Bullying at School: Never Acceptable

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ABSTRACT: No child should be harassed for his or her unique characteristics. Schools should encourage an environment of respectful self-expression for all students, and no group should be singled out for special treatment. Parental involvement should be a school's primary method of resolution with programs emphasizing general respectfulness serving to set the tone in the classrooms.

Bullying on the school campus is never acceptable in a society where all individuals are entitled to respectful treatment. The act of bullying is not a new phenomenon among children but one that is deserving of the school's and parents' attention. Bullying is defined: "To treat in an overbearing or intimidating manner; to force one's way aggressively or by intimidation.[1] A more complete definition of bullying is:
"Systematic, repeated, or recurrent conduct committed by a student or group of students against another student that causes measurable physical harm or emotional distress. Verbal expression, whether oral, written, or electronic, is included within the definition of "bullying" only to the extent that (1) such expression is lewd, indecent, obscene, advocating for illegal conduct, intended to incite an immediate breach of peace, or the severe and pervasive use of threatening words that inflict injury; or (2) District administrators or officials reasonably believe that such expression will cause an actual, material disruption of school work."[2]

Forms of Bullying

Bullying involves aggressive, negative behavior in a patterned manner over time toward an individual of weaker power. It may take many forms:

- Physical, such as hitting, pushing, kicking, or spitting
- Verbal, such as negative name-calling, derogatory comments or descriptions
- Social, such as deliberate isolation, or exclusion
- Written, such as hand-written notes or electronic messages
- Electronic displays, such as texting or posting pictures with negative messages on public websites

Target Characteristics of Bullies

Bullying is typically directed at unique characteristics (whether real or perceived by others) of an individual such as:

- Ethnic or racial
- Physical build or features of appearance that are unique and different

- Social or economic status
- Physical inabilities and disabilities[3]
- Mental or scholastic abilities
- Speech quality or tone
- Sexual orientation or sexual activity
- Moral or religious beliefs

Effects of Bullying Upon Children

Bullying has negative effects upon the bullied and the bully. Being the victim of a bully during school years can contribute to maladjustment in children.[4] An association between involvement in bullying and psychosomatic problems has been demonstrated.[5]

Having a special health care need generally is associated with being bullied, and having a behavioral, emotional, or developmental problem is associated with bullying others and being a bully/victim.[6]

Prevention

Parents should be the primary focus for both prevention and correction of bullying behavior, with school based anti-bullying programs supportive of parental values. Parents should be enlisted to control and correct any bullying that their children instigate, and they should be encouraged to obtain professional help from their pediatricians since children who bully others are at risk for future physical and mental concerns. In designing anti-bullying programs, the focus should be upon the high value of each individual student, regardless of his or her differences. Some minority rights advocates and some school boards have proposed anti-bullying programs that would intentionally desensitize and reorient students with respect to a variety of chronic and self-limited conditions. This is inappropriate for the following reasons:

- By focusing a program upon the special characteristic or activity of one student or group, the school opens the flood gates for other programs promoted by its advocates, i.e. over issues involving religion, ethnicity, stature, intelligence, race, or even athletic abilities. By focusing anti-bullying programs, instead, on the topic of *general* respectfulness, the school preserves its precious classroom time for academic teaching (its primary role), includes all target characteristics of bullying, and avoids the pitfalls of calling undue attention to a particular group or perhaps venturing into controversial teachings.
- The creation of programs for certain characteristics implies a hierarchy among characteristics, thereby disenfranchising individuals with "non-covered" characteristics.
- Childhood and adolescence by very definition are times of tremendous fluidity. Such programs may have the unintentional effect of premature labeling or validating individuals displaying temporary behaviors or orientations.
- For many families and students, attempts by the school to make normative certain inherent or adopted characteristics may infringe upon specific parental teachings and, therefore, are not appropriate for general teaching. Additionally, such

programs may have the unintended consequence of proselytizing temporarily confused adolescents into adopting an atypical lifestyle or tempt others to experiment with atypical behaviors.

- The effectiveness of current bullying prevention programs has yet to be proven, and they may actually be counterproductive. A 2013 analysis of a large U.S. data base studied the effects of bullying prevention programs and revealed a negative effect on peer victimization. "Students attending schools with bullying prevention programs were more likely to have experienced peer victimization, compared to those attending schools without bullying prevention programs."[7]

General disrespectfulness should be the targeted negative behavior. There is no need to create specific programs for every unique characteristic of a student that might draw the attention of bullies. Classroom time is too precious and the purview of the school too narrow to pursue specific programs for various student characteristics.

Bullying and Suicide

Bullying has been linked to various negative outcomes among students; however, a direct link to suicide is less clear. Suicide most often occurs as a culmination of long term internal struggle and unrest. It is an irrational act of desperation that is often associated with the presence of long-standing mental illness, depression, substance abuse, and isolation in its victims. More than 90% of adolescent suicide victims met criteria for a psychiatric disorder before their death.[8] Even suicide victim advocates caution the media against portraying bullying as the "cause" of suicide, stating that it ignores "the underlying mental illness issues that are present in 90% of the people who die by suicide."[9] Some advocates for those expressing alternate sexual identities also caution against the claim "that bullying caused someone to die by suicide."[10] Their concern is that by oversimplifying an association, individuals sympathetic to a cause or group may commit copycat acts of suicide.

CONCLUSION

It is the school's legitimate role to provide a safe environment for respectful self-expression for all students. While students may hold differing opinions or convictions, they must treat one another with equal respect. For all individuals, bullying is <u>never</u> an acceptable behavior.

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The American College of Pediatricians (ACPeds) is a national medical association of licensed physicians and healthcare professionals who specialize in the care of infants, children, and adolescents. The mission of the ACPeds is to enable all children to reach their optimal physical and emotional health and well-being.

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