Bullying
What Schools Can Do

Franklin P. Schargel
Can you remember the schoolyard jingle that went, “Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me”? Obviously that was not and is not the truth. Both physical and nonphysical forms of bullying can happen anywhere in the school, on the way to and from school, and even online. In recent years, bullying has become a “hot button” issue both in and out of school: “Over 13 million American kids will be bullied this year, making it the most common form of violence experienced by young people in the nation” (Hirsch, 2012).

According to the FBI, “Bullying remains one of the largest problems in schools, with the percentage of students reportedly bullied at least once per week steadily increasing since 1999” (Booth, Van Hasselt, & Vecchi, 2011). Additionally, cyberbullying has become more rampant (at least according to the media) and bullying has also contributed to the suicides of multiple children. The most susceptible are also the most vulnerable. A recent report from the Interactive Autism Network found that 63 percent of children with autism have been bullied, over three times as much as those without the disorder (Anderson, 2012).

Schools need to assertively confront this problem and take any instance of bullying seriously. Addressing and preventing bullying requires the participation of all major school constituencies: leaders, teachers, and students. By taking organized schoolwide measures and providing individuals with the strategies to counteract bullying, schools can reduce the instances of bullying and be better prepared to address it when it happens.
Bullying: What Schools Can Do

What Is Bullying?

Bullying among children is commonly defined as intentional, repeated hurtful acts, words, or other behavior, such as name-calling, threatening, and/or shunning. Bullying may be physical, verbal, emotional, or sexual in nature.

- **Physical bullying** includes punching, poking, strangling, hair pulling, beating, biting, and excessive tickling.
- **Verbal bullying** includes hurtful name-calling, teasing, and gossip.
- **Emotional bullying** includes rejecting; terrorizing; extorting; defaming; humiliating; blackmailing; rating or ranking of personal characteristics such as race, disability, ethnicity, or perceived sexual orientation; manipulating friendships; isolating; ostracizing; and peer pressuring.
- **Sexual bullying** includes many of the actions listed above as well as exhibitionism, voyeurism, sexual propositioning, sexual harassment, and abuse involving physical contact and sexual assault.
- **Cyberbullying**—a relatively new phenomenon enhanced because of the dramatic increase in the use of cellphones and social media (e.g., Facebook, Twitter, Skype)—is using the Internet or text messaging to intimidate, put down, or spread rumors about someone.

The Effects of Bullying

Victims can suffer far more than temporary physical harm. Victims are more likely than nonvictims to grow up being socially anxious and insecure, displaying more symptoms of depression than those who were not victimized as children. According to Harvard University, “[Victims of chronic bullying] are more likely to develop depression or think about suicide later on” (Harvard Health Publications, 2009). While students are still in school, the effects of bullying can be extremely damaging:

- Grades may suffer because attention is drawn away from learning.
- Fear may lead to absenteeism, truancy, or dropping out.
- Victims may lose or fail to develop self-esteem, experience feelings of isolation, and become withdrawn and depressed.
- Victims may be hesitant to take social, intellectual, emotional, or vocational risks.
- If the problem persists, victims occasionally feel compelled to take drastic measures, such as vengeance in the form of fighting back, weapon carrying, or even suicide.

Bystanders and peers of victims can be distracted from learning as well. They may also be afraid of associating with or assisting the victim for fear of lowering their own status or inciting retribution from the bully. The experiences may leave them feeling guilty, insecure, and helpless.

Bullies themselves attend school less frequently and are more likely to drop out of school than other students. Several studies suggest that bullying in early childhood may be an early sign of the developing of violent tendencies, delinquency, and criminality.
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**Myths About Bullying**

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<tr>
<th>Myth</th>
<th>Reality</th>
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<tr>
<td>Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words can never hurt me.</td>
<td>The emotional and psychological scars left by name-calling can last a lifetime.</td>
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<td>Children have to learn to stand up for themselves.</td>
<td>Children who get up the courage to complain about being bullied are saying that they cannot cope with the situation on their own. Their complaints should be treated as a call for help. Additionally, it is important to provide children with problem-solving techniques and assertiveness training to deal with difficult situations.</td>
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<td>Bullied children should hit back—only harder.</td>
<td>This could cause serious harm. People who are bullies are often bigger and more powerful than their victims. This also gives children the idea that violence is a legitimate way to solve problems. Children learn how to bully by watching adults use their power for aggression. Adults have the power to lead by setting assertive and positive examples.</td>
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<td>Kids will be kids.</td>
<td>Bullying is a learned behavior. That is why it is important we change attitudes toward violence.</td>
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<td>Being bullied builds character.</td>
<td>Children who are bullied repeatedly have low self-esteem and do not trust others.</td>
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<td>That is not bullying—they are just teasing.</td>
<td>Vicious taunting hurts and should be stopped.</td>
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<td>There have always been bullies and there always will be.</td>
<td>By working together as parents, teachers, and students, we have the power to build a better future for our children. It takes time to change a culture, and we need to work together to change attitudes about bullying.</td>
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**What Schools Can Do to Prevent Bullying**

**School-Level Interventions**

Many effective anti-bullying measures involve broad, school-level changes. By adjusting student schedules, training staff, and establishing a safe school atmosphere, schools can reduce the opportunities for bullying and communicate to students and parents that bullying is not tolerated.

- Increase student reporting of bullying. To address the problem of students’ resistance to reporting bullying, some schools have set up “bully hotlines.” Alternatively, schools can provide a “bully box” in which students drop notes to alert teachers and administrators to bullies. Student and staff questionnaires can be used to assess the nature and extent of bullying problems.
- Reduce the amount of time students can spend unsupervised. Because much of bullying occurs during the least supervised periods (e.g., recess, lunch breaks, class changes), reducing the amount of time available to students can reduce the amount of bullying. Student activities can also be provided to limit opportunities for bullying.
- Assign bullies to a particular location or to particular tasks during release times. This approach separates bullies from their intended victims. Careful victim monitoring is required to ensure that bullies do not pick on victims at other times.
- Stagger recess, lunch, and class-release times. This approach minimizes the number of students that are
present at a given time, so supervisors have less trouble spotting bullying. However, supervisors must be mindful that most bullies are in the same grade as their victims.

- Post classroom signs prohibiting bullying and listing the age-appropriate consequences. This puts would-be bullies on notice and outlines the risks they are taking. It also lets victims know that what happens to them is not okay. Teachers and administrators must consistently enforce the rules for them to have meaning.
- Provide teachers with effective classroom-management training. Because research suggests that classes containing students with behavioral, emotional, or learning problems have more bullies and victims, teachers in those classes may require additional, tailored training to spot and address bullying.
- Conduct classroom meetings or schoolwide assemblies to raise awareness regarding the problem of bullying and to communicate zero tolerance for such behavior.

**Leader Interventions**

The school principal’s commitment to and involvement in addressing school bullying are key. Principals and other leaders who invest the time and energy to tackle the problem collaboratively and comprehensively will often get the best results. The following strategies are recommended:

- Closely supervise children on playgrounds and in classrooms, hallways, restrooms, cafeterias, and other areas where bullying occurs in school.
- Form a bullying prevention coordinating committee (a small group of energetic teachers, administrators, counselors, and other school staff who plan and monitor school activities). This committee should develop schoolwide rules and sanctions against bullying, systems to reinforce prosocial behavior, and events to raise school and community awareness about bullying.
- Hold teacher in-service days to review findings from student questionnaires or surveys, discuss bullying problems, and plan the school’s violence prevention efforts.
- Inform late-enrolling students and their parents about the school’s bullying policy. This removes any excuse new students have for bullying, puts parents on notice that the school takes bullying seriously, and stresses the importance the school places on countering it.
- Ensure that your school has legally required policies and procedures for sexual discrimination. Make these procedures known to parents and students.
- Establish close relationships with law enforcement officials, notifying them of school policies regarding bullying. Get a contact in case school bullying results in situations that may involve arrests.
- Receive and listen receptively to parents who report bullying. Establish procedures whereby such reports are investigated and resolved expeditiously at the school level to avoid perpetuating bullying.

**Teacher/Counselor Interventions**

As the ones who spend the most time with students, teachers have the opportunity to positively influence students’ social and emotional development. In addition to providing a watchful eye, teachers can design lessons and activities around prosocial behaviors and discourage bullying in general.

- Provide students with opportunities to talk about bullying and enlist their support in defining bullying as unacceptable behavior.
- Develop strategies to reward students for positive, inclusive behavior.
- Involve students in establishing classroom rules against bullying. Such rules may include a commitment from the teacher to not “look the other way” when incidents involving bullying occur.
- Provide classroom activities and discussions related to bullying and violence, including the harm that they cause and strategies to reduce their occurrences.
- Develop a classroom action plan to ensure that students know what to do when they observe a bully–victim confrontation.
- Teach cooperation by assigning projects that require collaboration. Such cooperation shows students how to compromise and how to assert themselves without demanding. Take care to vary grouping of participants and to monitor the treatment of participants in each group.
- Take immediate action when bullying is observed. All teachers and school staff must let children know
they care and will not allow anyone to be mistreated. By taking immediate action and dealing directly with the bully, adults support both the victim and the witnesses.

- Confront bullies in private. Challenging bullies in front of their peers may actually enhance their status and lead to further aggression.
- Notify parents of both victims and bullies when a confrontation occurs, and seek to resolve the problem expeditiously at school.
- Refer both victims and aggressors to counseling when appropriate.
- Provide protection for bullying victims when necessary. Such protection may include creating a buddy system whereby students have a particular friend or older buddy on whom they can depend and with whom they share class schedule information and plans for the school day.
- Listen receptively to parents who report bullying, and investigate reported circumstances so immediate and appropriate school action may be taken.
- Avoid attempts to mediate a bullying situation. The difference in power between victims and bullies may cause victims to feel further victimized by the process or to believe they are somehow at fault.

**Student Interventions**

Students may not know what to do when they observe a classmate being bullied or experience such victimization themselves. However, classroom discussions and activities may help students develop a variety of appropriate actions that they can take when they witness or experience such victimization. For instance, depending on the situation and their own level of comfort, students can do the following:

- Seek immediate help from an adult and report bullying and victimization incidents to school personnel.
- Speak up and/or offer support to the victim when they see him or her being bullied (e.g., picking up the victim’s books and handing them to him or her).
- Privately support those being hurt with words of kindness or condolence.
- Express disapproval of bullying behavior by not joining in the laughter, teasing, or spreading rumors or gossip.
- Attempt to defuse problem situations either singlehandedly or in a group (e.g., by taking the bully aside and asking him or her to “cool it”).

**Bullying: Summary**

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<tr>
<th>Defining the issue</th>
<th>Bullying can be physical or social-emotional. It is characterized by an imbalance of power. It consists of repeated, systematic harassment by an individual or group.</th>
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<td>The warning signs</td>
<td>Withdrawal from family and school activities, shyness, stomachaches, headaches, not being able to sleep, sleeping too much, being exhausted, nightmares, social isolation, negative view of self, increasing difficulty with school achievement, and giving excuses not to go to school.</td>
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<td>Significance of the problem</td>
<td>Nearly one in three students in sixth grade through tenth grade is affected by bullying. Victims suffer “extreme fear and stress,” including “fear of going to school” and “diminished ability to learn” (National Education Association, 2012).</td>
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<td>What you can teach students</td>
<td>If they are bullied, tell the bully to stop, walk away, avoid or ignore the teasing, make a joke, hang with friends, or tell an adult. If they witness someone being bullied, help the person get away, recognize bullying behaviors, get an adult, recruit others to help the person, befriend the person, and speak up.</td>
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<td>How you can help</td>
<td>Be watchful—supervise young people on the playground, at bus stops, etc. Tell them that bullying is unacceptable. Reassure those who report bullying and tell them they were right to talk to you. Work with other adults to help those who are bullied and those who bully others.</td>
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References