

Making a difference for the bullied: teachers' responsibilities for responding to bullying

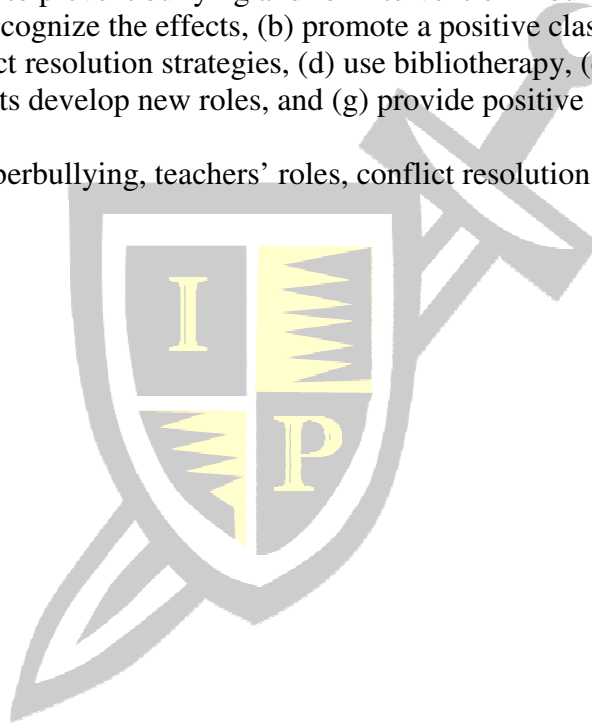
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Abstract

Bullying continues to be a challenging issue for classroom teachers. The authors provide seven recommendations to prevent bullying and for intervention if bullying occurs: (a) know the forms of bullying and recognize the effects, (b) promote a positive classroom environment, (c) teach a variety of conflict resolution strategies, (d) use bibliotherapy, (e) respond to incidents of bullying, (f) help students develop new roles, and (g) provide positive role modeling.

Keywords: bullying, cyberbullying, teachers' roles, conflict resolution, bibliotherapy



Another child has died—not due to a deadly disease or a horrible car accident but by his own hand. He committed suicide because of bullying (Tresniowski, A., Egan, N. W., Herbst, D., Triggs, C., Messer, L., Fowler, J., Levy, D. S., & Shabeeb, N., 2010).

Bullying is certainly not a new issue (Graham, 2010). Perhaps everyone can think of a time or many times when he/she was bullied (or was the bully). *Education Week* (2010) reported these statistics released by the Josephson Institute of Ethics: (a) 435 of 43,000 high school students said they had been bullied, and (b) 50% admitted to bullying. Bullying is “a chronic institutional problem leading to psychological impairment, depression and suicide” (Olson, 2008, p. 9).

The United States Department of Education held a bullying summit in August 2010 and encouraged school leaders to take action against bullying (Davis, 2011). While many schools now have policies to prevent bullying, punish bullies, and/or counsel both bullies and their victims, individual classroom teachers are often “first responders” and must take the lead to eradicate bullying behavior.

WHAT CAN TEACHERS DO?

As teachers once again face the challenge of addressing a longstanding societal issue, the following recommendations can be important strategies for prevention and intervention.

Recommendation #1: Know the forms of bullying and recognize the effects.

Piotrowski and Hoot (2008) provided definitions of three major forms of bullying: (a) physical—contact that causes discomfort, (b) emotional—aggression without words, and (c) verbal—psychological bullying or relational aggression. These authors also suggested that these three types of bullying may be combined forming new categories. Relational aggression is the most difficult to recognize and seems to be more socially acceptable. An example of relational bullying is a popular student who uses rumors and social isolation to control others (Sparks, 2011).

Technologies have provided a new method for bullying, cyberbullying. Holladay (2010) described cyberbullying as “the repeated use of technology to harass, humiliate, or threaten” (pg. 43). An individual may text, tweet, or email whatever he/she wishes to say with no consequences (Damani, 2011). For example, one website for bully prevention included a “You said it” column where only first names and ages were required to post a comment. Cyberbullying is more of a risk for students because it is nearly impossible to erase once begun (Adams, 2010) and because there is limited parental/adult supervision when it occurs (Davis, 2011; Sparks, 2011).

Bullying is a complex phenomenon not easily defined (Hamarus, and Kaikkonen, 2008). It takes forms that range from the most subtle (i.e. light sarcasm) to serial bullying (relentless attacks with a variety of techniques).

Recommendation #2: Promote a positive classroom environment.

According to Graham (2010), teachers need to teach bullies anger control strategies. They need to help the bullied develop more positive self-concepts. Each child needs to feel valued. Positive relationships between teacher and students, as well as student to student, need to be developed (Allen, 2010). Hamarus and Kaikkonen (2008) found that a secure learning

environment must include students feeling secure socially. The study revealed that successful prevention and intervention are possible only if everyone understands the problem. Sometimes students may not realize that their behavior is bullying to others (Smolowe, J., & Bailey, M., 2010). They may think they are just being funny or cool, especially if they receive positive reactions from peers and/or adults (i.e. laughter).

Recommendation #3: Teach a variety of conflict resolution strategies.

Bystanders need to be taught that their actions as witnesses to bullying make a difference, too. Whether they are witnesses or victims, students need strategies for preventing and stopping bullying. Savage and Savage (2010) promote the use of DEFUSE as a strategy.

D: Depersonalize and don't lose your cool.

E: Encourage the students to vent, and empathize with them.

F: Find out the facts.

U: Understand feelings.

S: Suspend ego.

E: End on a positive note. (p. 205-206)

There are many websites with possible solutions, such as: www.stopbullyingnow.hrsa.gov; www.kidshealth.org ; www.cyberbullying.us ; or www.antibullying.net .

Recommendation #4: Use bibliotherapy.

The use of trade books can help students understand that others have been bullied and can illustrate successful experiences in preventing or stopping bullying. Teachers should read each book to be sure the contents of the book include appropriate responses to bullying. Paul Langan's book, *The Bully*, tells the story of a young man who moves to a new school and is bullied. He finally ends the bullying by fighting. For most schools this is not an acceptable response. In 2004 the ReadWriteThink website (www.readwritethink.org) provided lesson plans for books at the elementary and high school levels to help stop bullying (*Reading Today*, 2004). Bobbi Vaughn (personal communication, December 3, 2004) offered a list of books and provided a suggested appropriate grade level for each (Appendix).

Recommendation #5: Respond to incidents of bullying.

Students may be reluctant to report bullying (Jacobsen and Bauman, 2007), especially cyberbullying (Adams, 2010). They may be afraid the teacher will not respond or may not be able to stop the bullying, and it will get worse. Teachers need to know the school's policies concerning bullying and follow them quickly and consistently. After the initial response, it is important to be vigilant in following the bully and the victim to ensure that neither retaliates.

Recommendation #6: Help students develop new roles.

Barbara Coloroso, an expert in classroom management, recommends helping students develop the roles of "resister", "defender", and "witness" (Coloroso, 2011, p. 52). Because bullying is often not reported or not seen by adults, students can be taught to solve this issue

without adults. Teaching students these new roles will help them see that bullying can be stopped if just one person has the moral strength and courage to confront it.

Recommendation #7: Provide positive role modeling.

Teachers and other adults in the school setting are often admonished to always be aware of the incredible impact they have on children simply by their *behaviors*. Consciously or unconsciously, adults are contributing to the bullying/victim dynamic. Adults certainly carry the behaviors learned in childhood and adolescence into adulthood. Many have never moved beyond the role of “victim” or “bully”.

“Teacher bullying” is a reality that has recently been acknowledged in research and defined by Twemlow and Fonagy (2005) as: “One who uses his or her power to punish, manipulate or disparage a student beyond what would be a reasonable disciplinary procedure” (p. 2387). The same bullying actions observed in students are present in adults who use intimidation or harassment in any form to leverage student behavior—stereotyping, belittling, labeling, and even sarcasm. As authors Koenig and Daniels (2011) advise: “Every adult in the building needs to act when the bully is a teacher” (p. 58). Such behavior must be addressed immediately and professionally, with the entire faculty and staff sharing the responsibility for protecting students.

Adults model the villain/victim dynamic in daily situations that are often presented in “they/them” and “we/us” conversations: “*They* (the district administration) don’t really care what *we* (school-level educators) think.” “*They* (national elected leaders) impose taxes on *us* (the taxpayers).” The terms used and attitudes conveyed relay a sense of powerlessness for the victims at the hand of bullies. The impact on students of this kind of adult thinking and acting is immeasurable. Modeling confidence, problem solving, and decision making skills that communicate powerful, positive choices (i.e. voting) can have exactly as much impact. For people of all ages who are dealing with bullying behavior, it is important to stand up for one’s self while modeling respect (Horn, 2002, p.131). Developing these personal skills will help build the character traits and the school/classroom environment necessary for all to flourish.

CONCLUSION

Bullying has been a challenge in schools—and society in general-- for a long time. It is now a current issue due to the extreme measures some students have taken to escape tormentors. Once more, teachers have a huge responsibility placed on them to try to cure this societal problem. While there are no easy solutions, everyone can take some personal action to address this ongoing concern.

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