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Afterschool: A Strategy for Addressing and Preventing Middle School Bullying

The Afterschool Alliance, in partnership with MetLife Foundation, is proud to present the second in a series of four issue briefs examining critical issues facing middle school youth and the vital role afterschool programs play in addressing these issues. These issue briefs feature: the importance of aligning afterschool with the school day; bullying awareness and prevention; service learning opportunities for middle schoolers; and literacy education. They examine just a few of the ways afterschool programs support middle school youth, families and communities.

Bullying, commonly defined as hostile behavior involving an imbalance of power between victim and aggressor,ⁱ is one of the greatest dangers facing middle school youth in schools across the U.S. Several highly-publicized incidents, including extreme forms of teasing, physical beatings and even bully-induced suicides, have raised the national profile of bullying in recent years. Yet, as President Obama noted early this year in a video released by the White House, “This isn’t an issue that makes headlines every day, but it affects every single young person in our country.” Middle school students – who are undergoing physical, social and emotional transitions – are particularly vulnerable to teasing and intimidation, making the middle school years crucial to promoting healthy youth development. Schools have been working hard to eradicate bullying from classrooms and hallways during the day, but unfortunately, many of these incidents occur when children are outside of the supervision control of teachers and school administrators.ⁱⁱ Simply stated, schools are doing well to reduce bullying incidents, but they need help to address this all-important issue.

Afterschool programs that provide access to caring adults and offer a more informal environment that is distinct from the school day allow children to feel safe from peer pressure, build confidence and learn how to deal with bullies. Beneficial programs across the country are aiding in the fight against bullying and teaching children that aggressive and detrimental behaviors are not something to be taken lightly. During his aforementioned address, the president went on to note that, “For a long time, bullying was treated as an unavoidable part of growing up, but more and more, we’re seeing how harmful it can be for our kids – especially when it follows them from their school to their phone to their computer screen.” Afterschool programs, with their unique position as a less formal and more open learning environment, can provide middle school youth with the knowledge and attitudes necessary to combat bullying both in school and online, leading to healthy youth development and a happier generation of students.

The Facts: Bullying in Middle School

The statistics on the rate of bullying in this country are sobering – especially for middle schoolers. Bullying has been identified as a major concern for schools across the country,ⁱⁱⁱ and sixth, seventh and eighth graders represent the students with the highest corresponding rates of both general bullying and physical injury as a result of bullying.^{iv} Bullying’s omnipresence among U.S. schools cannot be overstated:

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- The National Youth Violence Resource Center reports that 30 percent of U.S. children have reported being involved in bullying as a bully, victim or both.^v
- Bullying tends to peak in late childhood/early adolescence, making prevention efforts in middle school integral to stemming future emotional damage.^{vi}
- In 2007, students reported the following forms of bullying as most common in school:
 - being made fun of (21%);
 - being the object of rumors (18%);
 - being pushed, shoved, tripped or spit on (11%).^{vii}
- Approximately 10 percent of children report being bullied on a consistent basis in school.^{viii}

As bullying persists, children and families are left struggling to ward off this dangerous distraction to both learning and healthy childhood development, and a new form of bullying has made prevention efforts by schools alone that much more difficult.

Cyberbullying: The New Medium

Cyberbullying is a developing form of bullying that tends to peak between the end of middle school and the beginning of high school. It occurs through the use of technology – such as computers, cell phones and other electronic devices – and can come in many forms such as hurtful text messages, spreading rumors on social networking websites or creating content online that makes fun of others.^{ix} Cyberbullying is particularly dangerous among middle school students who are savvy enough to navigate online content but not mature enough to understand cyberbullying’s potentially damaging implications:

“Within the last ten years, bullying has reached beyond the physical walls of our classrooms through the increased use of technology, making it ever more difficult to detect. Email, text messages, chat rooms and websites have provided a quick and often anonymous means of cyberbullying. In national surveys of 10 to 17-year-olds, twice as many youth indicated that they had been victims and perpetrators of online bullying in 2005 compared to 1999.”

Todd Platts (PA), U.S. House of Representatives

- In a Clemson University study of nearly 4,000 middle school students, 11 percent had been electronically bullied and four percent had electronically bullied someone else at least once in the previous two months.^x
- One study found that 14 percent of children in grades 6-10 reported being bullied online in the past two months, and that boys tended to be the aggressors in cyberbullying situations more often than girls.^{xi}
- Like other forms of bullying, cyberbullying tends to peak in grades 7 and 8; however, cyberbullying is distinct from verbal, social and physical bullying in that it has no link to the number of friends a victim possesses.^{xii}

With more than 17 million children aged 12-17 using the Internet,^{xiii} teaching them how to surf the Web responsibly is extremely important to make sure that children are not intimidated or harassed online.

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The Social and Emotional Dangers of Bullying

The short- and long-term consequences of bullying can be detrimental for both the victim and the bully. A number of studies prove that when it comes to acts of violence, exclusion and intimidation of a peer, every party involved is at risk:

- As bullies go through adolescence, they are more likely to suffer problems such as delinquency, alcohol and drug abuse, and dropping out of school.^{xiv}
- Both bullies and victims have been found to be more depressed than students who are not involved in bullying.^{xv}
- Sixty percent of boys who bullied others in middle school had a criminal conviction by age 24.^{xvi}
- Children and youth who are bullied are more likely to be depressed, lonely, anxious, have low self-esteem and think about suicide.^{xvii}
- Bullying creates a climate of fear and disrespect in schools and has a harmful impact on student learning.^{xviii}
- Adults who recalled being bullied in their youth were three times more likely to have suicidal thoughts or inclinations.^{xix}
- Children who were bullied in the past are more likely to lash out violently. In 12 of 15 school shooting cases in the 1990s, the shooters had a history of being bullied.^{xx}

“We know that the hurt and pain from bullying lasts long after the bullying itself takes place. Students involved in bullying are more likely to struggle in school, use drugs and alcohol, and have physical and mental health issues that can linger well into adulthood.”

Secretary Kathleen Sebelius, Department of Health and Human Services

Unfortunately, to date, despite their best efforts, school-based anti-bullying programs alone have not shown evidence of strong results.^{xxi} Therefore, it is integral that community partners come together to offer innovative anti-bullying programs in which children can take part before school, after school and during the summer so they have a chance to develop healthy behaviors and learn how to deal with bullies.

How Afterschool Can Help

While offering children a more open environment in which to express their feelings regarding relationships with peers both inside and outside of school, afterschool programs also offer a host of other benefits that improve children’s self-concepts, behavior and ability to deal with bullies. The research shows that afterschool programs keep kids safe, have a positive impact on self-concept and decision making, and help improve behavior in school:

- A Public/Private Ventures evaluation of the CORAL initiative in California found that 9 in 10 program participants reported feeling safe at the afterschool program.^{xxii}
- The Promising Programs evaluation found that regular participation in high-quality afterschool programs is linked to “reductions in behavior problems among disadvantaged

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students,” including “significant reductions in aggressive behaviors with peers” and “reductions in misconduct.”^{xxiii}

- Researchers at Fordham University found that participants in the YMCA of Greater New York Virtual Y programs demonstrated statistically significant and moderate-to-large improvements in task motivation, frustration tolerance, learning skills, acting out, peer social skills, assertive social skills, shyness/anxiety and on the overall behavior scale.^{xxiv}

With these benefits in mind, afterschool programs can be a key part of the bullying solution in a school or community in several capacities:^{xxv} One obvious benefit is that afterschool offers a flexible space for one-on-one mentoring without the potential limitations imposed by school calendars or a stringent focus on academics.^{xxvi} Beyond mentoring, several innovative afterschool programs are proving the powerful effects that afterschool can have in promoting positive social interaction among students in middle school.

Afterschool programs help promote a sense of community among students. By tying together school and afterschool and offering an open venue for communication with like-minded students, programs help ensure that students develop a strong network of friends so that healthy relationships carry on throughout each portion of a student’s life.

Bully Me Not in Lansing, MI, is an anti-bullying afterschool program designed to meet the unique needs of refugee middle school youth. The program tailors the anti-bullying curriculum to address students’ unique language levels and cultural backgrounds. Bully Me Not teaches strategies for coping with bullying, techniques for managing anger and tools for locating trusting adults and other individuals to help with bullying situations. All lessons are designed to engage students with one another to build teamwork skills while learning about anti-bullying tactics. The afterschool program serves children from Burma, Bhutan, Nepal, Thailand, Iraq, Somali, Tanzania, Burundi, Democratic Republic of Congo and Ethiopia and addresses the negative effects of bullying on self-confidence and how to respond to a bully. Activities for each lesson, ranging from art therapy to group discussions, are designed to engage students actively in their learning and encourage peer interaction and teamwork.

Afterschool programs help encourage pro-social behaviors among middle schoolers. Offering opportunities for altruistic acts such as community service cultivates empathy, improves self-esteem and promotes positive attitudes.

The main goals of **Girls Incorporated of Worcester**, MA, are to promote positive self-concept among the area’s young women and create opportunities for them to succeed in the future. The program’s “Dear World: Voices of Worcester Girls,” an expressive arts and anti-bullying project, empowers girls ages 11-15 to explore the socially challenging issues in their lives through theater. With the support of trained mentors and experienced group facilitators, the girls perform anti-bullying productions on stage, providing them with the opportunity to educate themselves and the community on issues of violence, intimidation and social exclusion to promote healthy relationships. The program engages middle school girls as important agents of change by developing their self-confidence and helping them promote a dialogue about violence prevention in their greater community.

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Afterschool allows children to develop leadership skills. Empowering children with the opportunity to develop in leadership positions in afterschool affords them the confidence to stand up to victimization.

The Bullying Situation is a project created by students at the **21st Century PASOS** program at Bermudian Springs Middle School in Gettysburg, PA. Seventh and eighth grade students in the program created a website and video series depicting real-life school bullying to educate others in the community. After students reported an increase in bullying incidents at their school, program participants began role-playing exercises to show how to properly address bullies. As student interest in the exercises grew, they began taking the lead in videotaping and narrating these sessions to help spread the word on proper anti-bullying tactics. Students have benefited from the experience not only socially, but also by learning technology and acting skills, and by being part of something “big.” Seeing their videos online and knowing they can be accessed by anyone worldwide via the Internet has given the students an enormous sense of accomplishment.

Afterschool programs can help keep parents and the greater community aware of any bullying that may be occurring before, during or after school, ensuring that awareness and learning can persist at outside of the classroom.

The **El Puente Beacon** program at MS 50 offers structured programming and comprehensive support services for elementary and middle school students and their families in the Williamsburg neighborhood of Brooklyn, NY. The program engages youth through a curriculum of positive youth development, academic enrichment, and parent and community involvement. A primary example of the innovativeness of El Puente Beacon is the development of the Beacon B-boy/B-girl dance squad, No Control, which uses dance as a medium to communicate the effects of bullying in school. The group performs its anti-bully-themed routine and then facilitates workshops to create a dialogue about bullying and how it should be handled. Through its unique use of break dancing, the youth of No Control spread the message about the negative effects of bullying, empowering their peers, parents, school administrators and community members to work together to combat the problem of bullying in their schools.

Conclusion

Bullying is a dangerous behavior that can have potentially damaging effects on both bullies and victims for many years. In order to stop it, a concerted effort is needed from the entire community, not just schools, parents and students. Afterschool programs can provide that link to community partners who can bring in new voices to embolden children to stand up to bullies. Programs also let children become leaders on the issue, enlightening the community on challenges facing middle school youth and showing other students how bullying can be stopped at their school. While engaging middle school youth in constructive learning activities, afterschool offers a safe space for participants to voice their concerns and develop healthy behaviors and relationships with other students. The hands-on and student-driven nature of afterschool programs allows middle schoolers to confide in caring mentors while also developing leadership skills to build confidence and improve their self-concept. In partnership with schools, parents and the wider community, afterschool can help produce more emboldened students that know how to stand up to bullies, thereby promoting a bully-free environment in which all students can learn and grow.

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