

## THE PROBLEM OF SCHOOL BULLIES: WHAT THE RESEARCH TELLS US

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### ABSTRACT

This article includes an overview of the history of research on school bullying, its nature and prevalence, characteristics of bullies and victims, and teachers' knowledge of and attitudes toward bullying. Also, two model interventions designed to reduce this harmful behavior are examined.

The issue of school bullies and their victims has been a source of much research during recent years. This paper seeks to clarify and elaborate on some of the most salient findings of empirical studies in the United States and other countries. Various interventions have been utilized to deal with students who bully and have also focused on the needs of those who are victimized. The process of bullying can have negative consequences, both for bullies and victims. Psychological profiles of bullies and victims are examined as well as the nature, prevalence, and demographics of bullying.

Several general types of bullying have been identified in the literature (e.g., Donahue, 2004; Owlets, 1993). Among these are (a) *Direct Bullying*: Behaviors such as teasing, taunting, threatening, hitting, and stealing that are initiated by one or more bullies against a victim; (b) *Verbal Bullying*: Taunting, teasing, name calling, spreading rumors; (c) *Physical Bullying*: Hitting, kicking, destroying property, enlisting a friend to assault someone for you; (d) *Verbal (Non-physical) Bullying*: Threatening or obscene gestures, excluding others from a group, manipulating friendships, sending threatening E-mail; (e) *Sexual Harassment*: A form of bullying in which the intent is to demean, embarrass, humiliate, or control another person on the basis of gender or sexual orientation.

Bullying is present in most schools in the country and has been reported to impact (to some extent) as many as 70% of students (Can-

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ter, 2005). Students of all ages and grade levels may experience the problems that bullying creates (Acre, 2001; Roberts, 1988). It is all too often symptomatic of the aggressive way in which young people interact with each other in our society (Melton et al., 1998). Every school should recognize the extent of bullying and take steps to stop it. When bullying is ignored or downplayed, students suffer ongoing torment and harassment. It can cause lifelong damage to both victims and those who bully. A school's failure to deal with bullying endangers the safety of all its students by allowing a hostile environment to interfere with learning. There is evidence that school interventions can dramatically reduce the incidence of bullying. We need to know which interventions really work; with this information, school officials can make the appropriate decisions about suitable programs designed to reduce and eliminate this serious problem. Dealing effectively with bullying is one means of improving school climate, maximizing achievement, and curbing the tide of violent behaviors in our schools.

#### LITERATURE REVIEW

##### *History of Bullying Research*

Bullying has received research attention only since the 1980s when Olweus (1991; 1993), a Norwegian researcher, began to study this matter. At that time, a strong societal interest in bully/victim problems, emerged in Scandinavia.

School officials in Scandinavia did not take serious action against bullying until a newspaper report in 1982 revealed that three young adolescent boys from Norway had committed suicide because of severe bullying by peers (Olweus, 1993). This event triggered national interest in bully/victim problems prompting a study in which data were obtained from 140,000 students in 715 schools (Olweus, 1991). The results suggested that 15% of children in Norwegian schools were involved in bullying from time to time or more frequently. About 94% of the students were classified as victims while 6% were classified as bullies (Olweus, 1991).

##### *Nature and Prevalence of Bullying*

Following Olweus' (1993, 1991) groundbreaking research in Scandinavia, a number of other researchers studied the prevalence of bullying. In England, Stephenson and Smith (1987) found that 7% of their samples were victims of bullying, 10% were bullies, and 6% were both bullies and victims. Whitney and Smith (1993) reported that 10% of

students in their sample were bullied at least once a week. In Australia, Rigby and Slee (1991) asked respondents to identify what percentage of their class was being picked on a lot by other students. The median percent per class was 10.6% for girls and 11% for boys. In another study, Slee (1995) noted that 26% of the sample was bullied once a week or more.

Perry, Kusel, and Perry (1988) observed the rate of peer victimization in the United States to be about 10%. In a Canadian study in Toronto, 8% of respondents reported being bullied weekly or more often (Ziegler & Rosenstein-Manner, 1991). In a recent article, Christie (2005) reported that bullying among 12- 18-year-old students had risen from 5% in 1999 to 7% in 2004. Christie also noted that a National Center for Educational Statistics 2000 report indicated that 29% of schools considered bullying to be the single most problematic discipline issue.

### *Gender of Bullies and Victims*

Bullies tend to be boys, either in groups or as individuals (O'Moor & Hillery, 1989; Hazier, Hoover, & Oliver, 1992). Individual boys, groups of boys, and mixed groups seem to be perpetrators of bullying in about equal numbers (Ziegler & Rosenstein-Manner, 1991). Bullying by females should not be dismissed and there is evidence that its frequency is growing (Christie, 2005).

Findings on the gender of victims of bullying are mixed. Some report that the number of boys and girls being victimized by bullies is about the same (Slee, 1995), while others have found that more boys are bullied (Rigby & Slee, 1991). For example, O'Moore and Hillery (1989) observed that 12.5% of boys and 5.6% of girls were frequently bullied. In similar research, boys were reported as victims 73% of the time and girls 27% of the time (Hazier, Hoover, & Oliver, 1992). Thus, various studies support the notion that boys are bullied significantly more often than girls.

### *Age of Bullies*

Bullies most often tend to victimize students who are the same age since they are less often with younger students (Boulton & Underwood, 1992; Whitney & Smith, 1993). Most bullies were in the same grade and same class as the victims, followed by the same grade and a different class and, lastly, in a higher grade. Bullies were generally peers of the victim—they were the same age and in the same grade or class. In general, bullies victimize students with whom they spend time and know well.

### *Age of Victims*

Bullying generally was highest in the youngest age groups included in most samples and declined with age (Rigby & Slee, 1991; Ziegler & Rosenstein-Manner, 1991; Boulton & Underwood, 1992). However, the percentage of bullies at each age remains relatively constant for both genders throughout the age range. Why is this? Is it that older children experience less aggression or have come to terms with it and can cope with it? Sharp and Smith (1994) suggest two main reasons for this developmental observation: (1) the number of older pupils with opportunities to bully at low risk to themselves decreases with age and (2) potential victims become more socially skilled and can thus avoid bullies.

### *Types of Bullying*

The most frequent type of bullying reported is teasing and name calling, followed by hitting and kicking, and threats (Stephenson & Smith, 1989; Sharp & Smith, 1994; Hoover, Oliver, & Hazier, 1992). Borg (1998) observed that boys are generally more violent and destructive in their bullying than are girls, making greater use of physical means of bullying. Girls tend to use more covert and subtle forms of harassment, including rumor-spreading, malicious gossip and manipulation of friendships (e.g., depriving another girl of her best friend). Other research corroborates these findings (Rivers & Smith, 1994; Whitney & Smith, 1993; Siann, Callaghan, Lockhart, & Rawson, 1993).

### *Where Bullying Occurs*

Various authors have noted that there is much more bullying in school than there is on the way to and from school (Olweus, 1993; Ziegler & Rosentstein-Manner, 1991). Within the school itself, the playground is the most common setting for bullying, followed by the hallways, classrooms, lunchrooms, and washrooms (Siann et al., 1993; Whitney & Smith, 1993).

### *Motivation for Bullying*

Hazier, Hoover, and Oliver (1992) reported that the five highest rated items that motivate boys to bully were "didn't fit in," "physically weak," "short-tempered," "who their friends were," and "the clothes they wore," (p. 21). The five items rated highest by girls were "didn't fit in," "facial appearance," "cried/was emotional," "overweight," and "good grades." Hazier et al. (1992) asked students who were bullied what they believed the reasons were for their victimization. A number

of reasons were offered, including favoritism, not being part of the in-group, how they acted, what they said, who their friends were, religion, size, and academic or social shortcomings. Ziegler and Rosenstein-Manner (1991) asked participants in their sample why students (including themselves, if applicable) bully other students. The reason identified most often was the desire to feel powerful, followed by a desire for attention.

Other research points to familial factors. Bullies often come from families where parents use more physical forms of discipline, which may be coupled with parents who are rejecting and hostile or overly permissive (Duncan, 1999). It may be that some school bullies are in fact victims at home. It has also been suggested that bullies are from families with child-parent relationship difficulties, family and marital difficulties, as well as financial and social problems (Nansel et al., 2001; Kumpulainen, Rasanen, & Henttonen, 1998). Familial factors may also predispose children to being bullied. Some victims of bullying come from highly protected backgrounds, making it harder for them to be assertive and causing them to feel more anxious and insecure in their peer relations (Sharp & Smith, 1994).

### *Bullying and Students with Special Needs*

Research indicates that children with special educational needs are overrepresented as victims of bullying, especially on a frequent basis (Whitney, Nabuzoka, & Smith, 1992). The studies noted that while 25% of their sample of mainstream students were bullied, 67% of the special needs students were bullied, and those with moderate difficulties more so than those with mild difficulties. In a sample of adults who stammered as children, 59% reported that they were bullied at least once a week (Mooney & Smith, 1995). Almost all of the respondents indicated that the nature of the bullying was related to their disability.

### *Profile of Victims*

A consistent profile of bullying victims has emerged from the literature. Victims of bullying tend to be physically smaller, more sensitive, unhappy, cautious, anxious, quiet, and withdrawn than other children (Byrne, 1993; Hoover, Oliver, & Hazier, 1992). Most victims of bullying can be termed "passive" or "submissive" victims (Olweus, 1993). They are generally insecure and non-assertive, and react by withdrawing and crying when attacked by other students. In this sense, they are vulnerable to being victimized; bullies know these students will not retaliate (Salmivalli, Karhunen, & Lagerspetz, 1996). A less common profile, the "provocative victim," has also been described. This type of

victim exhibits a combination of both anxious and aggressive traits, and sometimes provoke classmates into victimizing them by their over-active and irritating behavior (Olweus, 1993).

Perry, Kusel, and Perry (1988) found that students' victimization scores were negatively correlated with peer acceptance and positively correlated with peer rejection; however, this result does not indicate whether peer rejection preceded victimization, or victimization preceded peer rejection. Craig and Pepler (2000) observed that victims of bullying tended to be victimized repeatedly over time, having established themselves in the role of victim. Being bullied creates a vicious cycle. These students tend to feel badly about themselves which predisposes them to being bullied. This, in turn, makes them feel worse about themselves and thus vulnerable to even more victimization.

### *Profile of Bullies*

Less is known about the profile of the "typical" bully. Bullies are usually loud and assertive, but not necessarily the largest student in the class. Some bullies are more uncontrolled than other students, and may tend not to abide by social rules. In a survey of teachers, Byrne (1993) found that bullies were generally seen as more hostile and aggressive, showing less restraint than other students. However, more recent research has suggested that bullies may actually be the popular and self-confident students—the "cool" kids—and are not necessarily being targeted by intervention programs (Nudo, 2004).

Duncan (1999) discussed two possible conceptualizations of the bully. One is a student who is vicious and uncaring, and may be the child of a dysfunctional family. This type of bully has an aggressive temperament and is hostile in peer relationships (Kaltiala-Heino, Rimpela, & Rimpela, 2000). The second view suggests that some bullies are in fact members of a group that gains strength by harassing vulnerable peers who are not members of their group. The bullying may or may not be malicious in intent, and the members falsely reassure themselves that no real harm is being done.

### *Responses to Bullying*

Boulton and Underwood (1992) asked students how often other students tried to stop bullying, to which the most common response was "sometimes" (41%), "almost never" (16%), "almost always" (12%), and "did not know" (31%) (p. 79). When asked what they themselves did when they saw another student being bullied, the most common response was that they try to help in some way, think they ought to help, or should not get involved. Whitney and Smith (1993) asked partici-

pants if other students tried to stop bullying. Half of middle-school pupils and more than one-third of secondary-school pupils indicated that other students did intervene.

For some students, witnessing bullying episodes may encourage them to participate in such activities. For example, Craig and Pepler (2000) reported that when students in their sample intervened, it was in an anti-social or aggressive manner. Ziegler and Rosenstein-Manner (1991) reported that one-third of the students surveyed indicated that they might join others in bullying a student they did not like. Thus, witnessing bullying may influence students to imitate bullying behaviors.

Hazier, Hoover, and Oliver (1992) asked participants who saw themselves as victims to rate the responses of school officials to bullying. The majority of victims indicated that officials responded poorly. When students were asked to indicate how frequently teachers intervened to stop bullying, their replies were never to seldom. In other research, a majority of students believed that teachers either sometimes or almost always intervened in bullying (Whitney & Smith, 1993). These results may provide some insight as to why some students do not report incidents of bullying to teachers or other adults. Not only is there concern about the possibility of retaliation, but experience may have taught them that adults are not interested or experience may have taught them that adults are not interested or be inconsistent about their willingness to intervene. On the other hand, it should be noted that teachers may not be responding to bullying because they are unaware of its extent. In particular, verbal and indirect forms of bullying are less obvious and often go undetected by teachers.

#### *Teachers' Perceptions of Bullying*

Ziegler and Rosenstein-Manner (1991) observed that teachers were less aware of bullying than were students in terms of its prevalence. They believed that some bullying was in the form of hitting, kicking, or teasing of victims. Teachers saw most bullying taking place on the playground, followed by hallways, classrooms, and lunchrooms, which is similar to their students' perceptions. Teachers indicated that they and other officials intervened often and more than three times as often as did students (Craig & Peplar, 2000).

Siann, Callaghan, Lockhart, and Rawson (1993) and Byrne (1993) found that teachers' description of the prevalence of bullying was similar to that of students, suggesting that 10% of the students in their classes were involved in bully/victim problems. The majority of bullies

and victims were boys. Teachers indicated that 27% of the victims and 33% of the bullies were receiving remedial education of one form or other (Siann et al., 1993).

### *Psychological and Physical Outcomes of Bullying*

The tendency to be victimized by bullies has been commonly associated with low self-esteem, shyness, and feelings of isolation (O'Moore & Kirkham, 2001); Rigby & Slee, 1993). A relationship has also been observed between the tendency to bully and depression in both males and females (Seals, 2003; Slee, 1995). Increased fear and anxiety may become an everyday part of the lives of the students who are bullied, as they go to great lengths to avoid bullies and the places they frequent (Seals, 2003); Mooney & Smith, 1995). Other authors have observed that victims of bullying had lower scores on social acceptance, scholastic competence, and global self-worth than non-bullied students (Moutapa et al., 2004).

In terms of somatic complaints, bullied students were three to four times more likely to experience health issues such as headaches, gastric distress, and insomnia (Salmon & West, 2000; Kumpulainen, Rasanen, & Henttonen, 1998; Nansel et al., 2001). All of these studies support the view that both bullies and their victims are at risk for psychological and physical problems, and that these problems can have long-lasting consequences.

### MODEL INTERVENTIONS

Dillon and Lash (2005) describe general strategies for an anti-bullying program. The first step is for the school to administer a student survey to determine which students bully and where they do so. A plan of action can then be developed to address the issue. The plan should include training in social skills to help bullies, victims, and bystanders learn how to combat this problem. In particular, bystanders are usually at a loss as to what to do when they encounter bullying. They also may be afraid of becoming a victim.

Another strategy is for teachers to set aside class time for discussions with students about the problem of bullying. Students need to learn the behavior that is expected of them and understand that they do have choices as to how they behave. For example, bullies can learn how to have their needs met in more positive ways, while victims can learn how to avoid bullying by being more assertive. Students can be taught that it is always appropriate and indeed necessary to report

incidents of bullying. Of course, the school should strive to create a climate in which students who do report will not be threatened or face retaliation (Dillon & Lash, 2005). Role play sessions can be used to give students a chance to practice skills for effective bullying controls. It is hoped that students can translate these skills to everyday life situations. What is certain is that bullying will not magically disappear.

In terms of a more systemic approach, Dounay (2005), a policy analyst for the Education Commission of the States, has provided a list of recommendations for developing a comprehensive anti-bullying program. It has been adopted in several states. For example, Vermont House Bill 629 (2005) requires the State Education Commissioner to distribute a model school plan for student discipline. This plan focuses on the following:

- (a) Understand that bullying is a dangerous and disrespectful behavior that will not be tolerated;
- (b) Enable parents or guardians of students to file reports of suspected bullying;
- (c) Enable students to anonymously report acts of bullying to school officials;
- (d) Require teachers who witness acts of bullying to report them to school administrators;
- (e) Require school officials to investigate all reports (written or anonymous) of bullying;
- (f) Include a school intervention plan to deal with bullying;
- (g) prohibit bullying in the student handbook;
- (h) Require the school to notify the parent or guardian of a student who bullies about possible responses and consequences;
- (i) Require the school to notify the parent or guardian of a bullied victim of the actions taken to prevent further incidents;
- (j) require the school to collect data on reported and verified bullying incidents and make this data available to the general public.

The Vermont Model recognizes that bullying is an all too common behavior that, if ignored, can create serious problems. Thus, the real solution to bullying in schools depends on collaborative action from school officials, parents, students, and the community at large. Such actions may be the only effective means of ending this cycle of abuse and violence in our schools.

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