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## **Making a Difference in Bullying: Notes for Parents and Professionals**

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In recent years, there has been increased attention to the problems of bullying and harassment among children and adolescents. We believe that bullying is a problem that we should be concerned about. It is the combined use of power and aggression, which presents a problem throughout life. Children do not “just grow out of it”. On the contrary, we believe that children who learn how to acquire power through aggression on the playground may transfer these lessons to sexual harassment, date violence, gang attacks, marital abuse, child abuse, and elder abuse. By understanding the nature of the problem, we can make a difference in supporting both the children who are being victimized as well as those who engage in bullying and harassment.

### **What Is Bullying?**

1. Bullying involves a power imbalance – bullies are more powerful than their victims because of an advantage of age, size, ability, social status, peer support, etc. Bullies may also have power if they harass or provoke other students about a sensitive concern (e.g., being short, overweight, or about race, family, or sexuality).
2. Bullying is a form of aggression and is not accidental.
3. Bullying is not fun for the victims who experience distress and may feel: angry, anxious, fearful, sad, embarrassed, and ashamed. Victims often feel unsafe at school and try to avoid going to school.
4. Bullying happens over and over again.

### **What Are the Types of Bullying?**

Bullying can take many forms. It can be direct, indirect, physical, verbal, or psychological. We consider sexual harassment and racist comments as bullying as they focus on a potential vulnerability and inequities.

### **Direct (Face-to-Face)**

- C Verbal (teasing, insults, put-downs, harassment\*)
- C Physical (shoves, pushes, hitting, assault\*)
- C Psychological (making a mean face, rolling your eyes, "dirty looks", uttering threats\*, extortion\*)

\*These actions are against the law.

### **Indirect (Behind Someone's Back)**

- C Gossip (lowering people's opinions about the victim)
- C Leaving out, Exclusion, Shunning
- C Social aggression (Telling people not to be friends with a victim)

### **Who Is At Risk for Bullying and Victimization?**

Some children are more at risk of becoming bullies and victims than others, although this is in no way predetermined. It depends on a combination of individual, family, peer, school, and broader experiences.

### **Previous Experiences that May Contribute to Bullying and Victimization:**

#### **Individual characteristics of the child**

Bullying: Difficult temperament, Attention Problems, Hyperactivity.

Victimization: Anxious temperament, Social Withdrawal, Exceptionality

#### **Family Factors**

Bullying: Aggression within the home, Ineffective Parenting, Family Stress.

Victimization: Over-protective parents, Family Stress.

#### **Peer Factors**

Bullying: Aggressive peers, Rejection, Marginalization,

Victimization: Rejection, Isolation, Marginalization, Reputation

#### **School Factors**

Bullying: Ignoring antisocial behavior, inconsistent consequences, alienating interactions

Victimization: Lack of recognition, communication, and openness around victimization.

## How Do We Identify the Children at Greatest Risk?

The children at greatest risk of bullying and victimization problems can be identified by asking the following four questions:

- < Is the bullying and/or victimization **SEVERE**? (Does it involve serious physical or verbal aggression?)
- < Is the bullying and/or victimization **FREQUENT**? (Does it occur often in this child's life?)
- < Is the bullying and/or victimization **PERVASIVE**? (Does it occur in many contexts; e.g., home, school, community?)
- < Is the bullying and/or victimization **CHRONIC**? (Has it been a problem for a long time; e.g., since early childhood?)

## What are the signs of Bullying and Victimization?

### Some signs that a child may be involved as a bully include:

- C acquires new toys or objects without explanation
- C seems to have a lot of extra money
- C talks on the phone or chats on the Internet about others' shortcomings
- C brags about having power over another student
- C bullies siblings and parents at home

### Some signs that a child is being victimized include:

- C losing objects without a reasonable explanation
- C torn clothing
- C needing extra money
- C needing extra treats in lunch bag
- C starving after school (when lunch is extorted)
- C reticence to go to school
- C headaches, stomach aches, nervousness
- C significant change in mood from normal – more angry, sad, fearful
- C concern about inviting friends over or accepting invitations from friends

## Peers Are Often Part of the Problem and Sometimes Part of the Solution

Our observational research shows that:

- C Peers are present in 85% of bullying episodes on school playgrounds.
- C Bullying is common on school playgrounds. Students are involved in bullying about once every 7 minutes.
- C Many different types of students engage in bullying, and many different types of students become victims
- C Bullying is very stressful for victims, onlookers, and eventually even for bullies.
- C Bullying is kept hidden from adults and teachers.
- C Students are VERY effective in stopping bullying when they intervene.

## How Can Students Help to Stop Bullying?

There are many ways in which students can help to stop bullying. Here are a few suggestions, but you probably have many more. Remember, when you intervene – do not bully the bully!

- C Talk to the bully. Label the behavior as bullying and tell the bully to stop.
- C Reach out to the victim in friendship. Provide comfort and support to the victim. (Be an "ally.")
- C Report the bullying to school staff, or to your parents

Remember: Telling is reporting to get someone out of trouble. It's not the same as tattling or ratting, which is to get someone into trouble.

## What Can Children Do if Someone is Bullying Them?

There are many ways in which students can respond when they are being bullied. Here are a few suggestions, but children have many more. Remember, it is important that children not bully the bully – fighting back almost always makes the situation worse!

- C Ignore and walk away from the bully (this works best when bullying is mild).
- C Look the bully in the eye, and confidently tell her/him to stop.
- C Report the bullying to a trusted adult – a teacher or to a parent.

Students can also try:

- C Using humor
- C Finding "allies"
- C Let the comment roll off (e.g., by saying okay and walking away)

The dilemma for the victim is that once the bully-victim relationship is established there is little the victimized child can do to change the situation. Children and adolescents should be encouraged to:

- C Tell someone they trust how they are feeling.
- C Avoid keeping stress bottled up inside.

Remember, all children and adolescents have the right to feel safe at school and in their community.

### **School Staff are often unaware of Bullying and Victimization**

- < School staff are generally unaware of the extent of bullying and victimization problems.
- < 42% of bullies and 46% of victims report that they have talked to teachers about the problem.
- < 71% of teachers and 25% of students say that teachers almost always intervene.
- < Our observations indicate that teachers intervene in 14% of classroom episodes and only 4% of playground episodes of bullying.
- < Low teacher intervention may occur because:
  - the majority of episodes are verbal
  - episodes are brief
  - bullying occurs when monitoring is low

### **Parents are also often unaware of Bullying and Victimization**

- < Parents are generally unaware of the extent of bullying and victimization problems.
- < 48% of bullies indicate that they have talked with their parents about bullying problems and 62% of victims indicate that they have talked with their parents about being victimized.
- < Parents of bullies may inadvertently support this form of behavior if they model the use of power and aggression and fail to monitor, set limits and intervene with consequences for bullying at home.
- < Parents of victims may inadvertently place their child at risk for victimization by not encouraging independence and sociability.

## A Systemic Approach to Bullying: Strategies

We believe that bullying and victimization must be addressed from a systemic perspective. In order to intervene successfully to stop these problems, action must be taken on many levels: not only with the bully and victim, but within the school, within the peer group (classroom and playground), with parents, and with the community. The following principles of the systemic approach are important to remember when addressing bullying and victimization:

- < Bullying and victimization do not occur in isolation. Therefore, interventions with the bully and/or victim are necessary but not sufficient.
- < We need to extend our focus beyond the bully and the victim to include: peers, school, parents, community, and society.
- < To address the problem effectively, change is required at all of these levels of the system.

### Helping Children Who Bully

In all cases, students should be held responsible for their bullying behavior. It is important to remember, however, not to bully the bully as this generates feelings of hostility and alienation. The following is a range of consequences that not only provide a clear message that bullying is unacceptable, but also build awareness and skills to promote the students' responsibility. We refer to these as formative consequences, as they provide support for students to learn the skills and acquire the insights that they are lacking. In this way, the consequences for bullying provide an opportunity to educate and support troubled students. Through formative consequences, students who bully can learn to turn their negative power and dominance into positive leadership.

Withdraw privileges (e.g., recess, basketball practice) and replace with an instructive activity.

Make amends that are formative (i.e., work in cafeteria in school and give money back to the victim).

Activities that promote perspective-taking skills and empathy (e.g., novel study, story writing, drawing a picture of what it feels like to be a victim).

Bully reflects on his/her own strengths and weaknesses.

Role play the victim of the same behaviors with the teacher.

Observe acts of kindness around the school and in the community. Encourage the bully to identify the link between power (or strength) and kindness. It is important for them to view prosocial behavior as worthwhile, valid, and consistent with positive leadership.

Lead a class discussion on the harmful effects of bullying.

## Helping Children Who are Victimized

When dealing with a bullying problem, it doesn't help to instruct the victim to solve the problem him or herself. Children who are persistently victimized have most likely exhausted their strategies for responding to bullying. Each time they have been bullied, they have likely tried something to stop it. By the time they approach an adult, they have likely reached the end of their tolerance because no strategy they have tried has been successful in stopping the bullying. Furthermore, peers consider it "acceptable" to bully someone with low social status. Therefore, it is essential that an adult assist the victim and intervene to shift the power imbalance between the victim and bully. The goal is to take the power to torment away from the bully and to protect and empower the victim.

Reassure the victimized child that it is her right to feel safe at school.

Assure the student that you view the bullying as serious and that her concerns and fears are justified.

Counsel to support the victim to cope with the effects of bullying.

Generate a list of possible responses that she could use if similar attacks occur.

Ensure that the victim understands the importance of confiding in an adult if this form of harassment occurs again.

Provide the student with language to speak out for herself. Empower her to speak out against her own victimization and that of others.

Develop strategies to strengthen and protect the victimized girl. Build on her strengths to develop confidence. Ensure that she has others to support her and enhance her social status. This support can be built in numerous ways: (1) connecting the victim with prosocial peers from her own age group; (2) Buddying up with an older girl in the school might provide a confidant, someone who can keep an eye on the victim, and start to rebuild the victim's social status.

## It Takes A Village

Bullying is a community problem, not just a problem for schools. By intervening to support children who are aggressive and those who are victimized, we can promote children's well-being and prevent many significant problems in both the short- and long-term.

We need broad-based community efforts to protect children and change attitudes that support the use of aggression by those who hold power. There are excellent models for significant social change over the past few decades (e.g., environmental awareness, seat belts, concern for wife assault and child abuse). It can be done if we pull together to support all children and adolescents.