Bullying Prevention and the Parent Involvement Model

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Abstract

A recent meta-analysis of bullying prevention programs provides support for social-ecological theory, in which parent involvement addressing child bullying behaviors is seen as important in preventing school-based bullying. The purpose of this manuscript is to suggest how Epstein and colleagues' parent involvement model can be used as a framework in implementing bullying prevention programs. School counselors can use the types of parent involvement identified in Epstein and van Voorhis (2010) model, including parenting, communicating, volunteering, learning at home, decision-making, and collaborating with the community, in working with parents and families in the service of promoting anti-bullying interventions and programming in school systems.

Keywords: bullying prevention, family-school collaboration, school counselor, parent involvement model

Bullying Prevention and the Parent Involvement Model

Increasingly, researchers have been examining bullying from a social-ecological perspective (e.g., Espelage & Swearer, 2010; Pepler, Craig, Jiang, & Connolly, 2008), which has been found to be an explanatory model in predicting bullying behaviors (Lee, 2011). A recent meta-analysis of bullying prevention programs appears to provide support for the social-ecological perspective, in which parent involvement that addresses child bullying behaviors is seen as important in helping to prevent bullying behavior in school systems. Correspondingly, the purpose of this manuscript is to suggest how school counselors can use Epstein and van Voorhis' (2010) parent involvement model as a framework in implementing bullying prevention programs.

Empirical Support for Involving Parents in Bullying Prevention

Ttofi and Farrington's (2011) recent meta-analysis of the bullying prevention literature revealed that bullying prevention programs on average reduced the frequency of bullying by 20-23% and the number of students identifying themselves as victims by 17-20%. Specifically, these researchers found that parent meetings and trainings, information for parents, and parent-teacher conferences were associated with reductions in bulling at schools. Adding support to these findings, Ayers, Wagaman, Geiger, Bermudez-Parsai, and Hedberg (2012) noted that parent-teacher conferences were one of only two school-based disciplinary interventions that reduced the rates of reoccurrence in bullying and aggressive behaviors.

Social-Ecological Approach

The social-ecological framework contends that children are part of complex, interrelated systems, and that behavior, including perpetration of bullying and

victimization, is a function of numerous interacting variables that reciprocally influence each other (Espelage & Swearer 2010). Parents, teachers, and peers are seen as potentially impacting a child's behavior, and in turn, are being impacted by the child in question. No one person or environmental context is regarded as causative; persons and contexts are seen as potential contributors to problematic behavior, and consequently are eligible for intervention. Ecological theory was first developed by Bronfenbrenner (1994), who asserted that multiple embedded systems, which includes the peer, family, school, community and cultural environments, influence children's behavior. Children do not develop in isolation but instead are impacted by various interacting contexts (e.g., society, peers, family, etc.).

The social-ecological framework has several potential advantages for understanding and preventing bullying. The framework appears to be consistent with the complex nature of the phenomenon of bullying. Studies have consistently indicated that youth who are involved in school bullying tend to experience problems in other contexts, including in their families and neighborhoods (Swearer & Espelage, 2004). Fortunately, the social-ecological framework implies that practitioners can intervene at various levels with any number of individuals.

Preventative measures may include targeting the entire school through the development of a student code of conduct in which there are sanctions for bullying, through teaching classroom lessons that provide students with the definition and language for identifying bullying behaviors, and through the provision of strategies for bystanders to intervene or for perpetrators to manage tendencies to bully or to avoid bullying altogether. Individual interventions may be used to work with victims (e.g.,

assertiveness training) and perpetrators (e.g., aggression-replacement training), and consultation strategies can be used for the parents of victims and perpetrators in how to best help their children involved in such conflicts.

Parent Involvement Model

Epstein and her colleagues (2001, 2000) have developed the most comprehensive model for family-school collaboration, and recently have adapted the model for the use of school counselors (Epstein & van Voorhis, 2010). These researchers have conducted a rigorous program of evaluation that has demonstrated the effectiveness of the model in promoting family-school collaboration (Epstein et al., 2002), improved school climate (Epstein, 1995), improved student behavior and school discipline (Sheldon & Epstein, 2002), and increases in students' reading achievement scores (Epstein & Dauber, 1991).

Suggesting the usefulness of Epstein and colleagues' model for addressing the significant and pervasive problems of childhood bullying, Johnson (2012) found that parent volunteering was associated with a significant decrease in bullying at the middle school level. In the parent involvement model, the home, school, and community are referred to as "overlapping spheres," which influence both children and the conditions and relationships in the three contexts. The internal model refers to the interactions and patterns of influence that occur between individuals at home, at school, and in the community (Epstein et al., 2002). Conversely, the external model is comprised of the external contexts in which the students live (e.g., home, school, and community), and the theory assumes that student achievement is enhanced when these external contexts collaborate in promoting student achievement.

Interactions between the three contexts occur both at the institutional level (e.g., the school creating a system by which parents can verify homework assignments) and at the individual level (e.g., parent-teacher conference). Epstein and her colleagues identified 6 main types of involvement interactions which are used to organize the school's activities in promoting parental and community involvement, and which can be differentiated to meet the specific needs of the school or district.

Epstein and van Voorhis (2010) apply the parent involvement model to the service model of school counseling, identifying how school counselors can use each of the 6 main types of parent involvement in both a prevention and an intervention mode. The 6 types of involvement are listed below, along with our recommendations regarding how they can be related to bullying prevention and/or intervention.

Parenting. This type of involvement includes helping families (e.g., parents and extended family members) to become knowledgeable about child development, and providing resources that enables them to establish home environments that support student learning. School counselors function in the prevention mode when educating parents and community members about the short- and long-term impacts of bullying, identifying indicators that their son or daughter may be engaging in bullying or is being victimized, reviewing strategies to use when talking with their child about potential victimization or perpetration, and encouraging the use of strategies that decrease their child's likelihood of victimization or perpetration. Inviting parents to a school anti-bullying conference day is a component of many of bullying prevention programs (e.g., Olweus, Limber, & Mihalic, 1999). Additional venues for educating parents about bullying include

parent resource centers, and through consulting with the school counseling program's website, blog, Twitter account, or newsletter.

School counselors can help parents engage in more developmentally appropriate parenting by providing learning experiences as a part of a school conference anti-bullying day, or as part of consultation with the parents of victims and perpetrators. Studies examining the relationship between parenting and children's involvement in bullying (Baldry & Farrington, 2000; Georgiou, 2008) appear to support Baumrind's (1996) research regarding the role of parenting styles and childhood aggression. Baumrind's research suggested that the parents of perpetrators and victims tend to use passive or authoritarian parenting styles, and that children of parents who use an authoritative style are less likely to perpetrate or be victimized. Authoritarian parenting is characterized by harsh or corporal punishment and low levels of nurturance, while passive or permissive parenting may involve showing little interest or knowledge of the child's social interests or desire to promote the child's social development, or failing to set limits upon the child's behavior.

Parent education workshops can include a discussion of developmentally appropriate forms of parental discipline and nurturance. School counselors can help parents explore how they may more effectively promote their child's social development by providing their child with appropriate opportunities for social interaction, and help their child process such peer interactions. Parents can be taught to use a social problem solving model to promote their child's social perspective taking, using the following discussion questions in helping their child to analyze a social situation that involves bullying or aggression: (a) What are you thinking/feeling? (b) What do you think

he or she (other child or children) was thinking/feeling? (c) Has this happened before? Is there a pattern? (d) What do you want to happen in this situation? (e) What ideas are you thinking of trying out or have worked for you before? (f) What do you plan to do now/next? In order to increase the likelihood of parents utilizing such skills, school counselors can demonstrate such skills through role-playing, showing YouTube clips, or having selected parents talk about their use of such skills. Similar goals can also be used by the school counselor when consulting with the parents of perpetrators and victims.

School counselors can play an active role in educating parents and students about safe social media usage. School counselors can provide parents with strategies that decrease their child's risk of experiencing cyberbullying. Mesch (2009) found that participation in social networking sites and having an online profile on such sites increased adolescents' risk for cyberbullying victimization. Mesch also noted that while parents who prohibited their adolescents from accessing certain social media sites decreased the risk of exposure to online bullying, the location of the computer in the household and restricting adolescents' access to certain sites through the use of software were not associated with lower levels of cyberbullying victimization. For additional information, the American School Counselor Association (ASCA) has published a free *Facebook for School Counselors* guide in collaboration with iKeepSafe to educate school counselors regarding the potential risks of Facebook and information about developing school policies to protect students (Internet Keep Safe Coalition & ASCA, 2013).

Given that parenting styles appear to contribute to an increased likelihood of perpetration or victimization, school counselors are encouraged to pursue consultation with parents of both perpetrators and victims who appear to not have made progress with school-based interventions. Because parents of perpetrators, and possibly, parents of victims, are likely to be angry and defensive, we recommend that school counselors use a consultation approach that is based in solution-focused theory (Kahn, 2000).

The solution-focused theory approach to consultation involves establishing a collaborative, problem-solving atmosphere in which the consultant empowers the consultee, helping the consultee to realize that he or she has the resources to achieve goals by exploring his or her strengths, resources, and past successes. Rather than extensively focusing on the problem, the consultant encourages the consultee to concentrate upon past successes and exceptions to the problem (meaning when the problem did not exist or was less severe). The consultant does not provide direct suggestions, but rather engages the consultee in a constructive conversation that helps the consultee to develop a new perspective of the situation, resulting in the consultee devising his or her own solutions. Solutions that are generated by the consultee are considered preferable because the consultee is often likely to use those solutions since they stem from his or her own resources and perspective (Berg, 1994). Importantly, the consultant focuses upon those aspects of the situation that the consultee controls.

Parents of victims often feel hopeless and have a tendency towards over-involvement with their child (e.g., Georgiou, 2008), possibly in an effort to insulate their child from the pain of the lack of healthy peer relationships. In working with the parents of victims of bullying, the school counselor first affirms the parent's concerns using

paraphrasing and summarizing, but eventually shifts the focus to the parent's goals for his or her child, asking him or her what would he or she would like the child to develop at this point in their life, which often leads the parents to identify such things as confidence, more friends, assertiveness, etc. The school counselor uses an exception to explore those times in which the child demonstrated the qualities the parent named, or the school counselor can using a scaling question to ask the parent the degree to which the child has demonstrated the qualities in question, asking for specifics of how and when the child has exhibited aspects of the desired qualities.

The school counselor then asks the parent to consider what he or she did to facilitate the child's development of that quality. For example, the school counselor can ask, "What did you do that helped your child to be a little more confident at the birthday party? How did you contribute to that?" Finally, the school counselor summarizes the resources and strengths that the consultation conservation has revealed, and explores with the parent his or her next steps for continuing to promote his or her child's development of the desired quality.

When working with parents of children who bully, it is particularly important for the school counselor to join with the parent, given his or her probable tendency to deny or minimize his or her child's aggression. It is encouraged for the school counselor to consider using a problem-solving tone, emphasizing that the goal of the consultation is to help the parent's child and requesting the parent's help given that he or she best knows the child. Because research suggests that parents of perpetrators tend to use harsh or inconsistent discipline and low levels of the nurturance, the school counselor should attempt to steer the parent in the direction of exploring when the parent believes

he or she has been successful in using more reasoned discipline balanced with nurturance. For example, the school counselor might ask, "When is a time that you think your child really understood your concern about how he or she treats others, and how did you get that message across to him/her?" "What did you do that helped him/her really understand your concern?" From a social-ecological perspective, a primary intent of such parent meetings is to convey the message to the perpetrating child that the adults in his or her life are concerned about the child and his or her behavior, and that these adults will collaborate with each other in supporting the child in changing his or her behavior.

Communicating. This type of involvement includes providing effective, appropriate, relevant two-way contact about school events (e.g., open houses, conferences, testing workshops), and student academic or personal development and progress and/or insight (e.g., success or challenges) within the home environment.

In addition to providing information about bullying through the school's website or newsletters, anti-bullying conference days, and consulting with parents, the school counselor can encourage the school to adopt formal methods for tracking and reporting bullying between school personnel (Suckling & Temple, 2002). Formal collection (e.g., phones, report forms, drop boxes) procedures may help to assure parents of victims that the school regards the issue as serious and is taking steps to address the problem. Such collection procedures may also be useful when consulting with parents of perpetrators, who can be presented with the factual information if they minimize or deny their child's aggression. Schools can also establish formal procedures for parents to report victimization and create a bullying hotline whereby students can anonymously

report bullying. Services such as Google Voice enable schools to create a free phone number that can be routed to ring other lines at the school. Using a service such as Google Voice creates a transcript of the voicemails, which allows for easy screening to determine which calls should be responded to immediately.

In addition to information about bullying, parents need data about all of the various events and activities that are taking place at school. When parents know what is going on at school, they tend to feel more connected and informed about what is going on in their children's lives. Moreover, parents and families are more able to participate more fully in events if they know about them in advance. School counselors can encourage administrators and teachers to create a school newsletter highlighting the various events and activities that are occurring periodically throughout the school year.

School counselors can also create a program website, blog, and Twitter account to keep parents and their school community informed (Mason & Schultz, 2013; Sampson, 2013). Using such electronic media, school counselors can share information and keep parents informed about the groups, classroom lessons, and school-wide events hosted by the school counseling program. Parents can subscribe to the school counselor's blog via email and receive updates every time a new post is published. Parents can also follow the school counselor or school counseling program on Twitter to receive updates on blog posts, school information, and resources.

Volunteering. In this type of involvement, school personnel are able to organize and encourage parental or family participation in activities initiated by school personnel (e.g., parent-teacher association) or generated by community members aimed at

supporting students and school programs, such as service learning projects, Big Brothers/Big Sisters programs, or violence-reduction assemblies.

There is a wide range of volunteer activities related to bullying prevention for parents and community members. Research on resiliency to bullying indicates that a relationship with a caring adult can increase at-risk students' behavioral outcomes (Werner & Smith, 1982). School counselors can train adults and college and high school students to serve as mentors to at-risk students, and the authors' experience has been that late elementary and middle school children are particularly responsive to having college students as mentors. School counselors train mentors in the basic active listening skills, which school counselors typically learned in their techniques class in their graduate education programs, as well as the role and expectations of mentors. Middle and high school students can be used to serve as facilitators for small group exercises for school transitions, such as when middle school students are preparing to enter high school. With exposure to such caring behaviors, older students serve as models of caring relationships for younger students.

Adult volunteers can be trained to lead small group, team-building exercises to foster cooperation and communication among students. Improved playground supervision is a component of bullying prevention programs that is associated with effectiveness (Ttofi & Farrington, 2011), and adult volunteers may be used monitor high risk areas such as the playground, hallways, or cafeteria.

Learning at home. In facilitating at-home learning, school counselors provide information to parents and families about school procedures (e.g., homework expectations, grading scales) in order to help them augment their children's academic

activities. School counselors can educate parents about school activities that may provide parents with an opening to discuss their children's social interactions with peers. School counselors can share information about socio-emotional development, bullying prevention events, lessons, school assemblies, volunteer activities, and other information pertinent to parents via a newsletter, school counseling website, or school counseling program blog (Sampson, 2013). Newsletters, school counseling websites, and school counseling program blogs can inform parents how they may discuss these events with their child, including the social-problem solving method mentioned earlier.

Decision-making. In type of involvement, parents and family members from all backgrounds are included as representatives and leaders on school committees. One of the first steps for school counselors in developing a bullying prevention program is to build support within the school and community, using a democratic process that involves key stakeholders, including administrators, teachers, and parents. The democratic process is essential for changing the prevailing values and norms. Parents who question or object to the implementation of the new rules concerning bullying can be made aware of the process by which they were established, and encouraged to be part of the process. The Bullying Prevention Program (Olweus et al., 1999) calls for the establishment of an anti-bullying coordination committee, (e.g., Kolbert, Moffet, & Kolbert, 2004) and some schools have used the school counseling program's advisory council to also function as the anti-bullying coordination committee (ASCA, 2012).

First, the advisory council should conduct a needs assessment in which data are collected regarding the types and frequency of bullying behaviors and the location of the incidents of bullying. The advisory council then should disseminate the results to the

stakeholder groups, subsequently making policy and curriculum recommendations to the school system's administration. The advisory council can coordinate the training of teachers, staff and educating parents. In addition they facilitate the implementation of the bullying prevention program. It is important to note that having an advisory council incorporate the functions of the anti-bullying coordination committee may increase school personnel's perceptions that school counselors are integral members of the educational team.

Collaborating with the community. This type of involvement includes identifying and integrating resources, services, and other assets in the community to help meet the needs of school personnel, students, and their families. Perpetrators and victims of bullying are at higher risk for childhood disorders; the most common diagnoses of children involved in bullying are attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder, oppositional defiant disorder, conduct disorder, and depression (Kumpulainen, Rasanen, & Puura, 2001). School counselors can assist parents/guardians in obtaining mental health services to address underlying mental health issues that may be associated a student's involvement in bullying. Furthermore, school counselors can assist mental health providers in collaborating with school personnel, as mental health counselors may lack an understanding of the educational context or family dynamics in relation to school systems. For example, school counselors can assist mental health counselors in understanding the child's patterns in relating to peers and resources and opportunities for the child to have more positive social interactions, the relationship between the teacher(s) and parents, the school's rules and code of conduct, and programs concerning bullying.

Additionally, school counselors can partner with community agencies to provide resources to those in need. Churches, non-profit organizations, thrift stores, and consignment shops are examples of community agencies that may be partners with schools in supporting children and their families. School counselors can solicit donations of clothing, shoes, coats, food, school supplies, backpacks, and other items for students and families in need. Creating partnerships with agencies helps them to feel invested in the school and the work of the school counselor. Students and parents who benefit from the services and goods provided are grateful that the school counselor and the school system as a whole recognize and assist them in meeting their basic needs.

Summary

Epstein and her colleagues (2001, 2000) have developed the most comprehensive model for family-school collaboration, which has been shown to be effective in promoting family-school collaboration (Epstein et al., 2002), improved school climate (Epstein, 1995), improved student behavior and school discipline (Sheldon & Epstein, et al., 2002), and increases in students' reading achievement scores (Epstein & Dauber, 1991). In this article, Epstein's model is applied to the school counselors' role in bullying prevention and intervention efforts. Consistent with the evidence demonstrating the value of the theory of social ecology in understanding and preventing bullying, the framework of parenting, communicating, volunteering, learning at home, decision-making, and collaborating with the community may be effectively used to promote the school counselor's efforts in contributing to school-based anti-bullying interventions and programming.

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