Bullying in Middle Schools: Prevention and Intervention

***This We Believe* Characteristics**

- *An inviting, supportive, and safe environment*
- *Curriculum that is relevant, challenging, integrative, and exploratory*
- *Multiple learning and teaching approaches that respond to their diversity*

By Amy Milsom & Laura L. Gallo

Jared hides behind the school building for an hour, hoping Tom has forgotten about him and walked home already. Maybe this will be the first night he will make it home without being pushed or taunted. Jared slowly leaves his hiding spot, gripping his backpack as tight as he can. As he gets farther away from school, his stomach begins to unknot. He is relieved that he will make it home tonight without incident. Just then, Tom appears around the corner with a smirk on his face, ready to fight.

A main characteristic of a bully is his or her need to gain control over another (Kaiser & Rasminsky, 2003). Bullies can gain control over others through physical force or threats, verbal teasing, and exclusion from peers (Beale & Scott, 2001). Argenbright and Edgell (as cited in Beale & Scott) described four specific types of bullies. Physical bullies often hit, kick, or shove others. Verbal bullies use words to harm others through name-calling, insulting, making racist comments, or harsh teasing. Relational bullies often focus on excluding one person from their peer group and usually do so through verbal threats and spreading rumors. Finally, reactive bullies are individuals who are often both bully and victim. Typically victims first, they respond to victimization with bullying behavior. While both boys and girls engage in and are victims of bullying, research has shown differences in their bullying behaviors. For example, boys engage in bullying more frequently than girls (Nansel et al., 2001; Seals & Young, 2003). Also, boys are more likely to engage in physical or verbal bullying, while girls often revert to relational bullying (Nansel et al., 2001).

Bullying in United States Middle Schools

Bullying among students in other countries (particularly Norway, Australia, and England) has been studied extensively for the past 30 years, but recently researchers in the United States have also begun to examine bullying and victimization in schools. Studies show that bullying tends to peak in late childhood/early adolescence, making prevention and intervention efforts in middle school crucial.

PHOTO BY DOUG MARTIN

All students have a right to physically and psychologically safe classrooms and hallways.

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Before designing effective prevention and intervention programs, however, school personnel must understand the scope of bullying in the United States as well as characteristics of bullies and victims.

Oliver, Hoover, and Hazler (1994) examined bullying by administering surveys to students in grades 7 through 12 from schools in three Midwestern states. Overwhelmingly, participants reported they felt victims of bullying actually brought on the bullying. Less than half believed bullying was done in an attempt to teach a lesson. Students also believed bullies to be more popular than victims. Interestingly, Oliver, Hoover, and Hazler (1994) found students believed most teasing they witnessed had been done with no malicious intent, but that victims perceived the teasing as bullying.

In their national study of 15,686 students in grades 6 through 10, Nansel and associates (2001) reported nearly 30% of students indicated more than occasional involvement as a bully and/or victim of bullying. Males were more frequently involved as both bullies and victims, as were students in grades six through eight (compared to those in grades nine and ten). In addition, Hispanic students reported slightly higher involvement as bullies than White or African American students, while African American students reported being bullied less frequently than both White and Hispanic students. Finally, more students from rural areas reported bullying than did individuals from suburban and urban areas.

Nansel and associates (2001) also examined the frequency of various types of bullying as well as psychosocial adjustment of students who bully or who are bullied. Verbal bullying was most prominent for both males and females, with students being recipients of negative comments about their appearance in addition to being recipients of sexual comments and being targets of rumors. Interestingly, negative comments about race or religion were rarely reported. More males than females reported being victims of physical bullying, indicating they had been hit, slapped, and pushed. With regard to psychosocial adjustment, Nansel and associates (2001) found positive correlations between bullying behavior and fighting, alcohol use, smoking, and ability to make friends. Poor academic achievement and poorer perceived school climate were also associated with being a bully. For middle school males, loneliness was also positively correlated with being a bully. Negative correlations were found between victims and both alcohol use and the ability to make friends. Also, being a victim was positively correlated with fighting.

As part of a larger study, Casey-Cannon, Hayward, and Gowen (2001) conducted a qualitative investigation of the experiences and perceptions of relational bullying among middle school girls (ages 13 and 14) from Northern California. The majority of participants reported experiencing either overt (i.e., physical or verbal) or relational bullying. Participants also reported emotional reactions including sadness, anger, and rejection. Behavioral responses included ignoring the bully, approaching an adult for help, being assertive, and bullying back (i.e., reactive bullying). Other consequences included losing friends, negative thinking, and changing schools. [Editor's Note: To read a related article dealing with relational and verbal bullying, see Lane, 2005.]

Poor academic achievement and poorer perceived school climate were also associated with being a bully.

Most recently, Seals and Young (2003) gathered data addressing the prevalence of bullying among students in grades seven and eight. The 454 participating students represented urban, suburban, and rural school districts, and most were African American and White. Twenty-four percent of students reported either bullying or being bullied. Males were involved in bullying (as bullies and victims) significantly more often than females, and significantly more seventh grade students than eighth grade students were involved as well. Nearly 14% of students reported being called mean names, and others reported being hit or kicked, being teased, or being threatened. Most incidents of bullying occurred at lunch or recess, but many occurred on the way to or from school as well as in class.

Consequences for Bullies and Victims

Bullies and victims are both at risk for negative future outcomes. Kaiser and Rasminsky (2003) reported that as bullies go through adolescence they are more at risk for severe problems such as delinquency, alcohol and drug abuse, and dropping out of school. In addition, both bullies and victims have been found to be more depressed than students

who are not involved in bullying (Seals & Young, 2003). Depression associated with bullying and victimization can lead to academic problems, self-defeating behaviors, and interpersonal problems (Seals & Young, 2003). Finally, victims are particularly at risk if there is no emotional support provided or if the bullying behavior is severe and prolonged. These victims are more likely to suffer from academic problems, absenteeism, loneliness, and loss of friends (Roberts & Coursol, 1996). Given schools' increasing concern about helping students succeed academically (i.e., No Child Left Behind), and given connections between bullying and potential for low academic performance or dropping out of school, addressing the problem of bullying is essential.

Attending to the needs of victims is as important as intervening with bullies and assessing school climate.

Prevention and Intervention Strategies for Bullying

Many recommendations have been made with regard to how to approach the problem of bullying, and most researchers agree that effective programs are comprehensive (Espelage & Swearer, 2003), targeting students, schools, families, and the community. Attending to the needs of victims (Roberts & Coursol, 1996) is as important as intervening with bullies and assessing school climate (Hanish & Guerra, 2000). Clarke and Kiselica (1997) indicated that "bullying will continue to be tolerated in schools until there is a philosophical shift among school personnel in how they view and respond to coercive behavior" (p. 319). Orpinas, Horne, and Staniszewski (2003) found that many schools try to prevent bullying by using packaged programs that lack support from teachers and do not meet the specific needs of the school. They recommended securing cooperation from key personnel as an important first step in successful intervention. Many researchers have provided suggestions for important components of bully prevention and intervention programs, but few have actually collected data with regard to program effectiveness. The following is a discussion of two successful bully prevention programs.

Bullybusters—A Drama

Beale and Scott (2001) presented an anti-bullying program initiated by the counseling and drama staff in a middle school. They initially conducted surveys concerning student and teacher perceptions regarding bullying and found that teachers were generally unaware of bullying behaviors whereas students believed bullying to be a significant concern. The drama teacher wrote a play, *Bullybusters*, to educate students about how to deal with bullies. The authors believed psychoeducational drama allowed students to learn vicariously through the actors and allowed for modeling positive attitudes and behaviors.

Beale and Scott (2001) indicated the *Bullybusters* program was first presented to sixth graders and then later implemented in elementary schools. The drama helped clarify the universality of student experiences. The actors (students) performed realistic and common bullying situations with which other students could identify. An important part of the program was the discussion that followed; students were able to process their own feelings and discuss alternative ways of handling bullying situations.

Every attempt was made to involve important stakeholders in the *Bullybusters* program (Beale & Scott, 2001). The school principal reinforced concepts by speaking to students upon completion of the program and explaining the school's zero tolerance policy. In an effort to secure a long-term commitment to bully prevention, supporting materials (e.g., information about types of bullying, strategies for dealing with bullies) were provided to teachers so they could reinforce concepts throughout the school year. Teachers were also encouraged to explore student reactions to the drama through class discussions. In the hope that students would actively participate in the school's efforts to decrease bullying, teachers involved students in the creation of classroom anti-bullying rules and asked them to sign an anti-bullying pledge (by signing the pledge students agreed not to bully, to look out for bullying behavior, and to report bullying behavior). Finally, administrators and teachers made efforts to involve parents, providing information through newsletters and outlining steps they could take to help their child deal with bullying. Students also performed the *Bullybusters* program at Parent-Teacher Association (PTA) meetings.

Beale and Scott (2001) reported positive results, including a 20% reduction in the number of bullying incidents at the middle school level. Teachers reported

being more aware of bullying and having more students reporting incidents of bullying to them. They attributed success of the program to a variety of components, including initial data collection, a school-wide approach involving all personnel and including the adoption of consistent policies, increased supervision, the use of the *Bullybusters* play, and the follow-up classroom discussions.

Elementary school model

Because Orpinas, Horne, and Staniszewski (2003) believed effective programs must be school-specific, they conducted a study in an elementary school using a program developed collaboratively by school personnel rather than using a pre-packaged model. The goal of this program was to provide information about bullying to students, develop awareness and skills in teachers, and promote a safe school climate. The program began with a committee comprised of teachers, paraprofessionals, parents, school counselors, and principals.

To explore the problem of bullying, Orpinas, Horne, and Staniszewski (2003) indicated the committee conducted needs assessments and held focus groups with students. Results of these efforts were presented to teachers at the beginning of the next school year, and a joint effort was made to develop a comprehensive plan to address main areas of concern (student behavior and school climate in general). Teachers generated five core values (respect, responsibility, honesty, readiness to learn, and personal best) to target through a character education program. A focus on decreasing verbal bullying became their main goal, and target areas for change included educating students, preparing teachers, and modifying school climate.

School staff used a variety of activities to address the target areas. They first worked on creating positive environments in their buildings through the development of new values and norms with matching rules and consequences. For example, during guidance lessons the school counselor provided opportunities for students to practice complimenting each other. Also, teachers intentionally reinforced positive behavior, taught students conflict resolution skills, and established a rule whereby students were required to offer two positive comments for every negative comment directed at another individual. Teachers also participated in a 20-hour training program on bullying and aggression prevention, then educated students about bullying through a cooperative learning curriculum.

Orpinas, Horne, and Staniszewski (2003) reported positive results and identified "strong commitment of teachers" (p. 438) as critical to the success of the program. The results of the study showed a significant reduction in self-reported aggression for younger children and an overall reduction in victimization for students in all grades (K-5). Overall, the program was successful in achieving the goal of reducing verbal bullying (name-calling and teasing). While Orpinas, Horne, and Staniszewski (2003) clearly indicated the program was developed to meet the needs of one particular school, they believed the process used to develop the program could be beneficial to other schools.

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Recommendations for Middle School Personnel

Middle school personnel can learn from the success of these programs. What stands out about both programs is how the schools approached bully prevention comprehensively based on their unique needs. Others have supported similar concepts, with the idea that effective bullying prevention and intervention programs target not only the classroom, but also the school environment, students, parents, and the community (U.S. Department of Education, 1998). Newman-Carlson and Horne (2004), however, reported finding a decrease in bullying with teacher training alone (training content focused on recognizing bullying, intervening, assisting victims, and prevention). Teachers who voluntarily participated in the bullying training program filed significantly fewer bullying-related disciplinary reports upon completion of the training program and also reported feeling more confident in their abilities to intervene with bullies than did teachers who did not participate in the training. It is unclear if the school might have found even greater decreases in bullying had they implemented a more comprehensive program involving school support staff, parents, and students.

Nevertheless, more research needs to be conducted to more clearly identify bullying intervention components that have the greatest impact on decreasing bullying among school-age students. In the meantime, however, middle school personnel should consider approaches that have proven effective and work to implement programs that will best meet their school's unique needs.

School-wide considerations

Bully prevention/intervention programs work when schools have clear and consistent policies and rules (Clarke & Kiselica, 1997; Hazler, 1996; Olweus, 1991, 1999; Rigby, 2002; Sullivan, 2000). Indicating that "a widespread perception among students that bullying can take place without intervention or interruption has serious consequences for the bully, bystander, and victim" (p. 19). Unnever and Cornell (2003) believed bullies are more likely to continue engaging in bullying behavior when they feel no one will intervene and there will be no consequences for them. Acknowledging that bullying occurs and that it will not be tolerated (as communicated by allowing students to act out the *Bullybusters* drama) is an important start in helping students to recognize a school's commitment to protecting them from bullies. After communicating this awareness, school personnel are encouraged to develop policies that include clear definitions of bullying, outline policies for reporting inappropriate behavior, and list possible ramifications of bullying (Sullivan, 2000). School personnel must then follow through by enforcing the policies fairly and consistently. Examples of clear policies are evident in the two programs discussed previously. After the *Bullybusters* drama, the school principal met with students during an assembly to review the school's zero-tolerance policy. Teachers also talked with students during classes, clarifying the behaviors the school considered as bullying and discussing acceptable student behavior in response to bullying (e.g., telling a teacher as opposed to hitting back). In the elementary model, students were provided with a conduct code that included specific school expectations and consequences for breaking rules. This code was reviewed with students and parents each year. Additionally, incentives (such as a special lunch) were provided for students demonstrating positive behaviors.

Sullivan (2000) suggested bullying policies be developed with input from administrators, teachers, student representatives, parents, and community members. As a way of encouraging continued attention devoted to bullying concerns, Olweus (1999) recommended schools consider establishing a formal committee comprised of representatives from these stakeholder groups to work on writing the policies and coordinating any related activities throughout the school year. One consideration might be to include a teacher representative from each grade level team. By conducting a needs assessment during the spring, schools can identify both the scope of their bullying problem and target areas for intervention as well as provide information to assist in the revision of policies for the following school year (Olweus, 1999). Input from students, teachers, and parents addressing the frequency and location of bullying as well as the type of bullying experienced would be important to gather (Clarke & Kiselica, 1997; Sullivan, 2000). Orpinas, Horne, and Staniszewski (2003) did just this, and upon realizing that student fights often resulted from name-calling, they decided to work towards decreasing the amount of verbal bullying among students. Finally, an evaluation of the prevention/intervention activities should be conducted each year to provide feedback to the committee for policy revision (Rigby, 2002; Sullivan, 2000)

School-wide policies will not be effective if staff members are not made aware of the problem or are unfamiliar with anti-bullying policies and their responsibilities in enforcing the policies (Clarke & Kiselica, 1997; Rigby, 2002). By increasing teacher knowledge of bullying and helping them recognize how they can intervene, Newman-Carlson and Horne (2004) were able to decrease bullying in a middle school. Olweus (1999) recommended using an inservice day at the beginning of each year to review relevant policies. They stressed, however, that follow-up support for teachers throughout the school year is also important. Because many instances of bullying occur out of classrooms (e.g., playground, cafeteria), Olweus emphasized the importance of including all school staff (i.e., bus drivers, cafeteria staff, paraprofessionals) in this training. Similarly, schools are encouraged to consider providing increased supervision during non-class times (Beale & Scott, 2001; Clarke & Kiselica, 1997; Olweus, 1991, 1999; Sullivan, 2000).

Classroom considerations

Because teachers spend the greatest amount of time with students during the day, Hazler (1996) believed them to be vital to the success of any bullying prevention/intervention program.

The establishment of classroom-specific rules (consistent with school policy) for bullying has been supported as an effective component of a school-wide program (Olweus, 1991, 1999). Effective classroom management and modeling of desirable behaviors can provide a basis for enforcing these rules. Teachers must not ignore or dismiss student reports of bullying if their goal is to prevent or decrease bullying behavior. They must take every report seriously.

Holding regular discussions with students to review and/or revise classroom rules as well as to discuss the classroom climate is also recommended as an effective method for helping students take ownership in bullying prevention and intervention (Olweus, 1999; Sullivan, 2000). For example, classroom teachers can build in a weekly class meeting during which they allow students to discuss what is and is not working in their class (e.g., too many students interrupting others). After this discussion, the teacher and students might jointly modify classroom rules as necessary. Weekly classroom meetings might also reveal school-wide areas for revision. For example, if during the weekly class meeting students report lots of name-calling in the hallways, teachers would want to monitor hallways to determine whether or not more supervision is needed in that area.

Students must develop an awareness of bullying, or more specifically, an awareness of which behaviors the school classifies as bullying, if they are to effectively help enforce school and classroom rules. Instructional methods and activities can be used to help increase students' understanding of bullying in addition to providing opportunities for them to expand their social circles and practice new behaviors. For example, information about bullying can be taught through cooperative learning methods (e.g., small group projects), which can also facilitate students' successful interactions with others (Hazler, 1996; Olweus, 1991). Additionally, teachers can utilize literature addressing bullying in an effort to expose students to the various types of bullying as well as consequences for both bullies and victims (Olweus, 1991). Upon hearing stories about bullying, students might recognize they are not alone, might learn new coping mechanisms, or might realize how harmful their behaviors are to others. Finally, students can learn alternatives to bullying by participating in role-play opportunities designed to provide them practice for new behaviors (Olweus, 1991).

Student considerations

Both victims and bullies can benefit from developing skills and receiving support both prior to and after incidents of bullying (Olweus, 1999; Rigby, 2002). Teachers may consider collaborating with school counselors to develop classroom guidance or small group units addressing the skill areas described below. Following are recommended intervention areas for victims and bullies.

Victims. School personnel and other adults must clearly communicate to victims of bullying that they are not at fault and do not deserve the bullying they experience. Victims can often benefit from interventions designed to increase their self-esteem (Kaiser & Rasminsky, 2003; Roberts & Coursol, 1996; Rigby, 2002). Interventions in this area can help students identify personal strengths and accomplishments, thereby instilling feelings of pride and confidence. By building self-esteem, victims are better able to shield themselves from future bullying.

Furthermore, researchers have found that victims of bullying who developed assertiveness skills experienced reductions in bullying (Hazler, 1996; Kaiser & Rasminsky, 2003; Macklem, 2003; Rigby, 2002; Roberts & Coursol, 1996). When victims respond assertively, bullies will be more likely to stop bullying or find another, less assertive victim. Victims can practice assertiveness skills through role-play activities to develop confidence in their abilities to respond assertively to a variety of situations. Victims can also benefit from these types of role-play activities because they provide opportunities for generating a variety of reactions or responses for potential future encounters with bullies (Hazler, 1996; Sullivan, 2000).

The establishment of classroom-specific rules for bullying has been supported as an effective component of a school-wide program.

Improving social skills can decrease a victim's chances of being bullied (Clarke & Kiselica, 1997; Kaiser & Rasminsky, 2003; Macklem, 2003; Rigby, 2002; Roberts & Coursol, 1996). Effective social skills training can help students develop relationships with peers, which may decrease the likelihood of them being targeted in the future. Kaiser and Rasminsky (2003) recommend that social skills interventions include activities that address

friendship skills, such as how to approach a group of people and how to develop empathy.

In addition to teaching students skills in an attempt to help them be less easily targeted for bullying, school personnel must provide support to victims of bullying. Teachers and other school personnel should strive to prevent bullying, but in the event bullying does occur, they must prepare victims with coping skills (Hazler, 1996; Kaiser & Rasminsky, 2003; Rigby, 2001). School personnel might also want to consider implementing support groups for bullying victims (Clarke & Kiselica, 1997; Lane, 2005; Macklem, 2003; Roberts & Coursol, 1996). Groups can provide victims with opportunities to develop many of the skills addressed above while, at the same time, communicating to these students that others in the school are there to help them.

Rather than assume a student is intentionally being cruel, school personnel can approach intervention from a developmental perspective by providing education.

Bullies. A variety of skills are recommended for bullies to help them learn new ways of interacting with others. Teaching empathy to bullies has been recommended as an important component of any anti-bullying effort (Hazler, 1996; Kaiser & Rasminsky, 2003; Macklem, 2003; Sullivan, 2000,). Empathy training should include interventions designed to generate awareness of perspective taking. Additionally, Macklem (2003) recommended specifically helping bullies learn to label emotions in themselves and others and to become more aware of others' points of view.

Promoting self-control is another important component of bully prevention. Skills in self-regulation, anger management, and conflict resolution (Macklem, 2003; Rigby, 2001, 2002; Sullivan, 2000) have been identified as important in helping bullies learn both to think before they act and to change their behaviors. Ideally, students must learn to calm themselves down to generate alternatives to their gut reaction to hit or insult another student. Behavioral rehearsal (e.g., role-play) can provide students opportunities for practice and feedback.

Similar to victims, bullies can also benefit from social skills training (Kaiser & Rasminsky, 2003; Macklem, 2003; Rigby, 2002). Rigby (2002) believed bullies do not know how to behave in ways that elicit positive reactions from other students. Essentially, bullies often lack the social skills to get what they want in acceptable ways. Helping bullies develop friendship-making skills may serve to eliminate their aggressive behavior toward others (Macklem, 2003).

Finally, just as victims need adult support, bullies can also benefit from it. Hazler (1996) suggested that rather than immediately discipline bullies, school personnel talk with them to explore their reasons for acting as they did. For example, punishing a student for insulting another student about his ethnicity when that student has observed all adults in his life doing the same thing is less effective than talking with the student, explaining what is and is not acceptable at school, and providing alternatives. In other words, rather than immediately assume a student is intentionally being cruel (although that may sometimes be the case), school personnel can approach intervention from a developmental perspective by providing education.

Parent considerations

Parents can provide schools with much support during the development and implementation of bullying prevention/intervention programs. Providing information to all parents about school policies is critical to gaining parental support. Many researchers have recommended schools seek parental input during the development of school policies (Olweus, 1991, 1999; Sullivan, 2000), and communicate with parents when their child has either engaged in bullying or been a victim of bullying (Olweus, 1991). Finally, Olweus (1999) recommended developing a pamphlet with information about bullying, related school policies, and available interventions that could be sent home to parents each year.

Conclusion

Understanding the scope of bullying and characteristics of bullies and victims is helpful for middle school personnel in learning how to develop effective interventions for bullying in schools. Comprehensive bully prevention programs have proven to be successful in helping reduce the aggressive behaviors of children, and teacher training appears to be an important component of those programs. Overall goals of bullying

prevention/intervention programs should be to increase teacher awareness of bullying, develop clear policies that outline consequences for bullying, and provide skill training and support to both bullies and victims. Middle school personnel are encouraged to assess the unique needs of their schools and work collaboratively to design and implement programs that will help create and reinforce safe environments for all students.

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