Female Bullying: Prevention and Counseling Interventions

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Bullying is largely becoming recognized as a significant problem for children and adolescents in schools. Once believed to be a harmless occurrence of childhood, studies have documented the long-term effects of such peer abuse (Cleary, 2000). For a long time, research exclusively examined bullying among boys, but has more recently begun to recognize this as a problem, with perhaps a unique presentation, in girls. In fact, Olweus, a pioneer in bullying research, believed bullying occurred so infrequently in girls, that he initially excluded them as participants in his research (Bjorkqvist, 1994). Although boys are more likely to be victims and perpetrators than girls (Bosworth, Espelage and Simon, 1999; Grooper and Froschl, 2000; Hoover, Oliver and Hazler, 1992; Kumpulainen, Rasanen and Henttonen, 1999; Nansel, Overpeck, Haynie, Ruan, and Scheidt, 2003; Roland, 2002; Sharp and Smith, 1991; Weir, 2001) this does not mean that girls should go unrecognized in the literature. It is helpful to examine this population, as girls' problems tend to increase in adolescence, consistent with the time when bullying is most likely to occur (Mash and Wolfe, 1999). In addition, the form bullying takes in girls is frequently overlooked, as they often are not suspected of aggressive or bullying behavior in the same way as boys (Vail, 2002).

DEFINING BULLYING

Olweus defines a victim of bullying as "when he or she is exposed, repeatedly and over time, to negative actions on the part of one or more other persons" (1994a, p. 98). These negative actions are understood as being intentionally inflicted on someone to cause injury, fear, or distress. There is no one form of bullying, and it seems to fall along a continuum from very minor behaviors (e.g., name calling) to more physically aggressive actions that may result in injury (Bosworth et al., 1999). The goal of bullying is generally to cause distress in some manner and it usually takes place among children who are not friends (Garrity 2000; Olweus, 1994a). Interestingly, many studies have found that some children are both victims of bullying and bullies themselves (Kumpulainen et al., 1999; Roland, 2002).

Gender Differences

Clear differences emerge in the bullying research among females and males. Commonly, boys bully other boys and girls; whereas girls are bullied mainly by other girls (Boulton and Underwood, 1992; Limber, Flerx, Nation, and Melton, 1998; Sampson, 2002). When girls are bullies, they tend to use more indirect forms of bullying (van der Wal, 2003). Boys tend to use physical might and verbal threats. Girls use social and verbal threats, such as spreading rumors about one another and excluding one from the peer group (Hazler, Hoover and Oliver, 1991; Sharp and Smith, 1991). Girl bullying also includes actions such as social isolation, ignoring, excluding, and backbiting (Sampson, 2002). Other actions by girl bullies include manipulating friendships and ostracizing peers (Sampson, 2002). Adolescent girls, particularly, are prone to name calling, and gossiping (Vail, 2002).

Crick and Grotpeter (1995) have proposed the term relational aggression to cover actions committed by girls where social interactions are manipulated to cause harm to peer relationships. This would include much of what was discussed above: threats of expulsion from the peer group, purposely excluding someone from the peer group, and making harmful statements about a peer in order to cause peer rejection. They believe girls may use this form of peer abuse more than boys since it harms what concerns them most – their same gender peer relationships.

Some researchers have suggested that there are biological differences in boys and girls, in that girls are biologically predisposed to value friendships and relationships; therefore, that is the arena in which they would express their emotions (Vail, 2002). Girls tend to be more exclusive in their friendships and more intimate than boys (Ditzhazy and Burton, 2003). Thus, when problems occur in the girl-to-girl relationships, break ups tend to be more intense than with boys. Girls tend to rely more heavily on peer feedback to form their self-worth, thus making adolescent girls especially more susceptible to one another's comments about their physical appearance, attractiveness or being part of a peer

group (Casey-Cannon, Hayward, and Gowen, 2001). Regardless of the form bullying takes, it is the physical and emotional intimidation inherent that create the environment of harassment and abuse (Ditzhazy and Burton, 2003).

Generally, boys engage in higher amounts of bullying behavior than girls (Bosworth et al., 1999). In the Kumpulainen et al's. (1999) study, males were more likely than females to stay involved in bullying over a 4-year period of time. It was found that females, who were involved at one point in time, were not involved four years later. Although the authors are not certain as to what contributes to this trend, they speculate that teachers may be more likely to intervene when they observe female victims than when they see known bullies, being victimized themselves. They also found that females in rural areas were more likely to be caught up in bullying than females in the city (Kumpulainen et al., 1999).

Prevalence

Bullying behavior occurs in many American schools and is perhaps one of the most under-reported safety problems (Batsche and Knoff, 1994). Bosworth et al. (1999) found that 81% of their sample reported at least one act of bullying behavior during the last month. Another study found that 82% of the respondents were bullied at some period in their academic lives; of these 59% were bullied at least once a week (Mooney and Smith, 1995). In this same study, the age of most prevalent bullying was 11 – 13 years followed by 8 – 10 years; confirming that bullying seems to occur most frequently during the elementary and middle school years. Bullying by boys typically declines after age 15; whereas in girls the decline begins at age 14 (Ortega and Lera, 2000; Rigby and Slee, 1999). Several studies from different parts of the U.S. have reported 10 – 29 percent of the students surveyed were either bullied or victims (Bosworth et al., 1999; Perry, Kusel, and Perry, 1988). Further, there is evidence to suggest that racial bullying is a problem in the U.S. In one study, 25% of bullied students reported being victimized because of their race or religion ,with African Americans being bullied less than Hispanics and whites (Nansel et al., 2003). Children with special educational needs seem to be quite susceptible to bullying as their disability often becomes the target of bullies. These children tend to have fewer friends and thus may be less socially competent making them vulnerable and more likely to be bullied (Whitney, Nabuzoka, and Smith, 1992). Martlew and Hodson (1991) indicated that in their sample of students with special needs, 33% of them were victimized compared to only 8% of general education students.

Development/Maturation Process

During adolescence, identified as a peak time for bullying, children's bodies change, but not all at the same rate. Changes in puberty seem to be targets for bullying (Hazler et al., 1991). Girls may find themselves the object of teasing for the transformations their bodies may take (i.e., developing curves, breasts, etc.). Girls who mature early (middle school) are frequently victims of harassment from others (Ditzhazy and Burton, 2003). Reasons for being bullied vary, but girls appear to be at a particular risk of being bullied because of their physical appearances. Hoover et al. (1992) found that facial appearance and being overweight were among the most common reasons females felt that they were bullied.

Beane (1998) identified sexual bullying(direct or indirect bullying based on sexual and body development issues such as sexual orientation) as a form of bullying prevalent among children and adolescents. Fried (1997) found that 17% of her sample of dance and movement therapists reported sexual abuse as a type of bullying of which they were victims. The majority reported sexual bullying occurring between 9 - 12 years of age. Only female respondents reported this type of bullying. Incidents included trying to pull the victim's pants down, being teased for wearing a bra, and having one's breasts fondled by a boy. Grooper and Froschl (2000) found very few incidents of bullying and teasing to be gender explicit or sexual in nature among children between the ages of 5 through 8 years. However, examples of those they observed included a boy chasing a girl, rubbing up against her, and trying to grab her buttocks.

EFFECTS OF BULLYING

Psychosocial and Psychological Effects

The adolescent girls in the Casey-Cannon et al's. (2001) study reported feeling sad, unhappy, hurt, or rejected as a reaction to peer victimization. Some of the girls reported that they felt bad about themselves based on comments that were made by bullies and some even reported losing relation-

ships as a result of the victimization. Slee (1994) found that girls who were victims of peer victimization had a fear of negative evaluation by their peers as well as a tendency to avoid social situations. Further, Paquette and Underwood (1999) found that girls who were victims of what they termed "social aggression" felt sadder, more surprised, and worse about themselves than boys. These threats to friendship seemed to be more distressing for girls than boys as girls tended to think about them more.

van der Wal et al. (2003) found that bullying had a significant effect on depression and suicidal ideation in girls as compared to boys. In fact, the impact of being bullied on depression was higher in those who had suffered indirect bullying compared to those who were victims of direct bullying. This questions the belief that direct bullying is more harmful than indirect. Roland's (2002) research supports this in that he found that females, both victims and bullies, had significantly higher scores on measures of depression and suicidal thoughts than their peers not involved in bullying. Specifically, girl bullies had significantly more suicidal thoughts than girl victims. He concludes that for bullies, home dysfunction may contribute to their depressive feelings; whereas for victims, being bullied is the reason they are depressed.

Emotional and social behavior is not the only aspect of children's lives affected by bullying. Academic performance seems to suffer also. Roberts and Coursol (1996) found that repeated bullying is associated with absenteeism and poor academic performance. Vail (2002) found that female bullying can cause girls to have difficulty concentrating on their academics.

INTERVENTION STRATEGIES

To reduce the incidence of bullying and prevent its occurrence, individual, group, and systematic interventions should be implemented in schools. These interventions should be comprehensive in their scope and involve students, teachers, administrators, parents, and community personnel. Thus, the following intervention strategies are presented with the hope that when fully adopted, educators can begin to address the problems of bullying in their schools and communities.

Counseling Strategies

The association between bullying and psychosocial health differs between boys and girls, therefore practitioners must be cognizant of this when developing interventions (van der Wal et al., 2003). Since bullies tend to show little empathy for their targets (Ditzhazy and Burton, 2003), school psychologists and counselors will need to provide interventions to improve students' level of compassion and empathy. These include activities that foster sensitivity for the feelings of others. Role reversal techniques where students role play situations in which they place themselves in the position of others may help to increase empathic understanding. For example, the counselor or psychologist may ask the student bully, " Martha, I heard from Sally and others who witnessed it, that you made put down remarks to Sally about the way she was dressed, and then you pushed her into the wall. Is that right?". Martha responds, "Yeah, I really dissed her. She thinks she is smarter than everybody else. She is a nerd and dresses like one." Counselor then advises Martha that pushing is not allowed, and asks Martha, "I wonder if you would play Sally and Sally you can be Martha and say and do exactly what she did?". After the role reversal, the counselor asks the girls how they felt to experience each other's feelings. Further dialogue and communication would focus on exploring other ways of communicating that are not hurtful.

Radd (2003) developed a process that integrates self-esteem activities with life skills development. The counselor discusses with students the value of all people and their uniqueness. The counselor then goes on to tell them that because all people are special, valuable, and unique, all people have a responsibility to help and not hurt others. The importance of this is related by choosing helpful and non-hurtful ways of behaving toward others. If you choose to hurt someone, then you are forgetting how special and valuable you are. The question that may be asked would be: " How do you act toward those that are special to you?". A discussion about the consequences of hurting others, specifically one's self-esteem (e.g., feeling bad about oneself) can then be initiated.

Assessment

Bullying by females tends to be more covert; consequently, these types of behaviors may be more difficult for outsiders to observe (Casey-Cannon et al., 2001; Crick and Grotpeter, 1995).

Often, these actions are perceived by adults as typical adolescent behavior and go undetected. In addition, Roland (2002) hypothesized that anxiety seems to put children at risk for being bullied more than depression. Thus, identifying children who are anxious and working on reducing their anxiety levels may assist them in avoiding being targets of bullying.

Counselors can administer surveys (Casey-Cannon et al., 2001) to determine the extent of the problem in their schools. Weir (2001) suggested the following questions that can be asked of students suspected of not doing well in school and who may be victims of bullying. They include: At recess, do you usually play by yourself or with other children? Have you ever been teased at school? What kinds of things are you teased about? Other questions may be, How do you feel when you are teased by others? What does it make you want to do? These questions can provide a good starting point for gaining an understanding of children's victimization and reactions to such.

Specific Techniques

Assertiveness training is a helpful skill for children to enable them to avoid being victims of bullies. Beane (1998) suggested teaching children "to say "Leave me alone" or "Buzz off" with confidence and anger and then to walk away with confidence" (p. 217). When children communicate a sense of self-confidence to bullies, they are less likely to be targeted. It has been shown that children who do this are less likely to be victims than those who say nothing to the bully (Olweus, 1994b). Moving away from a position of passivity can help children avoid being victims. When victims respond in a manner that is not rewarding for the bully (i.e., assertive), they are less likely to be bullied again.

There is some evidence that teaching these skills to girls may be easier. Paquette and Underwood (1999) found that girls were more likely than boys to confront their perpetrator of social aggression. For example, they would either tell the perpetrator to stop or ask why he or she was engaging in the behavior. Grooper and Froschl (2000) found that girls (ages 5-8) were more likely to use verbal means to ask a bully to stop rather than the physically aggressive means more often used by boys.

Bosworth et al. (1999) found a strong relationship between general levels of anger and bullying, indicating a need for intervention in this area. Essentially, this means that those children who were angry and engaged in misconduct were the most likely to commit bullying. Anger management interventions such as the use of incomplete sentences, anger management games, and peer mediation can help students diffuse anger and also cope with its occurrence and after affects. Further, they reported that a lack of confidence in being able to use non-violent strategies such as talking out a disagreement were associated with higher levels of bullying. Bullies can also be assisted in learning non-violent strategies to solve conflicts, thus helping them avoid future bullying (Espelage, Bosworth and Simon, 2001). Interventions should include sufficient opportunities to build confidence in using these new behaviors. Repeated role-playing, with feedback and correction can be helpful to learn these new skills. Children can also be helped with handling social situations in general so that they do not resort to bullying. Assisting children in managing emotions, such as anger, depression and impulsivity, in other, more constructive ways may assist them in abandoning their role as bullies.

Groups can be of assistance when dealing with female bullying. Vail (2002) discusses interventions such as female only groups, where girls have the opportunity to talk about issues out in the open, rather than acting covertly. Paquette and Underwood (1999) also found that girls were more likely than boys to talk about their victimization and tell someone about it, which may make them more amenable to a group counseling setting.

Prevention Programs

Bullying can be lessened through anti-bullying programs in schools that serve to raise awareness of the problem, target school culture, and work with girls directly (Vail, 2002). Most schools may have policies about overt, physical aggression, but do not adequately address indirect forms of bullying (Vail, 2002). School counselors can play a critical role in preventing bullying in their schools by providing interventions to both victims and bullies.

Esplelage et al. (2001) contend that bullying "might be a type of behavioral strategy to manage the emotions of anger, impulsivity, and depression" (p. 421). Thus, prevention programs should focus on these emotional indicators. They

further suggested that an important component of prevention programs are the messages that school personnel and other significant adults in the child's life provide regarding violence and teasing.

There are some structural changes that can take place at schools to help reduce the incidence of bullying. More supervision and monitoring in school areas where bullying may likely occur can help to decrease its occurrence. These areas include the playground, the cafeteria, hallways, bathrooms and classrooms prior to class time (Ditzhazy and Burton, 2003). Beane (1998) suggested implanting strategies to structure some of the more unstructured times at school, such as recess. For example, have the students plan an activity they will engage in during this time or provide a place for children who prefer quiet study.

In addition, there is evidence that suggests school personnel often do little to intervene in bullying. Grooper and Froschl (2000) found that in 71% of the incidents of bullying, although teachers and other school personnel were present, they did not become involved in stopping the behavior. However, both boys and girls in this study, wanted teachers to stop ignoring bullying and become involved. Helping teachers identify more subtle forms of bullying, such as those demonstrated by girls, is necessary (Crick and Grotpeter, 1995). Educating teachers about bullying and ways in which they can effectively intervene may assist in lowering the incidence of bullying. Parents, too, may need to be educated about identifying the signs of bullying in their children or being more open to asking their children directly about bullying experiences.

Community involvement is essential. School personnel should contact community leaders to discuss the prevention program at their school and solicit their support and involvement (Limber et al., 1998). Community-school partnerships can be formed to assist with funding that can help to provide resources for the program. Church and community organizational leaders can be contacted to encourage them to reinforce a zero bullying tolerance beyond the school walls.

CONCLUSION

Although previously believed to not be involved in bullying, recent studies have documented that girls are victims and perpetrators of such behaviors quite frequently. However, the form of bullying girls most often engage is indirect and often goes undetected. This type of bullying can have similar psychological and socially harmful effects as overt or physical forms. School personnel must address these behaviors in schools by identifying the victims and perpetrators and implementing comprehensive programs to decrease and prevent the occurrence of bullying in their schools. The bullies and those whom they bully must be provided with counseling interventions. Parents, teachers, school staff, and community leaders must all work together to create safe, non-violent environments where everyone can learn and interact peacefully and constructively together.

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KEYWORDS Female Peer Abuse, Prevention of Female Bullying, Counselling Advocacies in Female Bullying, Peer Victimization among Females

ABSTRACT Bullying is largely recognized as a significant issue of peer abuse in schools. Although not all children are victims or perpetrators of bullying, it does occur across gender lines. However, bullying presents itself in a unique form with females when compared with males. The purpose of this paper is to more specifically understand the problem of bullying in females and outline effective prevention efforts. Counseling strategies for working with both bullies and their victims are reviewed.

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Journal of Social Sciences
Special Issue No. 8: 13-19 (2005)

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