

2002

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Recommended Citation

Garrett, Kendra J., "Reducing School-Based Bullying" (2002). *Social Work Faculty Publications*. 7.
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REDUCING SCHOOL-BASED BULLYING

Kendra J. Garrett

ABSTRACT

School staff often overlook bullying, because they do not recognize it or do not know how to respond. Many strategies are available to decrease bullying in school, including discussing bullying openly; refusing to accept bullying behavior; developing consistent, non-shaming consequences; creating a positive school climate; involving students, parents, and teachers; increasing hallway monitoring; keeping records on aggressive actions; creating support programs for victims; teaching victims problem-solving and assertiveness skills; and helping bullies become more empathic. Because preventing and reducing bullying requires a holistic system-wide approach, school social workers are in an excellent position to implement anti-bullying programs in their schools.

The problem of school-based violence has received broad coverage in the media and is causing alarm across the nation. Tragic school shootings by students who were picked on by other students have called increased attention to the role that bullying can play in perpetuating this violence. While a small number of students who have been teased and threatened by others turn to violent acts, others respond to being victimized by withdrawing from school participation (Shakeshaft et al., 1995). School social workers

can play an important role in addressing bullying, a problem too often tolerated in schools.

Bullying is long-standing physical or psychological aggression against one who is unable to defend himself or herself (Hazler, Hoover, & Oliver, 1992; Oliver, Oaks, & Hoover, 1994) by one who is generally more powerful (Horne & Socherman, 1996; Whitney & Smith, 1993). Bullying includes hitting, kicking, threatening, locking someone in a room, sending nasty notes, repeated teasing, ignoring, isolating someone socially (Whitney & Smith, 1993), name calling, telling unkind or false stories, forcing someone to do something against his or her will (**Boutlon & Flemington, 1996**), and theft of property (Roberts & Coursol, 1996).

Neither the location nor the size of the school appears to have an effect on the extent of bullying, as it takes place in similar proportions in large and small schools in both urban and rural areas (Whitney & Smith, 1993). School-based bullying is most likely to take place (in order of frequency) on the playground, in classrooms, and in hallways, (Siann, Glissov, Lockhart, & Rawson, 1994). It also may take place on the way to and from school, but with less frequency (Siann et al., 1994; Whitney & Smith, 1993).

School social workers, by nature of their position as advocates, consultants, and counselors in schools, often are apprised of school-based bullying behavior. School social workers who work directly with special education students are keenly aware that bullies often single out children with learning deficits as victims (Hoover & Juul, 1993; Lowenstein, 1995a). Unfortunately, social work literature on the topic of bullying is nearly nonexistent. The purpose of this article, therefore, is to gather research on bullying

from other sources and identify prevention and intervention strategies for use by school social workers.

Extent of Bullying in Schools

It is difficult to compare studies on bullying, as researchers use different definitions to describe the phenomenon. Research is confounded further by differences in the understanding of bullying from school to school. Siann et al. (1994) report that schools which have bullying programs in place are more sensitized to bullying and are more likely to label aggressive behavior as bullying than those that are less conscious of it. Observation as a data-gathering instrument is limited by the fact that bullying generally takes place away from adult observation (Mooney, Creeser, & Blatchford, 1991), so it is generally necessary to rely on student reports. Besides the fact that student perceptions are subjective, research on bullying is constrained by student reluctance to discuss bullying with researchers (Siann et al., 1994; Whitney & Smith, 1993) out of fear that bullying will escalate and because they do not believe teachers and other adults will do anything about it (Mooney et al., 1991).

Research on bullying is complicated further by different locations and age groups that have been studied. While bullying apparently exists in nearly every culture (Horne & Socherman, 1996), it is not clear that studies done in one area or culture can be generalized to another. A caution is, therefore, in order before applying what has been learned about bullying in other countries to schools in the United States.

Studies conducted in Norway (Olweus, 1991) and Great Britain (Austin & Joseph, 1996) suggest that somewhere between 9 and 38 percent of elementary students are

bullied regularly. In a Norwegian sample, 10% admitted to physically bullying others (Olweus, 1991), and 57% of students in a British sample indicated that they had teased other students (Mooney et al., 1991). An American study of middle school students in Maryland found that 24% of sampled students reported bullying others at least once in the year prior to the study, and 7% admitted to bullying three or more times. In this study 30% saying they had been victimized three or more times during the previous year (Haynie et al., 2001). While elementary-aged boys and girls were found in a British study to be equal perpetrators, the way in which they bully is notably different. Boys tend to use physical aggression, while girls use verbal tactics such as social exclusion and gossiping (Mooney et al., 1991).

At the secondary level, from 10% (Siann et al., 1994) to 27% (Whitney & Smith, 1993) of samples of British children indicated that they had been bullied at some time during their school careers. As many as 75% of students in an American sample responded that they had been bullied (Hazler et al., 1992). There is some evidence that students are less likely to be victimized in their last years of high school, perhaps because older students are no longer present to torment them (Nolin, Davies, & Chandler, 1996), but bullying does not appear to abate with age (Whitney & Smith, 1993). In an American study, high school bullying was likely to be verbal rather than physical. But two groups reported continued physical violence: girls, 10% of whom reported dating violence, and gay or lesbian students, who reported being victimized by both physical and verbal aggression (Shakeshaft et al., 1995).

Gender differences identified in elementary students carried through into high school, with boys using more physical aggression (Hoover , Oliver, & Hazler, 1992;

Whitney & Smith, 1993) and more direct verbal aggression (e.g., calling names directly), while girls were more likely to talk about others behind their backs (Shakeshaft et al., 1995). In general, boys were found to bully boys and girls to bully girls, but some boys cross gender lines and also bully girls. Little difference was found in the frequency of victimization of boys and girls (Whitney & Smith, 1993).

The reasons that secondary students were singled out to be bullied also varied by gender. Girls were more likely to be victimized because of their looks or clothing. Sexually mature girls were tormented by both boys and girls with rumors of sexual behavior or sexual comments. Boys, on the other hand, were harassed more for their behavior; they were often teased with accusations of being homosexual (Shakeshaft et al., 1995).

Bullies

It is not known what actually causes a student to bully others. Several researchers, however, have established relationships between bullying behavior and other personal characteristics. Bullies tended to have an aggressive personality pattern with weak inhibitions against physical behavior, and they generally had a positive attitude towards the use of violence (Horne & Socherman, 1996), were stronger than other students, and needed to dominate others (Olweus, 1996). They were more likely to lack sensitivity to the feelings of others, to be hyperactive, to have lower academic achievement, and to have more personality problems than victims or students not involved in bullying (Lowenstein, 1995a). Bullies used aggression as a strategy to get what they wanted and were organized about how they went about it. Bullies were found to have higher rates of

behavior problems and acceptance of deviant behavior and lower rates of self-control, social competence, and school adjustment than either victims or a comparison group of students who had been neither bullied or victimized (Haynie et al., 2001).

Bullies were found to have witnessed more violence at home than other students. They were also more likely to live in families with lower socio-economic status than children who were not bullies (Schwartz, Dodge, Pettit, & Bates, 1997). In a study of Maryland middle-school students, children who bully were found to have significantly lower parental involvement and support than either a comparison group or victims (Haynie et al., 2001).

Bullying has been correlated significantly with delinquency in an Australian study of high school students (Rigby & Cox, 1996) and with depression in a British study of elementary students (Austin & Joseph, 1996). Children who bully are five times more likely to have criminal records as adults than non-bullies (Oliver, Oaks, & Hoover, 1994).

Bully/victims. There is a subset of bullies who are not only provocative and aggressive with others but are also victimized themselves by other students. One British study of junior high students identified that bully/victims accounted for 62% of all bullies. Another study conducted with American elementary school children indicated that these aggressive victims accounted for 48% of all bullies (Schwarz et al, 1997). A study of Maryland middle-school students indicated that 53% of the students who reported they had bullied also reported frequent victimization (Haynie et al., 2001). Bully/victims appeared to have more problems than non-victimized bullies, victims, and children not involved in bullying. They were also more likely to be neurotic and psychotic than their peers (Mynard & Joseph, 1997; Schwartz et al., 1997). Bully/victims

were more likely to have school behavior problems, accept deviant behavior, and to be depressed than non-victimized bullies, victims, or a comparison group. These bully/victims had less self-control, social competence, and school adjustment (Haynie, 2001).

Victimized aggressors were exposed to more violence and rejection at home than other children (including other bullies), had more violent role models, viewed more parental aggression and marital violence, and were exposed to more maternal hostility. They were also more likely to have been physically abused than other students (Schwartz et al., 1997). Bully/victims also perceived themselves to have less-involved and less-supportive parents than the other groups studied (Haynie, 2001).

Victims

A study of bullying conducted in Norway with elementary and junior high students indicated that victims were generally physically weaker than bullies and somehow gave the impression that they would not retaliate if attacked (Olweus, 1991). Another study conducted in Great Britain indicated that 8 to 11 year-old victims tended to have lower self-esteem and higher rates of depression and introversion than other students (Austin & Joseph, 1997). Bullies tended to choose victims who had higher rates of learning disabilities and clumsiness than those who were not picked on (Lowenstein, 1995a). Victims also were more likely to be sensitive, anxious, and insecure than other students (Olweus, 1996). In other words, victims were quiet, weaker students, who were perceived as ineffectual by bullying students and were targeted because they rarely fought back.

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In an American study of secondary students, victims indicated that they responded to being bullied with a variety of strategies. They sometimes rationalized the abuse by excusing it or dismissed it as joking. They ignored the bullying (and were often advised to do so by adults). Some fought back; some sought refuge in a group. Other victims withdrew from school activities in an effort to avoid being bullied. All victims studied indicated that they felt badly about themselves (Shakeshaft et al., 1995). Only about half of all bullied students in a British study of secondary students said that they had told someone about the victimization (Whitney & Smith, 1993). A sample of elementary-level American students reported that they were reluctant to report bullying out of fear of retaliation from the intimidator (Roberts & Coursol, 1996). Although victims' families have been characterized in the literature as being too close or overprotective (Oliver et al., 1995), Schwartz et al. (1997) found no differences in the families of victimized students and those of non-bullied students in terms of discipline, child abuse, or parents' marital conflict.

School Responses

Students who have been bullied perceive that teachers and staff do not respond to bullying when they see it (Hazler et al., 1992; Roberts & Coursol, 1996). In a study of British youth, students reported that when they make adults aware of bullying, the adults only intervened half the time in elementary school and a third of the time in high school (Whitney & Smith, 1993). In a Canadian study in which students in grades 1-6 were observed, teachers were present half of the time when bullying was observed. When they

were present, they only intervened in half of the bullying observed by the researchers (Atlas & Pepler, 1998).

According to Barone (1997), teachers and staff tolerate bullying for four reasons:

Lack of awareness. Adults are unaware of most of the bullying that goes on in schools. In one American study, teachers believed that 16% of their students were being bullied, while students in the same school reported that 59% of the students were bullied. Teachers were also unaware of the location of bullying in their schools, believing that it took place out of sight on playgrounds. Students, in contrast, reported that bullying took place in hallways, where teachers could see it if they were attentive (Barone, 1997).

Belief that children need to learn to cope with bullying. Mooney et al. (1991) suggest that adults view teasing as being so common that children simply must learn to deal with it. Adults, therefore, are reluctant to intervene. Although many adults believe that bullying and being bullied are normal childhood activities, bullying is not a necessary part of growing up or a rite of passage (Baron, 1997). Unfortunately, such lack of intervention in bullying behavior “implies a tacit acceptance” (Olweus, 1991, p. 427).

Desensitization to bullying. Adults do not always perceive or identify bullying that they witness. What may look like accidental pushing may actually be bullying (Barone, 1997). In fact, some students in a study of American high school students indicated that teachers sometimes join in with students in harassing others or encourage such torment (Shakeshaft et al., 1995).

Lack of resources. School staff have been asked to deal with many issues for which they have not been trained. They may ignore bullying, because they do not know how to respond (Barone, 1997). While there are a number of reasons that adults fail to

intervene to stop bullying, students perceive one major reason for adult inaction. Students believe that adults do not care enough to get involved (Hazler et al., 1992; Shakeshaft et al., 1995).

Positive Strategies to Reduce Bullying

A holistic approach is needed to address the problem of bullying (Arora, 1994; Garrity, Jens, Porter, Sager, & Short-Camilli, 2000). All staff (including playground monitors), students, and parents should be involved (Garrity, Jens, Porter, Sager, & Short-Camilli, 1997; 2000; Saunders, 1997) in helping the school make changes to address bullying. The involvement of all stake holders increases ownership in the new policies so that they are more motivated and more likely to cooperate with any programs that are developed (Barone, 1997).

Schools that wish to reduce bullying should begin by bringing discussion into the open. Talking about bullying in student lessons and exercises removes the taboo, so that problem solving can begin (Saunders, 1997). A definition of bullying needs to be articulated and published school wide (Hazler et al., 1992; Horne & Socherman, 1996). All aggressive actions should be included, and everyone must understand what is considered bullying. A common early strategy is to begin with a needs assessment in which students are surveyed to determine the rate of bullying and the extent of the problem (Greenbaum, 1987; Hazler et al., 1992). Not only can this serve to alert school staff to the extent of bullying, it can also provide a baseline to determine the effectiveness of the intervention strategy. Policy development also should include development of bully reporting forms (Saunders, 1997) or some other systematic strategy to record

bullying behavior, such that the school can monitor all bullying activity and there are records of inappropriate student behavior (Greenbaum, 1987).

Developing a zero-tolerance policy. Safety should be a part of the school mission and values (Litke, 1996), so schools need to take a stand against bullying and adopt a policy for dealing with it (Hazler et al., 1992; Litke, 1996; Saunders, 1997), including creating clear, consistent consequences (Garrity et al., 2000; Horne & Socherman, 1996; Olweus, 1991). Teachers and staff never should overlook abusive acts (Hazler et al., 1992; Saunders, 1997), as bullies and victims alike interpret this non-action as tacit support of bullying. The consequences should be no-nonsense, factual, and non-punitive (Arora, 1994) and avoid shaming the student who has bullied (Garrity et al., 1997). Simply giving bullies a warning or a second chance before consequences fall does not contribute to a safe school for the victims (Litke, 1996).

Creating a positive school climate. Bullying can be viewed as a warning sign of problems in the school climate. Schools need to determine ways that they can increase tolerance, improve faculty-student relationships, increase student ownership of the school (Litke, 1996; Olweus, 1991), and create more opportunities for student leadership. Students need to learn skills to understand other students and accept different perspectives (Hazler et al., 1992). Reducing bullying has many healthy side effects in a school. When schools implement holistic anti-bullying programs, discipline issues fall, moral development of students grows, and bullies often are able to become positive leaders (Garrity et al., 1997).

Involving teachers. Teachers are key to school efforts to reduce bullying. They need information about the research on bullying and strategies to help reduce it (Garrity

et al., 1997; Hazler et al., 1992; Horne & Socherman, 1996). Informed teachers might teach students about bullying by directly discussing the problem and what to do about it. Teachers also can address bullying indirectly by assigning and discussing readings about bullying or by creating writing assignments of students' own experiences. History and current events also provide opportunities for discussions about bullying (Saunders, 1997).

Increasing monitoring. For student misbehavior to be stopped, recess activities need to be monitored (Lowenstein, 1995b; Olweus, 1991; Roberts & Coursol, 1996). In fact, schools with adequate playground and hallway supervision have been shown to have fewer incidents of bullying (Greenbaum, 1987; Horne & Socherman, 1996; Whitney & Smith, 1993). Students who have been identified as either bullies or victims should be observed even more carefully to prevent future incidences of bullying (Olweus, 1991). Saunders (1997) suggests that playground supervisors also need to be involved in discussions about bullying so as to alert them to the problem.

Encouraging student participation. Students who are involved in developing policies will be most likely be motivated to participate and make positive changes. It is important to include students in policy development to the extent that they are able to participate (Hazler et al., 1992). Students can develop an honor policy which addresses sanctions against bullying (Horne & Socherman, 1996) and a student code of conduct to discourage aggression (Hazler et al., 1992).

Garrity et al. (1997; 2000) discuss the importance of the "caring majority" of students who neither bully nor are bullied but who are often present when the bullying takes place. It is important that these students have strategies to help victims and to communicate to the bullies that their aggressive behavior is unacceptable. Those who

witness bullying should also report it to adults, but first they must believe that staff will intervene.

Stevens, Van Oost, & Bourdeaudhui (2000) suggest that peer attitudes and behaviors can inadvertently reinforce bullying. They recommend videos, discussions, and role-playing to help peers become aware of the effects of bullying and to create and rehearse ways to intervene when someone is being victimized.

Including parents. Parent involvement, like student involvement, will increase parent support for policies and consequences. It is important to include parents in policy making regarding bullying protocol (Garrity et al., 1997; 2000; Greenbaum, 1987; Hazler et al., 1992). When problems arise, parents of both bullies and victims need to be informed by the school (Greenbaum, 1987).

Parents of victimized students can learn to help by asking their children if someone is bothering them at school, coaching them in assertiveness skills, and instructing their children not to hit back or retaliate, which often makes things worse for the victim (Saunders, 1997). Parents who are sympathetic listeners are most helpful. Withdrawing the student or allowing him or her to stay home interferes with student learning and does not resolve the problem (Roberts & Coursol, 1996).

Schools should inform the families of students who bully about their son's or daughter's unacceptable behavior (Saunders, 1997). Schools can provide parents with strategies and counseling referrals to help their children or adolescents reduce aggression. To foster change, parents of bullies must communicate to their offspring that they do not condone aggression (Horne & Socherman, 1996).

Helping victims. Victims need protection and support from the school (Garrity et al., 1997; 2000; Greenbaum, 1987). When an incident of bullying happens, staff should respond immediately to victims and allow them to tell their stories (Roberts & Coursol, 1996). Victims also benefit from ongoing support (Roberts & Coursol, 1996) and an special adult or older-student who can act as a mentor (Garrity et al., 1997; 2000). Formal programs such as school-based individual and group counseling can help foster assertiveness, social skills, friendship building, staying near other students, and self-esteem (Garrity et al., 1997; 2000), and ways to get out of difficult situations (Roberts & Coursol, 1996).

Helping bullies. School-based interventions with bullies must include a no-nonsense approach, informing the bully that his or her behavior is not acceptable. There should be consequences for bullying behavior, but the aggressive student should not be blamed or shamed. Counseling can help bullies build empathy skills and correct thinking errors, such as the assumption that the student should always get what he or she wishes (Garrity et al., 2000). Bullying at school also has been reduced effectively by the use of group therapy, close supervision and monitoring, and social skills training (Lowenstein, 1995b).

Successful Anti-Bullying Programs

The following programs have been found to reduce bullying at different age levels:

Garrity et al. (2000) developed Bully-proofing to prevent and reduce bullying at the elementary level. This program begins by informing teachers about the nature of bullying and teaches strategies to intervene. The classroom teacher and/or the school

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social worker teaches six classroom lessons to every student in the school. Students learn examples of bullying, zero tolerance for such aggression, strategies for victims, and suggestions for witnesses (Garrity et al., 2000). Parents are informed and involved in supporting their sons and daughters. In-school counseling is provided for both bullies and victims to help them gain needed social skills (e.g., empathy and delay of gratification for bullies, avoiding isolated situations and problem solving for victims). This program has been shown to reduce the number of discipline issues and help some bullies become positive leaders (Garrity et al, 1997).

Olweus (1991) developed and tested a school-based bullying reduction program for slightly older children (grades 4-7) in Sweden and Norway. This program begins with the education of teachers (e.g., in-service training and an information booklets) and parents, who are given an information packet about the goals and strategies to be used in the program. Adult supervision of students is increased, and teachers intervene when they see bullying, giving students a clear message that bullying is not acceptable. Frequent classroom discussions (“social hour”) are used to talk about rules, helping others, and including left-out students. “Non-hostile, non-physical punishments” (p. 445) are used when bullying occurs and praise is given when students follow the rules. Teachers help victims learn to be assertive and find creative ways to make victims appear valuable in the eyes of their classmates. Parents of victims are encouraged to help their offspring increase peer contacts and make and keep friends. This program was found to reduce bullying within 8 months and showed marked results in 2 years (Olweus, 1991).

Lowenstein (1995b) developed an intense therapeutic intervention for emotionally disturbed students, aged 10-16 in England. This program relied heavily on building a

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positive relationship between staff and students. It included close supervision, group therapy (including feedback and confrontation by group members regarding inappropriate behavior), sensitivity training, role playing, drama therapy, and social skills training for both bullies and victims. Pair therapy was also used, bringing bully and victim together to work on tasks that required mutual problem solving. Both bully and victim monitored their own behavior and reported their progress and setbacks to their therapy groups. Both bullies and victims also engaged in individual therapy, seeking insight into their behavior. Outcomes were determined by student self-monitoring and independent observations. After 10 weeks of this intensive intervention, bullying ceased completely for 39 of the 50 subjects studied and was markedly reduced by 7 others.

Conclusion

Bullying in schools simply is not acceptable because students deserve a safe school environment. Schools must intervene to stop this aggression. Children do not have the power to stop bullying by themselves (Saunders, 1997), and, without intervention, bullies will not outgrow their offensive behavior (Olweus, 1991). Even though schools cannot control the amount of violence that their students face in their neighborhoods and homes, it is possible to create safe and bully-free environments at school (Garrity et al., 1997).

Effective approaches have been identified which reduce school-based bullying. Because of their holistic person-in-environment approach and their knowledge of planned change, school social workers are logical candidates to implement and evaluate these programs in schools. Administrators, teachers, school staff, parents, victims, and other

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students also need to be involved in creating policies that hold bullies accountable for their behavior. One challenge is to find ways to create a positive school climate and create an atmosphere in which all students respect (and are respected by) each other and school staff. Another challenge is to finance the presence of more social workers in schools. It probably will not be possible to eliminate all bullying activity. Nevertheless, schools owe it to their students to reduce bullying so that students are not intimidated by threats of physical or emotional harm from their peers.

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