The right to feel safe: the rise of bullying in our schools

Independent Schools Queensland

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Research indicates that many young people do not feel safe at school. An Australian survey of over 25,000 students (Rigby, 1997) found that in the course of any one year as many as half of all school students experience painful and unjustified aggression from individuals or groups of students. About one in seven experienced bullying weekly or more often. Findings from the Australian Covert Bullying Study (Cross et al, 2009) indicate that there has been a substantial increase in bullying in subsequent years.

The Cross et al study also reports that 7–10% of students in Years 4 to 9 have faced cyberbullying, while a [2009 survey](#) by the Australian Catholic University of 700 students in Years 7 to 10 found that 25% of respondents had experienced cyberbullying, with girls most at risk.

Cyberbullying involves the use of information and communication technologies such as email, text messages, instant messaging, and personal websites for deliberate, repeated and hostile behaviour. Willard (2007) suggests that the harm caused by cyberbullying may be greater than traditional bullying. Its anonymous nature can not only make it vicious, but difficult for the victim to know whom to trust. In addition, victims can be bullied at all hours of the day, and cyberbullying material can be distributed worldwide and is often irretrievable, even if the perpetrator is identified.

Fear of physical harm is less prevalent among students than fear of other types of bullying. Nevertheless, significant numbers of students are fearful of being physically hurt, with 27% of students in Year 4 and 12% in Year 9 being concerned about their physical safety (Cross et al, 2009).

However, schoolyard bullying is typically covert, appearing in forms such as threatening gestures or looks; social exclusion; the spreading of rumours; damage to friendships and other social relationships; practical jokes; criticism of students' clothes and personalities; and abusive notes. Covert bullying may often go unnoticed or be under-reported.

Student response data from the Australian Covert Bullying Study suggest that this form of bullying peaks in Year 4, indicating a need for targeted anti-bullying programs for students in this age group.

Programs should also target the year in which students move from primary to secondary education. Research has found that Year 7 students based in secondary schools are more likely to be covertly bullied, and are less likely to take defensive action, than students who complete Year 7 in a primary school environment (Cross et al, 2009).

What can schools do about bullying?

Effective policies against overt and covert bullying are generally associated with both a positive school climate and an ethos that promotes pro-social behavior. Schools with these attributes tend to create physical environments that make bullying more visible, and typically adopt measures to increase young people's conflict resolution skills.

Broad policy approaches towards bullying

Anti-bullying policies commonly apply one or more of the following approaches.

Shared concern: Aimed at older children, this technique aims to establish civil relationships between bully and victim without exploring the details of the bullying or requiring that the adversaries become friends. The teacher leads a structured series of discussions, starting first with the bullies, and elicits constructive agreements designed to help the victim.

Assertiveness training: This approach teaches students how to respond to intimidation in positive ways. It is primarily designed to help the victim deal with incidences of bullying rather than focusing on the reduction of bullying.

Bully courts: Trialled widely overseas, this approach involves a court of peers who decide upon sanctions against bullies. However, concerns have been raised that this approach can result in over-punitive sentences.

Peer counselling: This technique involves older secondary students volunteering as confidential listeners to children's problems during lunch hours and other breaks from classes. The student volunteers receive training and support from qualified adults as appropriate.

The no blame approach: When a bullying incident is reported the teacher determines that bullying has actually occurred and then speaks with the victim about the incident. The teacher meets with the group of pupils involved, including bystanders or colluders, and emphasises the victim's distress as a result of the incident. At no time does the teacher discuss the details of the incident or allocate blame to the group. The teacher will however, acknowledge that the group is responsible and that they can do something about it; each member of the group is encouraged to suggest a way to mitigate the victim's distress. The teacher urges the group to solve the problem and later meets with them to monitor progress (Robinson & Maines, 1994).

The buddy system: Under this system younger students are partnered with older students as a means of supporting their transition to a new school environment. Alternatively, a student new to the school is paired off with an older student or a peer who can help them settle in.

Peer mentoring: Peer mentoring involves a student being befriended by a peer who participates in activities with them, talks with them about school and life in general, offers help and support with difficult issues and helps find solutions to any problems the student is facing.

Peer mediation: This approach entails training students as 'peer mediators'. Students are trained and encouraged to watch for cases of aggression or intimidation in the playground and take steps toward mediation as appropriate.

Play safe: This initiative involves parents being rostered to organise and supervise lunch time activities. The activities initially serve as a haven for the victims of bullying, however

experience has shown that over time students who have been perceived as bullies also become involved, resulting in improved relationships between students and a more positive schoolyard environment.

The P.E.A.C.E. process: This is a school-based intervention program developed by Dr Phillip Slee (1997). The initials stand for *P*reparation and consideration of the nature of the bullying; *E*ducation and understanding of the issues; *A*ction taken and strategies developed to reduce bullying; *C*oping strategies for staff, students and parents; and *E*valuation, review and celebration of the program.

Approaches for dealing with cyberbullying

Like other types of bullying, dealing with cyberbullying requires a holistic approach. The Australian Government's cyber safety website suggests that schools establish a small cyber safety team of interested and motivated staff, students and parents to help promote a whole-school approach to cyberbullying.

The responsibilities of this team would include auditing students' use of ICT. The team would also review and update school policies and procedures, in consultation with relevant education authorities and other members of the school community, on an annual basis. Statements of procedures would include codes of conduct, incident response flowcharts, and explanations of the consequences of misconduct. The committee would also ensure that cyber safety issues are included within the curriculum, provide ongoing professional development for staff, and provide information to parents and students about online safety. At least one cyber safety contact person would be appointed.

The role of school staff

In order to improve a school's effectiveness in dealing with issues of bullying, all staff must be committed to a common response to bullying. They must seek to intervene immediately when bullying occurs and follow a set of clear, agreed procedures. Teachers need to assert publicly that bullying will not be tolerated, and should both model appropriate behaviour and provide mechanisms to ensure that their pupils can report bullying without fear of retribution or chastisement.

The school needs to support individual teachers in maintaining a safe classroom environment. This can be achieved by providing clear guidelines for dealing with issues relating to bullying and also through comprehensive and effective professional development. Pre-service training is also important in assisting teachers and other staff members to recognise and respond appropriately to different forms of bullying.

The role of students, and the student bystander

Students are the key to the success of any anti-bullying program. Schools should seek to involve students in the development and implementation of anti-bullying initiatives, as genuine consultation with students can improve their support of resulting policies. It is also essential that students feel secure that any information shared about bullying will be treated in strict confidence.

Research has indicated that most bullying takes place when bystanders are present. Salmivalli (1999) found that bystanders typically play one of four roles: assistants who join in and assist the bully; reinforcers who do not actively attack the victim but who give positive feedback to the bully; outsiders who stay away, but give 'silent approval'; and defenders who comfort the victim, trying to stop the bullying.

Peer intervention can be successful in stopping bullying (Craig and Pepler, 1997; O'Connell et al, 1999). Because the behaviour of bystanders may be 'easier to change than the behaviour of the aggressive bullies' (Salmivalli, 1999), children should be made aware of the potential influence they wield as a bystander to bullying, and schools should ensure that it is made clear that the teachers are not the only people responsible for the prevention of bullying. Schools should encourage the recording of the names of bystanders to any bullying incident, and should aim to develop a culture that encourages bullied children to ask for help from bystanders.

Conclusion

Bullying can be found in every school in every country. For many schools and teachers a disproportionate amount of time can be spent on dealing with issues related to bullying if the immediate problem and the ongoing effects of bullying are not addressed effectively. For students, the long-term effects of bullying are immense.

However, there is clear and unambiguous evidence that school action can dramatically reduce the incidence of bullying. Schools have a duty of care to recognise the extent and impact of bullying and to take steps to ensure that each member of its community feels safe and secure.

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