REFEREED ARTICLE

Keeping School Learning Environments Safe from Bullying

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Abstract

Schools are accountable for providing all students a safe and caring learning environment. When a child feels unsafe at school, personal relationships, mental health, and academics are negatively affected. The entire school community – staff, parents, and students – must work together to develop an effective safe school program. A carefully planned safe school program that is followed consistently by all members will ensure the greatest success for all students.

All students have the right to attend school and learn in a violence free environment. Consequently, educators have the responsibility to provide students a safe school for learning. Bullying in schools is a concern because it has many implications for student development. Bullying affects student achievement, mental health, and personal relationships. Educators must work together with staff, students, and parents to implement programs, in the hope that a safe, caring, and respectful learning environment will be achieved. In the end, students will be guaranteed their right to learn in a safe environment that is free from violence.

Bullying in School

Everyone has a right to personal safety, but about 25% of Canadian students are victims of school bullying (Craig & McCuaig Edge, 2011, p. 181). Bullying experiences at school have lasting effects on the bully, the victim, and the bystander. School violence can significantly impair a student's mental, academic, and social development (Klinger et al., 2011). Educators are responsible for the safety of their students. When they do not address the issue of bullying, students are not safe at school.

Bullying is often a precursor to poor mental health. Children who are bullied become physically hurt and emotionally scarred. In a 2011 study by the Public Health Agency of Canada, students reported that as the number of incidents of fighting increased, so did issues with their mental health and behaviour (Craig & McCuaig Edge, 2011). When students are bullied, or are witnesses to a student being bullied, they feel unsafe in the classroom. In a like manner, students may have feelings of distrust toward the adults who are normally seen as their protectors (Kreps, 2018). Victims of bullying incidents sometimes report thoughts of suicide, self-harm, and depression (Ashrafi et al., 2020). Students with poor mental health often engage in social media sites that further encourage at-risk behaviours (Mérelle, 2020). Subsequently, victims of bullying sometimes continue to be withdrawn and experience low self-worth, well into adulthood. Educators who miss the signs of bullying miss an opportunity to address the issue of poor mental health (Kreps, 2018).

It is no surprise that victims of bullying incidents are less successful academically (Klinger et al., 2011). Students who are victimized spend a lot of time worrying about their safety at school. Bullying can lead to depression, which influences their ability to concentrate on their schoolwork (Kim et al., 2020). The children who witness these acts of violence are also affected emotionally, especially when they are not able to help the victim. In fact, bystanders feel concern for their own safety and they worry that they may be the next target. Over time, this concern may affect their success in school (Evans et al., 2019). When the effects of bullying last for years, the risk of an unsuccessful future increases (Craig & McCuaig Edge, 2011). Educators must realize that students who feel unsafe at school will experience higher academic failure.

Bullying is an issue that involves relationships. Therefore, students who are victimized repeatedly, over several years, are less successful in adulthood and have a higher likelihood of becoming violent themselves (Kreps, 2018). That is to say, the power struggle and violence that students experience can lead to poor relationships in adulthood. This cycle of abuse can be present in many relationships: dating, marriage, family units, and among co-workers in the workplace (Craig & McCuaig Edge, 2011). Because this is a relationship issue, educators who do not teach students about healthy relationships will not help victims break the cycle of abuse.

In summation, bullying is a safety concern that has immediate and long-lasting effects on the bully, the victim, and the by-stander. Victims are at risk for poor mental health and self-worth, low academic achievement, negative outlook for future success, and poor relationships in adulthood (Craig & McCuaig Edge, 2011). When educators do not realize their unique position to influence healthy student development, or to foster positive relationships (Klinger et al., 2011), healthy relationships are not achieved. All relationships and areas of development are hindered when students feel unsafe.

Creating Safe Schools

Schools can offer students safe learning environments by implementing programs that prevent bullying, offer staff training, and include intervention programs. These programs are most effective when they require educators to teach coping strategies to all students, address student mental health issues, and encourage support from parents. Furthermore, student success will increase as educators, parents, and students work together to create a caring and safe school environment (Coloroso, 2016). At the end of the day, educators must acknowledge that prevention programs, proper staff training, and intervention programs will offer students the safest place to learn.

Schools must acknowledge that consistently following a bully prevention program will keep students safe. Prevention programs are important because students need to be taught not to bully (Evans et al., 2019) and, equally important, such programs help to prevent violent incidents from reoccurring (Kreps, 2018). These prevention programs are most effective when all students take part (Joo et al., 2020, p. 2). The most effective prevention program begins with a student survey, for the purpose of helping the school gain an understanding of the problem. Then, specific rules need to be taught to the students. Equally important, a well-developed policy needs to focus on the inclusion of all students in the school and on the overall culture of the school (Coloroso, 2016). This policy must be communicated to all students, staff, and families, and be followed consistently in order to ensure that all students are safe.

Educators require training to recognize the signs that a child is being bullied (Kreps, 2018). One common sign is that the child will become withdrawn and, if incidents of bullying keep occurring, the child may become inattentive, fearful of joining in regular classroom routines, or act out aggressively (Kreps, 2018). Educators need to be aware of what is happening and act accordingly when they notice something is not right (Coloroso, 2016), including sharing that information with other staff (Evans et al., 2019). Students need encouragement to confide in a trusted adult when something bad happens (Kreps, 2018). Educators will be better equipped to help students stay safe when they are trained to recognize and respond to signs of students being bullied.

Intervention programs help to create a safe learning environment for all students (Kim et al., 2020), with clear consequences for everyone who was involved in a bullying incident: discipline, possible solutions, a home plan, a safety plan for the victim, and how all students will be supported at the school (Coloroso, 2016). In addition to supporting the victim the intervention program should include staff intervening as early as possible (Evans et al, 2019). Intervention involves more than a quick chat and then walking away from the incident. Educators need to address all students who were involved and make sure that limits are set so that everyone is immediately safe, and then effective discipline needs to be handed out. After this, children need

to be given time to discuss what was wrong and how to fix it. Overall, this reinforces the need for educators to implement intervention programs that support the entire school population.

The violence that often characterizes bullying affects more than the bully and the victim (Joo et al., 2020). The victim, the bullied, and the bystander all need to be supported immediately following an incident. For the victims, this means they are immediately kept safe from the bully and supported from further retaliation or humiliation (Coloroso, 2016, p. 54). This immediate support may also prevent victims from skipping school because they fear being hurt again. The consequences should include both discipline and restitution (Evans et al., 2019), so that the bully learns how to respect and care for others, makes amends with the victim, and is given opportunities to participate in acts of kindness (Coloroso, 2016, p. 318). Finally, school staff need to support bystanders who take an active role in helping victims, in the hope that other students may help (Evans et al, 2019). Educators must be prepared to support all students after a violent act, because all students are affected by school violence.

All students affected by bullying should be supported and offered opportunities to address their mental health and well-being (Sibold et al., 2020). For example, some mental health programs teach students how to recognize incidents of violence, stand up for themselves, and report incidents (Coloroso, 2016). Other programs teach bullies appropriate social skills and help them to find opportunities to take on leadership roles, so that they will learn how to make a positive influence on others (Evans et al., 2019). When bystanders are supported and taught appropriate social skills, they become more successful in school, have positive feelings about their future, and sometimes experience positive mental health and self-worth (Evans et al., 2019). One study found that bystanders who had developed positive behaviour reported incidents of bullying more often (Joo et al., 2020). Educators must make a conscious effort to teach coping skills, so that students learn how to deal with problems that affect their mental health.

Educators need to implement regular physical activity as part of their intervention plan to address effects of bullying in schools (Sibold et al., 2020). Students who exercise on a regular basis experience positive self-esteem and report less depression. Likewise, some youth report that being active helps them build social relationships, which has a positive influence on their mental health (Janssen et al., 2011). To illustrate, one recent study concluded that students who exercised more than three days a week felt less sad, and thought about suicide less than other bullying victims who worked out for less time (Sibold et al., 2020). The benefits of exercise on student mental health must be shared with all staff, students, and parents.

Equally important, students who feel supported by their parents openly communicate with them, experience better mental health, and cope better when personal issues arise. As an example, in a 2011 study by the Public Health Agency of Canada, students acknowledged the importance of having supportive parents and valued being able to communicate with them openly (King & Hoessler, 2011). Students said that a happy and supportive home influenced their mental health because they could share their thoughts and problems. Students who have a positive relationship with their parents are also bullied less because they feel comfortable discussing bullying incidents (Ashrafi et al., 2020). Parents can support their children by taking an active role in helping them, such as by discussing coping strategies with their children and speaking to the principal (Georget, 2009). Parents must realize that supporting their children and communicating with them on a regular basis will influence the children's mental health and ability to cope with future problems.

To ensure academic success of all students, the environment of the school needs to be respectful and caring, and a place where educators promote peaceful interactions between all students (Coloroso, 2016). Students perform better in school when they know that their teachers will keep them safe and will support them (Kim et al., 2020). Hence, educators need to create environments that foster kindness and respect, by including others and celebrating differences among students. When students feel a sense of belonging, they will be less motivated to take part in negative behaviours to gain acceptance from others (Coloroso, 2016). It is therefore

crucial that educators promote caring and positive interactions within the school, so all students feel respected and perform at their best.

In summation, educators are responsible for implementing programs to keep students safe while they attend school. It is of utmost importance that teachers implement prevention programs, receive training to recognize when a student is being bullied, and know how to react appropriately when incidents happen. Additionally, educators must teach students coping strategies when they are bullied, support student mental health, and encourage parental support. Bullying programs are most effective when all staff, parents, and students work together to provide a safe learning environment.

Conclusion

Schools are obligated to meet the needs of all students, including their right to personal safety while they attend school. School bullying incidents that are not addressed will negatively affect academic success, mental health, and interpersonal relationships. Therefore, it is pivotal for all school staff, students, and parents to work together for the safety and well-being of the entire school population.

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About the Author

Angela Caines has taught various combinations of grades K-8 in rural Manitoba schools for 22 years. This classroom experience led her to pursue a role in leadership and administration. She has lived in the beautiful Interlake of Manitoba for almost 18 years, where she enjoys spending time with her husband and four children.