Bullying Prevention: What Schools and Parents Can Do

Bullying is a widespread problem in our schools and communities. The behavior encompasses physical aggression, threats, teasing, and harassment. In any form, bullying is an unacceptable anti-social behavior that can undermine the quality of the school environment, affect students' academic and social outcomes, cause victims emotional and psychological trauma, and, in extreme cases, lead to serious violence.

It is critical that adults create an environment in school and at home where bullying is not tolerated under *any* circumstances. Bullying is not an inevitable part of growing up but learned through influences at home, in school, from peer groups, and through the media. As such, it also can be unlearned or, better yet, prevented. The following information can help parents and teachers ensure that children understand the appropriate way to treat others, and are not victimized by cruel or threatening behavior.

Facts About Bullying

- Bullying is the most common form of violence in our society; between 15% and 30% of students are bullies or victims.
- A 2001 report from the American Medical Association on a study of over 15,000 6th-10th graders estimates that approximately 3.7 million youths engage in, and more than 3.2 million are victims of, moderate or serious bullying each year.
- Since 1992, there have been 250 violent deaths in schools that involved multiple victims. In virtually every school shooting, bullying has been a factor.
- Membership in either bully or victim groups is associated with school drop out, poor psychosocial adjustment, criminal activity and other negative long-term consequences.
- Direct, physical bullying increases in elementary school, peaks in middle school and declines in high school. Verbal abuse, on the other hand, remains constant. The U.S. Department of Justice reports that younger students are more likely to be bullied than older students.
- 25% of teachers see nothing wrong with bullying or putdowns and consequently intervene in only 4% of bullying incidents.
- **Over two-thirds of students believe that schools respond poorly to bullying, with a high percentage of students believing that adult help is infrequent and ineffective.**

Why Do Some Children and Adolescents Become Bullies?

A *bully* is someone who directs physical, verbal, or psychological aggression or harassment toward others, with the goal of gaining power over or dominating another individual. Research indicates that bullying is more prevalent in boys than in girls, though this difference decreases when considering indirect aggression (such as verbal threats), which is more common among girls. Bullying behavior is not caused by one factor, but generally results from multiple influences in a child's environment, including:

- *Family factors.* The frequency and severity of bullying is related to the amount of adult supervision that children receive—bullying behavior is reinforced when it has no or inconsistent consequences. Additionally, children who observe parents and siblings exhibiting bullying behavior, or who are themselves victims, are likely to develop bullying behaviors. When children receive negative messages or physical punishment at home, they tend to develop negative self-concepts and expectations, and may therefore attack before they are attacked—bullying others gives them a sense of power and importance.
- *School factors.* Because school personnel often ignore bullying, children can be reinforced for intimidating others. Bullying also thrives in an environment where students are more likely to receive negative feedback and negative attention than in a positive school climate that fosters respect and sets high standards for interpersonal behavior.
- *Peer group factors.* Children may interact in a school or neighborhood peer group that advocates, supports, or promotes bullying behavior. Some children may bully peers in an effort to "fit in,"

even though they may be uncomfortable with the behavior.

Why Do Some Children and Adolescents Become Victims?

A *victim* is someone who repeatedly is exposed to aggression from peers in the form of physical attacks, verbal assaults, or psychological abuse. Victims are more likely to be boys and to be physically weaker than their peers. They generally do not have many, if any, good friends and may display poor social skills and academic difficulties in school.

Victims signal to others that they are insecure, primarily passive, and will not retaliate if they are attacked. Consequently, bullies often target children who complain, appear physically or emotionally weak, and seek attention from peers. Studies also show that victims have a higher prevalence of overprotective parents or school personnel; as a result, they often fail to develop their own effective coping skills. Many victims long for approval and even after being rejected, some continue to make ineffective attempts to interact with the victimizer.

How Can Bullying Lead to Violence?

Bullies lack respect for others' basic human rights and are more likely to resort to violence to solve problems without worry of the potential implications. Both bullies and victims show higher rates of fighting than their peers. And, as shown in recent school shootings, victims' frustration with bullying can turn into vengeful violence.

What Can Schools Do?

Many schools today respond to bullying, or other types of school violence, with reactive measures. However, installing metal detectors or surveillance cameras or hiring police to patrol the halls has no tangible positive results. Similarly, "Zero Tolerance" policies (severe consequence for any behavior defined as dangerous such as bullying or carrying a weapon) rely on exclusionary measures (suspension, expulsion) that have long-term negative effects.

Instead, researchers advocate school-wide prevention programs that promote a positive school and community climate. Existing programs can effectively reduce the occurrence of bullying; in fact, one program decreased peer victimization by 50%. Such programs require the participation and commitment of students, parents, educators and members of the community. Effective school programs:

- *Provide early intervention*. Researchers advocate intervening in elementary or middle school, or as early as preschool. Group, classroom, and building-wide social skills training is highly recommended, as well as counseling and systematic aggression interventions for students exhibiting bullying and victim behaviors. School psychologists and other mental health personnel are particularly well trained to provide such training as well as guidance in selecting and evaluating prevention programs.
- *Balance discipline with behavioral supports*. Establish clear consistent consequences for bullying behavior that all children understand. Discipline should address the behavior *and* its underlying causes. Incorporating positive behavioral interventions with loss of privileges or other consequences will do more to change students' behavior than approaches based solely on punishment.
- *Support parents' efforts to teach their children good social skills.* Parents must learn to reinforce their children's positive behavior patterns and model appropriate interpersonal interactions. School psychologists, social workers, and counselors can help parents support children who tend to become victims as well as recognize bullying behaviors that require intervention. Be sure parents know how to get in touch with the appropriate mental health professional in the building or district.
- *Equip teachers and school staff with prevention and intervention skills*. Training can help teachers identify and respond to potentially damaging victimization as well as to implement positive feedback and modeling to foster appropriate social interactions. Support services personnel can help administrators design effective teacher training modules. *All* school personnel (bus drivers, playground monitors, after school program supervisors, etc.) should be trained to prevent and intervene with bullying. **Supervision of students is important!**
- *Change attitudes toward bullying.* Researchers maintain that society must stop defending bullying behavior as part of growing up and with the attitude that "kids will be kids." School personnel should never ignore bullying behaviors. Consistently modeling appropriate behavior, praising children when they do the right thing, **intervening immediately when bullying occurs**, and offering children alternatives to bullying will change attitudes and behavior.

- *Empower students to support each other.* An important factor in the prevalence of bullying behavior is the degree to which children become "accepting" bystanders or even participants when a classmate is being bullied. Teaching children to work together to stand up to a bully, encouraging them to reach out to excluded peers, celebrating acts of kindness, and reinforcing the availability of adult support can transform what experts call the "silent majority" into a "caring majority" of students who become part of the anti-bullying solution.
- *Create a positive school environment*. A positive school climate will reduce bullying and victimization. Schools with easily understood rules of conduct, smaller class sizes, and fair discipline practices report lower rates of aggressive behavior and violence. Adults should be visible and vigilant in common areas, such as hallways, cafeterias, locker rooms, and playgrounds. School personnel should be aware of behavior on the bus, and on the way to and from school for children who walk, as these can be important parts of a child's school day. Children should trust that an adult can and will help them if they are being bullied.

What Can Parents Do?

- *Be aware of changes in your child's behavior or attitudes.* Children who are bullied often give signals that something is wrong. They may become withdrawn or be reluctant to go to school and can experience physical symptoms such as headaches, stomachaches, or problems sleeping. Talk to your child about their concerns. **Reassure them** that you will work with the school to stop the bullying behavior.
- *Let the school know if your child is being bullied.* Talk to your child's teacher and/or contact the school's psychologist, counselor or social worker to ask for help. Become involved in school programs to counteract bullying. Volunteer at the school to get firsthand knowledge of the school environment and your child's peer group.
- *Teach your child strategies to counter bullying*. Useful strategies include standing up for themselves verbally, such as saying "I don't like what you said/or did," or "You can say whatever you want but it's not true;" walking away from the bully; using humor (practice funny comebacks with your child); thinking of positive images or statements about themselves to bolster self-esteem; and getting help from an adult.
- *Begin teaching good social skills early.* The pattern of bullying can begin as young as age two. The earlier children learn positive alternatives, the better. Praise your child for appropriate social behaviors and model interactions that do not include bullying or aggression. "Catch" your child doing something good and offer positive reinforcement. Encourage children to support their peers, (e.g., asking a lonely classmate to eat lunch or sticking up for a child being teased). Monitor television watching and video games.
- *Foster positive social relationships and activities*. Help your child identify peers with whom they get along. Suggest things they can do together, (e.g., study, each lunch, come home after school, go to the movies). Also, finding a variety of activities that your child enjoys and does well can help build self-esteem and confidence.
- *Use alternatives to physical punishment*. Children who are spanked too harshly or too often learn that physical aggression is okay. Consistent alternatives, such as the removal of privileges or additional chores, serve as more effective consequences for inappropriate or difficult behavior.
- *Stop any bullying behavior immediately.* Supervising children is important. Intervene as bullying behavior is happening and have the child practice alternative behaviors.

This handout was developed from a number of resources including *Children's Needs: Development, Problems and Alternatives* and *Best Practices in School Crisis Prevention and Intervention* published by NASP. For a complete list of references and additional resources, visit ***www.nasponline.org***.