

Misdirections in Bullying Prevention and Intervention

Bullying is unwanted, aggressive behavior among school aged children that involves a real or perceived power imbalance. The behavior is repeated, or has the potential to be repeated, over time. Both kids who are bullied and who bully others may have serious, lasting problems.

In order to be considered bullying, the behavior must be aggressive and include:

- **An Imbalance of Power:** Kids who bully use their power—such as physical strength, access to embarrassing information, or popularity—to control or harm others. Power imbalances can change over time and in different situations, even if they involve the same people.
- **Repetition:** Bullying behaviors happen more than once or have the potential to happen more than once.

In recent years, increasing numbers of educators, health professionals, parents, and other adults who interact with children and youth have come to understand the seriousness of bullying. Many proven and promising prevention and intervention strategies have been developed.

Unfortunately, some misdirected intervention and prevention strategies also have been developed lately.

Zero Tolerance Policies

Many schools and school districts have adopted “zero tolerance” or “three strikes and you’re out” policies towards bullying, in which children who bully others are suspended or expelled from school. These policies (also called “student exclusion” policies) raise many concerns.

- These policies affect a large number of students. Recent surveys of elementary and middle school students indicate that approximately one in five students admit to bullying their peers periodically (Melton et al., 1998). Even if policies are limited to physical bullying, the numbers of affected children are still significant.
- Threats of severe punishments, such as suspension or expulsion, may actually discourage children and adults from reporting bullying that they observe.
- Bullying can be an early marker of other problem behaviors. Children who frequently bully their peers are at risk of engaging in other problem behaviors such

as truancy, fighting, theft, and vandalism. Children who bully are in need of positive, prosocial role models, including adults and students in their school.

Although suspension and expulsion of students may be necessary to maintain public safety in a very small number of cases, these practices are not recommended as a broad-based bullying prevention or intervention policy.

Conflict Resolution and Peer Mediation

Conflict resolution and peer mediation are common strategies for dealing with conflicts among students. Many schools also use peer mediation and conflict resolution to address bullying problems, but this is not recommended. Why?

- Bullying is a form of victimization, not conflict. It is no more a “conflict” than are child abuse or domestic violence.
- Mediating a bullying incident may send inappropriate messages to the students who are involved (such as, “You are both partly right and partly wrong,” or “We need to work out this conflict between you”). The appropriate message to the child who is bullied should be, “No one deserves to be bullied, and we are going to do everything we can to stop it.” The message for children who bully should be, “Your behavior is inappropriate and must be stopped.”
- Mediation may further victimize a child who has been bullied. It may be very

upsetting for a child who has been bullied to face his or her tormenter in mediation.

- There is no evidence to indicate that conflict resolution or peer mediation is effective in stopping bullying.

Group Treatment for Children Who Bully

Another strategy that some schools use to address bullying behavior involves group therapeutic treatment for children who bully, including anger management, skill-building, empathy-building, and seeking ways to build the self-esteem of bullies. Although these interventions are well-intentioned, they often are counter productive. Students’ behavior may further deteriorate, as group members tend to serve as role models and reinforcers for each others’ antisocial and bullying behavior.

Simple, Short-Term Solutions

Often, school administrators and their staff adopt a short-term, piecemeal approach to bullying prevention. Bullying may be the topic of a staff in-service training, a PTA meeting, a school-wide assembly, or lessons taught by individual teachers. Although each of these efforts may represent important initial steps in the adoption of a comprehensive, long-term bullying prevention strategy, they likely will do little to significantly reduce bullying problems if implemented in a piecemeal way. To reduce the prevalence of bullying we need a change in the climate of the school and its expectations for student behavior.

References and Resources

Chase, B. (March 25, 2001). Bullyproofing our schools: To eliminate bullying, first we must agree not to tolerate it. Editorial. Retrieved August 12, 2005, from www.nea.org/publiced/chase/bc010325.html.

Cohen, R. (2002, February). Stop mediating these conflicts now! *The School Mediator: Peer Mediation Insights from the Desk of Richard Cohen*. Electronic newsletter, School Mediation Associates. Retrieved August 12, 2005, from www.schoolmediation.com.

Conolly, J. C., Hindmand, R., Jacobs, Y., & Gagnon, W. A. (1997). How school promote violence. *Family Futures*, 1(1), 8-11.

Limber, S. P. (2002). *Addressing youth bullying behaviors*. Proceedings from the American Medical Association Educational Forum on Adolescent Health: Youth Bullying. Chicago, IL: American Medical Association.

Limber, S. P. (in press). Implementation of the Olweus Bullying Prevention Program: Lessons Learned from the Field. In D. Espelage & S. Swearer (Eds.) *Bullying in American Schools: A Social-Ecological Perspective on Prevention and Intervention*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.

Limber, S. P. (in press). School and community efforts to reduce and prevent bullying. *Journal of Health Education*.

Melton, G.B., Limber, S.P., Cunningham, P., Osgood, D.W., Chambers J., Flerx, V., Henggeler S., & Nation, M. (1998). *Violence Among Rural Youth. Final Report to the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention*.

Mulvey, E. P., & Cauffman, E. (2001). The inherent limits of predicting school violence. *American Psychologist*, 56, 797-802.

Nansel, T. R., Overpeck, M., Pilla, R. S., Ruan, J., Simons-Morton, B., & Scheidt, P. (2001). Bullying Behaviors Among US Youth: Prevalence and Association With Psychosocial Adjustment. *Journal of the American Medical Association*, 285, 2094-2100.

Olweus, D. (1993). *Bullying at school: what we know and what we can do*. NY: Blackwell.