Issue Brief

Examining Current Challenges in Secondary Education and Transition

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Bullying and Teasing of Youth With Disabilities: Creating Positive School Environments for Effective Inclusion

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Issue: Bullying has been proven by numerous studies to be a serious problem nationwide. Harassment of youth with disabilities in particular has been steadily increasing. Whole-school antibullying/antiviolence programs are necessary to address this problem effectively.

Defining the Issue

Bullying, harassment, and teasing within schools are not only practiced by many students, but have historically been allowed, ignored, and even modeled by adults. Bullying and teasing have been accepted by many as rites of passage for youth—a normal part of the childhood and adolescent experience. In fact, some researchers have recently wondered whether bullying may serve some purpose for society, resulting in ambivalence toward antiviolence programs (Hoover & Salk, 2003). However, the fact that youth who have been bullied, teased, and ostracized continue to use violence as a means of fighting back, indicates otherwise.

Bullying and teasing have become critical issues nationwide (Bowman, 2001). This is particularly true as it applies to youth with disabilities. In July, 2000, the U.S. Department of Education issued an official statement on behalf of the Office for Civil Rights (OCR) and the Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services (OSERS) regarding disability harassment in school. The number of complaints and consultation calls to OCR and OSERS demonstrates steadily increasing allegations and proven situations of disability harassment (U.S. Department of Education, 2000).

Bullies tend to focus on peers who seem vulnerable, such as those who are passive, anxious, quiet, sensitive, or unusual in some way (e.g., being short or having an identifiable disability) (Lingren, 1997; Bully B'ware Productions, 2003). Khosropour and Walsh (2001) additionally reported the personality characteristics of

victims as shy, quiet, sad, weak, or helpless. However, some controversy exists about the relationship between victim status and risk of bullying. Research by Olweus (1993) argued that while bullies may seize upon a victim characteristic as an excuse for bullying or teasing, only physical weakness has appeared consistently as a predictor of victimization. Nonetheless, Hoover et al. (1992) demonstrated that young people themselves believe vulnerability predicts whether or not a student becomes a victim.

Several steadfast features of American schools may also contribute to this problem. Labeling and separating students based on athletic or academic aptitude provides an atmosphere ripe for support of bullying, teasing, and development of cliques (Bowman, 2001; Hoover & Salk, 2003). Continued non-participation by students with disabilities in general education classes, mainstream educational clubs and organizations, and athletic programs perpetuates a lack of understanding and interaction among students with and without disabilities, as well as among staff outside of special education.

Unless bullying is proactively addressed by school and community leaders, it can lead to serious consequences for students, including higher dropout rates, more incidents of violence in school, lower self-esteem, fewer friends, declining grades, and increased illnesses. Lifelong problems include involvement with the criminal justice system, mental health issues, and poor relationship development for both the bully and victim (Ballard, Argus, & Remley, 1999; Rigby, 1999; Sagarese & Giannetti, 1999; Schmitt, 1999; Simanton, Berthwick, & Hoover, 2000). In addition, equal access to educational opportunities and benefits for youth with disabilities can be eroded through bullying, including denial of rights under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act, Title II, and provisions of a Free Appropriate Public Education (FAPE).

Bullying Defined

The Council on Scientific Affairs of the American Medical Association defines bullying as "…a negative behavior involving (a) a pattern of repeated aggression, (b) deliberate intent to harm or disturb a victim despite apparent victim distress, and (c) a real or perceived imbalance of power (e.g., due to age, strength, size), with the more powerful child or group attacking a physically or psychologically vulnerable victim" (Bully B'ware Productions, 2003).

Bullying consists of a series of repeated, intentionally cruel incidents between the same children who are in the same bully and victim roles. Bullying is not limited to but can include:

- Harassing someone because of perceived differences (e.g., a disability, sexual orientation)
- Being physically attacked/assaulted or abused

The rate at which bullying occurs depends on many factors, including whether or not peers and responsible adults get involved and provide support, how victims respond, and how schools or other organizations either condone and tolerate or prevent its occurrence (CSA, 2002). A general lack of leadership by youth to prevent bullying and teasing of their peers contributes to the problem (Bowman, 2001).

Teasing Defined

Most bullying is subtle and discreet rather than overt (Hoover & Oliver, 1996). This teasing, a form of bullying, includes:

- Spreading rumors or gossip
- Ridicule
- Verbal abuse
- Public shunning or private humiliation and embarrassment

Peer victimization, in which students are repeatedly harassed, ridiculed, teased, scorned, and excluded, is one of today's most overlooked educational problems (Brendtro, 2001). Students consistently rank verbal behavior as the primary mode of teasing, and it has been found that long-term verbal harassment is as damaging psychologically as infrequent physical harassment. Students express a great deal of confusion about teasing and how to deal with it, and some argue that social and communication skills are central to dealing with teasing and harassment in any successful antibullying efforts (Hoover & Oliver, 1996; Hoover & Olson, 2000; Stein, 1995).

Disability Harassment Defined

Disability harassment is the form of bullying and teasing specifically based on or because of a disability. This treatment creates a hostile environment by denying access to, participation in, or receipt of benefits, services, or opportunities at school (PSEA Interactive, 2003; U.S. Department of Education, 2000).

What We Know

We know that:

- Bullying is the most common form of violence; 3.7 million youth engage in it, and more than 3.2 million are victims of bullying annually.

- Since 1992, there have been 250 violent deaths in schools, and bullying has been a factor in virtually every school shooting.

- Direct, physical bullying increases in elementary school, peaks in middle school, and declines in high school. Verbal abuse, on the other hand, remains constant.

- 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.

- Twenty-five percent (25%) of teachers see nothing wrong with bullying or putdowns and consequently intervene in only 4% of bullying incidents.

(Cohn & Cantor, 2003; Council on Scientific Affairs, American Medical Association, 2002).

Addressing the Problem

According to Brendtro (2001), when young adults feel physically or socially unsafe, schools become a breeding ground for ridicule and attack. Under such conditions, even the most ordinary students can become capable of extreme cruelty. Cliques are formed, and through these alliances, students gain a sense of superiority and belonging at the expense of those who are banished. Olweus (1993) stated that experts must help students exert leadership—in recognizing bullying, refusing to participate, and in coming to the aid of victims skillfully and nonviolently.

Creating Caring Communities

Children and young adults spend the majority of their days within school systems in the presence of adults. Schools must begin implementing comprehensive antibullying and antiviolence programs to reduce bullying and teasing of all youth, especially youth with disabilities. The U.S. Department of Education (2000) states that at a minimum, schools must develop and disseminate an official policy and grievance procedures that prohibit discrimination based on disability and that address disability harassment.

Most American schools are designed to divide students into groups, effectively emphasizing differences rather than commonalities. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the design of the majority of special education programs. Research has demonstrated however, that students' odd or age-inappropriate behavior may play a role in attracting bullies within integrated environments as well, where students with disabilities frequently occupy the lowest rung of the popularity ladder (Bruininks, 1978).

Brendtro (2001) argued that "the quality of youth peer cultures is largely determined by adults," (p. 49), suggesting that the responsibility for curbing negative youth culture falls at least in part on adults. According to Harris, Petrie, and Willoughby (2002), school climate must improve to reduce the incidence of bullying for all youth. This includes:

- Having warm, positive, caring, involved, authoritative adults

- Being committed to setting firm limits for unacceptable behavior

- Being committed to the consistent application of nonhostile, nonphysical sanctions for offenders

Comprehensive Whole-School Antibullying Programs

Whole-school approaches consist of a set of routines, rules, and strategies to deal with existing and future bullying problems in schools. The attitudes, routines, and behaviors of school staff (especially teachers), as well as students and parents, are key factors in preventing and controlling bullying behaviors, as well as redirecting these behaviors into more socially acceptable channels (Olweus, 1993). A number of comprehensive, whole-school antibullying models have proven to be successful. This brief will share two specific models: (a) Olweus's Intervention Program, and (b) The Second Step Program.

Olweus's Intervention Program

Dan Olweus, author of *Bullying at School* and Professor of Psychology at the University of Bergen, Norway, is acknowledged as a leading authority on bullying and victimization. He has conducted research in this area for more than 20 years and is regarded as the "Founding Father" of the field.

Olweus's intervention program has met with positive feedback from school settings. The program's major goal is to reduce or eliminate existing bully/victim problems in and out of the school setting, as well as to prevent the development of any new problems.

Olweus's Core Program

General Prerequisites
• Awareness and involvement of teachers and parents

Measures at the School Level
Target: The entire student body
• Survey of all students regarding bullying
• School conference on bullying
• Better supervision of students during breaks and lunch time
• Parent/staff cooperation to resolve the problem

Measures at the Class Level
Target: All students in each classroom
• Students help develop class rules against bullying; rules are consistently enforced
• Students hold regular class meetings about bullying

Measures at the Individual Level
Target: Students known to be or suspected of being bullies or victims
• Serious talks with bullies and victims
• Serious talks with parents of involved students
• Use of creative solutions to resolve the issue

For more information and details on implementing this program, refer to Olweus (1993).

Second Step: Educating the Heart and Mind

The Second Step program is an exemplary violence prevention program. Second Step includes research-based, teacher-friendly curricula, training for educators, and parent-education components. Teachers learn how to deal with disruptions and behavior issues, and students learn how to: (a) recognize and understand their feelings, (b) make positive and effective choices, and (c) keep anger from escalating into violence. Classroom use of the Second Step program provides children with the skills they need to create safe environments and to become successful adults.

The Second Step curriculum is based on more than 15 years of classroom application and current academic, social, and emotional research. The curriculum focuses on three key competencies: empathy, impulse control and problem solving, and anger management. Integrated activities tie lessons into curricular requirements so teachers can build on existing classroom material. The curriculum includes a family guide to help parents use the program at home to apply the same problem-solving, anger management, and conflict resolution skills that their children learn in school.

For more information on implementing this model, visit the Second Step Web site at *http://www.secondstep.org/.*

Preventing Disability Harassment

Additional suggestions from the U.S. Department of Education (2000) specifically targeted to prevent disability harassment include:

• Create a campus environment that is aware of and sensitive to disability concerns and harassment.
• Weave this issue into curriculum or extra-curricular programs.
• Encourage parents, students, employees, and community members to discuss disability harassment and report it when they become aware of its occurrence.
• Publicize antiharassment statements and procedures for addressing discrimination complaints.
• Provide appropriate training for staff and students regarding harassment.
• Counsel both victims and perpetrators of harassment.
• Implement monitoring programs to follow up on resolved issues of disability harassment.
• Assess and modify existing disability harassment policies and procedures to ensure effectiveness.

Conclusion

Although bullying and teasing are often considered a harmless activity, research shows that they may result in serious short- and long-term negative consequences. Youth with disabilities are particularly vulnerable and represent a high-risk group for becoming both potential victims and perpetrators of

bullying and teasing. Addressing this issue in isolation is not the answer. Comprehensive, school-wide reform programs are a proactive strategy for meeting the needs of youth with disabilities, the student body at large, school staff, families, and community members.

Resources

Kids Help Online
An extensive list of bullying and teasing Web sites.
http://www.kidshelp.org/bullying.htm

Students Against Violence Everywhere
A student-driven organization where students learn about alternatives to violence.
http://www.nationalsave.org

Bully Stoppers
An online help and referral center for U.S. schools.
http://www.bullystoppers.com

ERIC Clearinghouse on Counseling and Student Services–Bullying Resources
An excellent list of up-to-date articles and information on bullying.
http://ericcass.uncg.edu/virtuallib/bullying/bullyingbook.html

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