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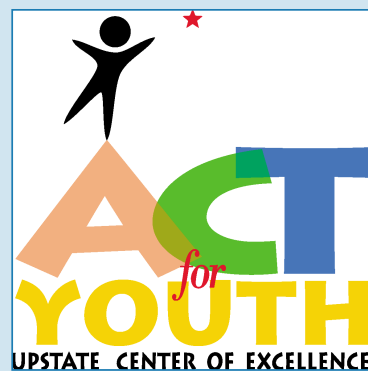
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RESEARCH facts and FINDINGS

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Bullying

by Jane Powers and Amanda Cohen

Awareness of the negative effects and long-term consequences of bullying on school-aged youth has grown substantially in the past few years. Contrary to common belief, bullying is not a 'natural' part of growing up or a relatively harmless behavior that helps build character. Research has shown that bullying can have long-lasting harmful effects for both the victim and the bully. In response, prevention and intervention programs designed to reduce bullying have proliferated, many of which have proven to be quite successful.

Definition of Bullying

What differentiates bullying from normal conflict, rough play, and teasing behaviors which occur between children? Key distinguishing elements of bullying include: 1) power imbalances due to age, size or peer group status; 2) a repeated activity in which a particular child is singled out more than once; and 3) intention to harm. Bullying can take several forms: physical (e.g., hitting, kicking, taking personal belongings); verbal (e.g., taunting, malicious teasing, name calling) and psychological (e.g., spreading rumors, intimidating, or engaging in social exclusion). Widespread use of the Internet has fostered a new form of bullying involving anonymous posting of negative or disparaging messages. These "cyber-bullies" use the Internet to spread malicious gossip which can potentially reach a worldwide audience (Sampson, 2002).

Scope of the Problem

A 1998 study intended to assess the prevalence of bullying behaviors among a nationally representative sample of 15, 686 students in grades 6-10 showed that about 30% of the sample reported occasional to frequent involvement in bullying behavior. Thirteen percent reported involvement as a perpetrator, 10.6% as a victim, and 6.3% as both (Nansel et al, 2001). The researchers estimated that 1.6 million children in grades 6-10 in the US are bullied at least once a week and 1.7 million children bully others. This study excluded elementary age students (who often experience high levels of bullying) and did not limit the bullying to school related incidents. Other smaller studies validate these findings and suggest that 10-29% of American students report being either bullies or victims (Juvonen et al, 2003).

Studies conducted outside of the US in Scandinavia, Japan and the United Kingdom of bully/victim problems reveal similarly high rates. Between 8-38% of



students are bullied with some regularity. These studies show that chronic victims of bullying, (i.e., bullied once a week or more) generally constitute between 8-20 percent of the student population. (Olweus, 1993; Rigby and Slee, 1999).

Research consistently demonstrates that boys are more likely than girls to be both the perpetrators and victims of bullying. Boy bullies tend to engage in direct forms, such as physical aggression, whereas girl bullies more often use indirect forms, what has been referred to as “relational aggression” (Crick and Grotpeter, 1995) such as rumor-spreading, exclusion and social isolation. Across studies, physical bullying is the least common form of bullying and verbal bullying the most common.

The Problem of Underreporting

Unfortunately, many children endure chronic bullying and do not report their experience to adults, including their teachers (O’Moore et al, 1993). One reason for their failure to report is that children do not believe that teachers will intervene effectively when told about bullying—if they respond at all (Olweus, 1993; Hoover et al, 1992). Other reasons victims do not report include fear the problem will get worse, that they will not be believed, nothing will change as a result, and not wanting to worry parents (Sampson, 2002). Teachers often show limited awareness of bullying—even when it occurs in their classrooms—or believe that they intervene when in fact they don’t (Atlas and Pepler, 1998). Improved training of school staff is an essential component of effective bullying intervention.

Evidence suggests that although most students agree that bullying is wrong, bystanders—i.e., individuals who know the bullying is happening—rarely tell teachers and infrequently intervene on behalf of the victim (Juvonen et al, 2003). Some students worry that intervening will raise the bully’s wrath or make them the next target.

Long and Short Term Effects of Bullying

Aggressive behavior in childhood that takes the form of bullying often persists into adulthood (Eron et al, 1987). The US Department of Education found that one in four children who bully have a criminal record by the age of 30 (HRSA, 2003). Olweus (1993) also found that

bullying can lead to adult criminal behavior: 60% of males who were bullies in grades 6-9 were convicted of at least one crime by age 24, compared with 23% of males who did not bully; 35-40% of these former bullies had 3 or more convictions by age 24 compared with 10% of those who did not bully. Bullying has been linked to other forms of antisocial behavior, including weapon carrying and fighting (Nansel et al 2003), vandalism, shoplifting, school truancy and dropping out, and use of drugs/alcohol (Sampson, 2002).

The effects for victims can be devastating and long lasting. Research indicates that victims have lower self esteem, experience more depression, anxiety and insecurity (Boivin et al 1995; Hodges and Perry, 1996). They also suffer from social problems including loneliness, difficulty making friends and poor relationships with classmates. Victims often perceive themselves as social failures and may disengage from friendships (Graham and Juvonen, 1998). This is particularly damaging since friendship has been found to play an important role in both preventing bullying and in buffering its effects once it has occurred. Children with at least one close friend are less likely to be bullied and show fewer emotional, psychological, and behavioral problems should they experience bullying (Hodges et al., 1999).

Victims are also more likely to experience academic problems, including a fear of going to school, that can lead to a greater risk of truancy and school dropout (Sharp, 1995). The link between being bullied and developing negative feelings about school has been documented as early as kindergarten (Kochenderfer and Ladd, 1996). In extreme cases, bullying can have life threatening consequences including suicide.

The most disastrous effects appear to fall on “bully-victims”—those who both bully and get bullied. Several studies have shown that these youth tend to be the least engaged in school, display the most disruptive classroom behavior, and have increased emotional and social problems including depression and loneliness (Juvonen et al, 2003; Nansel et al 2001).

Prevention and Intervention

The good news is that efforts to address bullying have demonstrated remarkable success. For example,

Olweus (1993) showed that a school-based program with 2500 fourth through seventh grade Norwegian students reduced student reports of bullying by half. Other evaluations indicate a 30% to 70% decrease in reports of bullying and other types of antisocial behavior in schools. These interventions also show significant improvements in classroom order and the school environment, as well as increases in positive attitudes about peers, schoolwork, and in students willingness to seek help for the problem (Smith and Sharp, 1994).

Researchers emphasize the importance of a “whole school approach,” one which involves the entire community (staff, students, parents) to address bullying with specific components at the school, class and individual levels. Effective strategies include: raising awareness about bullying, improving peer relations, changing the peer culture, training bystanders to intervene and stop intimidation, developing clear rules against bullying behavior, and supporting victims.

Attitudes are clearly changing—bullying is no longer viewed as an inevitable stage of childhood, or something that children should figure out on their own without adult involvement. Effective training and intervention can improve school safety, an essential condition for learning and for the health and well being of everyone involved—the bullies, the victims, and the bystanders.

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Additional Resources

The Olweus Bullying Prevention Programs:

<http://modelprograms.samhsa.gov/pdfs/FactSheets/Olweus%20Bully.pdf>
Phone: 1-877-773-8546

Steps to Respect

http://www.cfchildren.org/program_str.shtml
Phone: 1-800-634-4449

The National Bullying Prevention Campaign: Take a Stand. Lend a Hand. Stop Bullying Now!

<http://www.stopbullyingnow.hrsa.gov/index.asp>

New York State Center for School Safety

Phone: 1-845-255-8989

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