Counseling and Climate Change as Treatment Modalities for Bullying in School

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Individual, group, and family counseling are invariably included in bullying prevention programs and strategies. Nevertheless, if bullying is treated exclusively as a problem between bullies and victims or as a family problem, counseling efforts will have limited impact. Counseling strategies must be articulated within a systemic approach to bullying in schools. In particular, the roles that students and adults play in actively or passively reinforcing bullying behavior must be addressed through school-wide and family efforts to change the norms and climate with respect to bullying. The pertinent literature is reviewed and steps to implement a systemic prevention strategy are outlined.

KEY WORDS: bullying; counseling; school violence; bystanders; aggression.

> *There is another kind of violence, said one middle school girl, and that is violence by talking. It can leave you hurting more than a cut with a knife. It can leave you bruised inside.*
> *(National Association of Attorneys General, 2000, p. 28)*

BACKGROUND

Though the phenomenon of childhood bullying has been acknowledged for centuries in fiction and diaries, and fairy tales; the scientific study of bullying commenced in Norway in the early 1970s (Ross, 1996). Since that time, the literature has blossomed not only in Scandinavia, but in virtually every industrialized country throughout the world (Smith, et al., 1999). Furthermore, an increasing number of program models have been proposed to address bullying in schools, though few

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of these programs have been rigorously evaluated (Gottfredson, 2001). Moreover, a nearly universal component of these programs involves some form of counseling for the perpetrators and victims of bullying (Hazler, 1996; Hoover & Oliver, 1996).

Based upon a growing body of research, a consensus is emerging among researchers and some practitioners that individual, group, and family counseling are inadvisable and ineffective in addressing bullying unless they are articulated with a systemic school-wide prevention strategy (Clarke & Kiselica, 1997; Hazler, 1996; Olweus, 1993). Nevertheless, in practice, bullying is typically approached as an individual or dyadic problem of the bully and the victim that can be resolved exclusively or primarily through individual, group or family therapy or through social skills training (Rigby, 2002).

INCIDENCE

Bullying behavior is widely acknowledged as the most prevalent form of aggressive behavior during elementary and middle schooling (Greene, 2000; Nansel, et al., 2001). The first national surveys of school aged children were conducted in Norway and Sweden in 1983 (Olweus, 1993). The results revealed that approximately 15 percent of students were involved in bullying incidents during the prior semester, with 7 percent indicating that they had been victimized and 9 percent indicating they had bullied others.

The first national survey in United States was conducted in 1998 revealing that 44 percent of 6th through 10th graders had bullied others and 41 percent were bullied at least once (Nansel, et al., 2001). More importantly, the survey revealed that nearly one in ten students, or approximately 1.5 million students, were bullied or bullied others at least once weekly. Indeed, while differing rates have been reported in different countries (party due to the use of different instruments and different age groupings), the rates in Norway and the United States are similar to published surveys in other parts of the world (Smith, et al., 1999). Similar results were also obtained in two subsequent surveys in the United States, both of which revealed that students consider bullying and mean-spirited teasing to be a more significant problem than either drugs, alcohol, or violence (Galinsky & Salmond, 2002; Kaiser Family Foundation, 2001).

DEFINITIONS AND TYPES OF BULLYING

While definitions of bullying in the literature vary, nearly all encompass four essential characteristics. First, bullying is a form of aggressive behavior in that the bully intends to inflict harm, distress, or fear upon his/her victim. Second, bullying always involves a perceived or actual power differential between the bully and

his/her victim. Most experts advise against the adoption of peer or other forms of mediation because of this power differential and the likelihood of retaliation (Greene, 2000). Third, bullying behavior is generally recognized as a form of proactive aggression in that it is not provoked. Finally, bullying behavior involves repeated instances of such behavior, i.e., a single act of aggression is not bullying (Olweus & Limber, 1999; Slee, 1995). Still, students and teachers alike often fail to include all of these components in their conceptualizations (Boulton, 1997; Hazler, Miller, Carney, & Green, 2001).

While the Scandinavian research has identified physical differences between the bully and his/her victim as the primary source of the power differential between bullies and victims, research in the United States and elsewhere have identified multiple sources of the power differential, including: sex (or sexual harassment), perceived sexual orientation, learning and emotional impairments, differences in speech or looks, status and class differences, and racial and religious differences (American Association of University Women Educational Foundation [AAUW], 2001; Nansel, et al., 2001; Whitney, Smith & Thompson, 1994).

SEX DIFFERENCES AND DEVELOPMENTAL TRENDS

Several additional findings provide a useful base of information about bullying for counselors, clinicians, teachers, and administrators. Girls tend to perpetrate and are victimized by indirect verbal strategies such as group ostracizing (often based on status-related cliques) and rumor mongering, while boys tend to perpetrate and are victimized by direct strategies such as physical intimidation, name-calling, and extortion (Crick & Bigbee, 1998). The newest form of bullying—cyber-bullying—appears to be escalating rapidly, though there is no published research on this topic.

Developmentally, physical bullying tends to decrease and verbal bullying tends to increase as children move from elementary to middle schools (Perry, Kusel, & Perry, 1988). Furthermore, most researchers have found that bullying peaks during the middle school years, decreasing precipitously during the high school years (Olweus, 1993). Nevertheless, this finding may be a semantic artifact in that adolescents tend to frame "bullying" as a childish phenomenon. High school students do acknowledge engaging in, and being victims of, repeated identity-threatening forms of harassment and disrespectful behavior, e.g., anti gay taunts and sexual harassment (AAUW, 2001; Crick & Bigbee, 1998). Finally, the few longitudinal studies that have been undertaken reveal that in the absence of interventions, bullying and victimization are relatively stable, at least during elementary and middle school, though less stable in girls than boys (primarily due to more labile friendship patterns) (Boulton & Smith, 1994; Salmivalli, Lappalainen, & Lagerspetz, 1998).

CHARACTERISTICS OF BULLIES AND VICTIMS

Much of the bullying literature in the 1980s and 1990s can be characterized as a search to identify characteristics that differentiate bullies and victims from one another and from those not involved in bullying behaviors. While contradictory findings among studies are frequent, and the proportion of variance explained by single or multiple characteristics is not terribly high, some characteristics have been repeatedly identified.

Children who bully tend to have reasonably intact self-esteem, though one discriminating study suggests that bullies have a particular form of self-esteem impairment, descriptively named defensive egoism: they tend to be grandiose and psychologically defensive (Salmivalli, Kaukiainen, Kaistaniemi, & Lagerspetz, 1999). Children who bully also tend to impute aggressive intentions to others more so than non-bullies, they tend to be impulsive, they tend to view aggression as an appropriate means to resolve conflicts, and they tend to have a high need for dominance (Graham & Juvonen, 1998; Olweus, 1993; Ross, 1996). Finally, children who bully are quite adept at finding victims who will pose no threat to them physically and no threat to their social status (Perry, Willard, & Perry, 1990).

Victims of bullying, on the other hand, generally manifest internalizing psychological problems (depression, loneliness, low self-esteem, school phobias, and social anxiety) and they are relatively unpopular (Hawker & Boulton, 2000). They also tend to be passive or ineffectively reactive in response to being bullied (Crick & Bigbee, 1998; Salmivalli, Karhunen, & Lagerspetz, 1996).

DYNAMICS AND SOCIAL CONTEXT

These patterns of differential characteristics do identify the kinds of issues that may arise or need to be addressed in counseling, but they provide only a partial and somewhat misleading understanding of bullying dynamics. Primarily, this research ignores the social context in which bullying occurs. The most important contextual factor is that bullying invariably occurs in the presence of peers who are neither the primary bully nor the victim—peers termed "bystanders" in the literature (Atlas & Pepler, 1998). Researchers adopting what is known as the "participant role approach" have demonstrated that bystanders can and do take on various roles vis-à-vis the bullying (Salmivalli, Lagerspetz, Bjorkqvist, Osterman, & Kaukiainen, 1996). Some bystanders will support the bully through active and clear encouragement. Others will support the bully in a less active way. Even passive onlookers are viewed by the victim and the bully as supportive of the bullying behavior. Only a minority of children will directly express their disapproval of the bullying behavior.

The majority of students who actively or passively support the bully, however, maintain disapproving attitudes toward bullying behavior in general (Atlas

& Pepler, 1998; Hawkins, Pepler, & Craig, 2001; O'Moore, 2000). For some children, their support of the bully, and/or their failure to intervene, is fueled by fears that if they express their feeling that bullying is hurtful and undeserved, they may in turn suffer the wrath of the bully and the other peers who are supportive of the bully (Slee, 1995). Other children express the belief that victimized children deserve to be bullied because they are "weak" or possess other undesirable characteristics; and still other consider the bullying behavior as "none of their business" (Randall, 1995; Slee, 1995). Similar to teachers, some children may not intervene because they feel they lack the know-how to so effectively (Atlas & Pepler, 1998; Boulton, 1997). Another dynamic that contributes to this attitude-behavior discrepancy among peers is the fact that many adults—teachers, administrators, and parents—ignore, passively support, or even engage in bullying behaviors themselves (O'Moore, 2000; Ross, 1996; Olweus, 1993).

From the perspective of the child who actively bullies, the support they receive from their peers, and the support they receive either indirectly or directly from adults, provides social sustenance consistent with their hunger for dominance, prestige, and popularity (Perry, et al., 1990). From a motivational perspective, most bullies have no compelling psychological or social reason to consider their behavior as inappropriate. To the contrary, social and school norms appear to provide positive social and psychological reinforcement for their behavior. Individual, or even group counseling, then becomes an arduous uphill battle.

While victims of bullying are universally unhappy about their victimization, their status as victims is unlikely to change unless there is a shift in the social climate with respect to behavioral responses to the bullying behavior (Gottheil & Dubow, 2001). A social climate that positively reinforces or ignores bullying incidents may contribute to the reluctance of victimized children to tell their parents or a school representative about their victimization (O'Moore, 2000). The therapeutic work for the counselor or clinician in such cases involves a constant struggle to enhance the victim's self-worth as the bullying behavior continues, a difficult task in that the bullying is experienced as being actively and passively supported by peers and adults. Attempts to help such children become more assertive toward the bully often fail because many of these children are temperamentally unassertive (Rigby, 2002). Nevertheless, many universal programs aimed at teaching fundamental social and interpersonal skills to all children in a school are effective and therefore do not stigmatize specific children—the victims of bullying—as needing special help (Gottfredson, 2001).

CLIMATE CHANGE STRATEGIES

Does this mean that counseling efforts are doomed to fail with bullies and their victims? The answer is that counseling can work effectively if the social climate of the child's school, as well as communications from the child's

parents, is such that bullying is viewed and responded to as unacceptable behavior. Several key components are important in actualizing climate change. The overriding injunction in these efforts is that all key stakeholders need to be actively involved in the process: teachers, administrators, parents, students, community representatives, and auxiliary school staff (Clarke & Kiselica, 1997; Greene, 2000).

Two initial steps are essential to secure the needed climate change. First, all of the stakeholders need to understand the dynamics of bullying and the impact it has on students. This can be done through a presentation by an expert in the field, educational videos, or theatre presentations. Second, a survey needs to be undertaken that documents the extent, nature, and location of bullying behavior in the school. The results of the survey, particularly if students are asked to indicate the impact of bullying in their lives, can be very persuasive in securing support for the adoption of a bullying prevention program. Such surveys can also be used to identify bullying "hot spots," locations in the school where bullying is especially prevalent. Adult supervision can then be provided or enhanced in these locations. The results also provide a baseline upon which to assess whether intervention efforts are having the desired impact.

As the key stakeholders begin to understand the importance of changing the school's norms with regard to bullying; policies, programs, and procedures can be established. This can be done through a variety of fronts, including but not limited to student codes of conduct, poster contests, student problem-solving projects, pertinent reading assignments, classroom-based discussions, role-plays, special assemblies, designation of special days in which a variety of efforts converge in addressing bullying, parent workshops, and the adoption of specialized curricula (Hoover & Oliver, 1996; Olweus, 1993; Ross, 1996; Sjostrom & Stein, 1996).

In addition, the key stakeholders need to create a child-friendly and teacher-friendly method for reporting and responding to bullying behaviors when it is observed. Certainly a system of graduated sanctions needs to be consistently and justly applied and publicized. In addition, students who are repeatedly victimized or those who observe unrelenting bullying need to feel comfortable in reporting the bullying behavior without it being associated with "ratting," "tattletaling," or "dobbing" (Rigby & Barnes, 2002). Students, in fact, are the most effective informants since much bullying occurs outside the purview of adults (Olweus, 1993). Once reported, a system for responding to bullying incidents must be established and enforced.

The foregoing components or steps comprise the Olweus Bullying Prevention Program. This program has been shown through quasi-experimental studies to reduce levels of bullying in school by 25 to 50 percent (Olweus & Limber, 1999). These studies have been conducted in Scandinavia, Great Britain, and the United States.

COUNSELING STRATEGIES

Once the school climate begins to shift to the norm that bullying is unacceptable and hurtful, counseling efforts for bullies, victims, bystanders, and parents can be beneficial. Children who had been bullying others with near impunity, will begin to find the tide turned against them. They will begin to become motivated to refrain from bullying. Similarly, victims of bullying can then enter counseling sessions with the knowledge that they are not alone, that something can be done about the bullying, and that victimization is not something about which to be ashamed. In this context, counseling becomes an important, if not critical, adjunct in the systemic efforts to reduce and prevent bullying in schools.

Three separate counseling strategies, none of which has been scientifically evaluated, have been proposed to specifically reduce bullying in school: Hazler's "Promoting Issues in Common" (Hazler, 1996), Pikas' "Method of Shared Concern" (Pikas, 2002), and Mains and Robinson's "No Blame Approach" (Maines & Robinson, 1992). While these strategies differ in important ways, they all make use of individual and group sessions (with bullies and victims meeting together) and all derive their therapeutic power from the elicitation of empathic responses among bullies and bystanders toward their victims and the provision psychological and social support for the victim. Correspondingly, these methods avoid punishing or shaming the bullies and bystanders and they attempt to avert subsequent stigmatization of the victims.

The three counseling strategies, in essence, mirror and enhance, and are enhanced by, macro-level climate change strategies to promote prosocial norms and behavior among the entire student body as a means to reduce social support for bullying behavior. The Shared Concern Method focuses exclusively on group bullying and the dynamics underlying this form of bullying (Pikas, 2002). This method involves three fundamental steps: individual talks with the suspected bullies that build upon their feelings of concern for the victim, individual talks with the victim to discuss the counselor's meeting with the bullies, and a meeting with both parties in which constructive solutions are posed and agreed upon. A follow-up meeting is also convened to ensure that what was agreed upon is being followed.

The No Blame Approach involves two essential steps: interviewing the victim about his/her feelings and convening a meeting with the bully, victim, and some bystanders in which the feelings of the victim are elaborated and the group works to establish a constructive solution to the problem (Maines & Robinson, 1992). As in the Method of Shared Concerned, a follow-up meeting is convened to ensure that the agreements are holding. In the Promoting Issues in Common method, an emphasis is placed on ensuring the safety of the victim or victims, communicating to the students that a supportive process is in place, and establishing positive working relationships between the counselor and students. Once this is done, individual sessions, first with the bully and then with the victim, are

convened. The individual work proceeds through four steps: exploration of the student's concerns about the bullying, elaboration of each student's understanding of the situation, exploration of common feelings, and encouragement to reflect about the other student's feelings. Unless individual problems suggest that a joint meeting is inadvisable, joint counseling sessions are convened to articulate common concerns, and based on these common concerns, establish a mutually satisfying resolution.

While all three methods can be articulated with a climate change strategy, none is comprehensive. None includes ongoing individual or group counseling, though individual treatment for traumatized victims is recommended. None actively engages parents or teachers in the therapeutic process, both of whom can and do exert significant influence with children and adolescence. Studies of the family dynamics of bullies and victims have revealed distinguishing characteristics of such families, suggesting that family systems therapy would be beneficial (Finnegan, Hodges, & Perry, 1998). Teachers also need assistance in appropriately identifying and responding to bullying incidents. Without training, teachers often overlook bullying (particularly verbal bullying) and they tend not to intervene or intervene inadequately in response to observed incidents of bullying (Atlas & Pepler, 1998; Boulton, 1997; Hazler, et al., 2001; O'Moore, 2000). Indeed, preliminary results of a teacher training effort to provide a more caring environment has shown promise in reducing levels of school bullying (Galloway & Roland, 2003).

SUMMARY

Comprehensive climate change strategies that reduce social support for bullying behavior and that promote prosocial norms among students, teachers, administrators, and parents are needed to significantly reduce schoolwide bullying. Once the school climate begins to change in this manner, counseling efforts are needed to reinforce empathy among bullies and bystanders and to promote self-regard and provide psychological and social support for victims. The need for ongoing individual, group, and family counseling among affected students should be assessed on a case by case basis and provided accordingly.

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