
Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:
http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/vtch20

What Teachers and Schools Can Do to Control the Growing Problem of School Bullying

Hani Morgan a

a University of Southern Mississippi, Hattiesburg, MS

Version of record first published: 11 Jul 2012

To cite this article: Hani Morgan (2012): What Teachers and Schools Can Do to Control the Growing Problem of School Bullying, The Clearing House: A Journal of Educational Strategies, Issues and Ideas, 85:5, 174-178

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/00098655.2012.677075

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR ARTICLE

Full terms and conditions of use: http://www.tandfonline.com/page/terms-and-conditions

This article may be used for research, teaching, and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproduction, redistribution, reselling, loan, sub-licensing, systematic supply, or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden.

The publisher does not give any warranty express or implied or make any representation that the contents will be complete or accurate or up to date. The accuracy of any instructions, formulae, and drug doses should be independently verified with primary sources. The publisher shall not be liable for any loss, actions, claims, proceedings, demand, or costs or damages whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with or arising out of the use of this material.
What Teachers and Schools Can Do to Control the Growing Problem of School Bullying

HANI MORGAN

Abstract: School bullying, also referred to as peer victimization, has increased rapidly in recent years and can be extremely harmful if schools and teachers do not establish effective bullying-prevention programs. Recent data on the number of students who are victims of bullying indicate that between 30 and 80 percent of students in schools report being targets of peer victimization. The concern that educators have about bullying has led to many studies that have refuted common beliefs about peer victimization. This article discusses what bullying is, why bullies mistreat others, and how schools and teachers can respond effectively to the problem.

Keywords: classroom environment, discipline, school improvement, student behavior

School bullying, or peer victimization, has become a major problem in recent years and has proven itself to be extremely harmful when school systems and teachers do not establish effective bullying-prevention programs. Recent data indicate that between 30 and 80 percent of students in schools are victims of peer victimization (Graham 2010). Piotrowski and Hoot (2008) show that the rise in school shootings in the United States is linked directly to bullying. More importantly, bullying prevents victimized students from reaching their academic potential, interferes with their normal development, and increases the chances that these students will experience suicidal thoughts and actions (Allen 2010a).

Educators’ concerns about bullying have led to definitive studies that refute past beliefs about peer victimization. Graham (2010) identifies six “myths” about bullying based on research done in the past decade: (1) bullies have low self-esteem, (2) being bullied is normal, (3) victims remain victims, (4) girls use psychological bullying and boys use physical bullying, (5) zero-tolerance approaches always work, and (6) bullying occurs only between a victim and an aggressor.

Peer victimization is an old phenomenon in both American and international schools, but it seems to be spiraling out of control throughout America. Consequently, many school systems, schools, parents, and students are citing safety and achievement as dual concerns. Schools and teachers need to have an effective program to deal with bullying so that students can concentrate on what should be their most important goal in school—academic achievement. This article discusses what bullying is, why bullies mistreat others, and how schools and teachers can respond to the problem.

Definition of Bullying

Bullying behaviors can sometimes be difficult to identify because researchers often do not include one set of common characteristics that describe a bully. Most studies define peer victimization as repeated aggressive behavior with the intent to harm, involving an imbalance of power between the perpetrator and the victim (Graham 2010; Graham and Bellmore 2007; Piotrowski and Hoot 2008). Although bullying is more likely to occur when adult supervision is minimal, Hamarus and Kaikkonen (2008) explain that bullies can often mislead teachers and do harm to their victims, even when in the presence of the teacher, by manipulation. Bullies are not necessarily underachievers, but can be top achievers who are looked on with favor by faculty, students, and administrators because of their social and academic standing, causing a real problem in choosing “who to believe”; this is where manipulation rears its head when trying to determine the aggressor in any given situation.
Bullies behave in many ways; they can confront their victims directly, as in a face-to-face incident, or indirectly through a third party. Examples of bullying tactics include name-calling, taunting, social exclusion, hitting, spreading rumors, intimidating gestures, and racial slurs (Graham 1993; Graham and Bellmore 2002).

The boom in technology in recent decades has led to a new form of bullying, known as cyberbullying, which involves attacking victims through electronic means such as e-mails, websites, or social networks (Beale and Hall 2007; Hinduja and Patchin 2011; Siegle 2010).

**Cyberbullying**

Because of the exposure that students have to technology, cyberbullying has become a huge problem in American schools. This type of bullying is more dangerous than bullying without the use of electronic devices—because it can occur at any time, at any location, and can reach thousands of young people (Floreno 2011). What bullies think of as fun, however, can lead to catastrophic results.

Although technological devices offer many advantages—such as allowing students to access educational information—they also make bullying easier. Attacking other students through malicious e-mails, websites, and other electronic formats is often used to avoid face-to-face interactions (Keith and Martin 2005).

Many bullies are cowards. Reasons for their actions may include an anonymous retaliation for being actively bullied themselves; group or clique harassment, which is considered a “fun sport” by popular students against less-popular or unpopular students; intimidation by recognized “gangs,” which should be reported to the local police; and innumerable other reasons that children do what they do to their peers.

The higher degree of anonymity afforded to students on the Internet allows bullies to have less fear of disciplinary action as a result of their nefarious activity. Beale and Hall (2007) explain that even if school personnel identify a suspect, the student under suspicion can blame another student for using his or her screen name or computer. Wolfson (2010) explains that bullies often use false names, temporary e-mail addresses, or someone else’s electronic device to avoid disciplinary action. These students must be made aware that such conduct is a misdemeanor crime, tantamount to identity theft, which can be traced back to them.

When students attack others in cyberspace, they do not see an immediate reaction from those they are bullying and, therefore, do not have a “rational” idea of the inappropriateness of their actions (Hinduja and Patchin 2011). Cyberbullying is easy to perform because of the lack of supervision from the websites themselves. Parental intervention and control is crucial because of these circumstances.

Cyberbullying has led to well-publicized cases regarding the suicides of teenagers. One case involves the tragic story of Phoebe Prince. Phoebe had been harassed in person and also on Facebook, and she eventually committed suicide by hanging herself; some witnesses reported seeing her crying with an iPod in hand. What led others to attack her was her decision to date boys that some of her female peers thought should be “off limits” to her (Holladay 2011).

Another highly publicized case involved the suicide of Tyler Clementi. A freshman at Rutgers University, Tyler jumped from the George Washington Bridge in New York after his roommate recorded a video of him having an encounter with another male and then posted it on YouTube (Dollnick 2010). Authorities have subsequently charged two students, the student who made the video and another whose computer was used to send it. Although the student whose computer was used will likely get no jail time, the student who made the video could face a maximum 10-year sentence for invasion of privacy and hate crime charges. Students must be made aware that this type of behavior is a serious crime that could affect the rest of their lives.

**What Causes Students to Bully?**

Researchers offer several explanations as to why students bully their peers. The influence of the media is paramount. Children often model what they see; when children observe aggressive behavior in the mass media, they learn bullying behaviors (Anderson and Bushman 2002). Piotrowski and Hoot (2008) explain how video games like Bully encourage aggressive behavior that can lead children to act out what they see. When these games become more popular, the manufacturers often increase their production and add more intimidation techniques, thus encouraging more bullying.

Children also learn aggressive behavior by observing other children, or adults, directly (Anderson and Bushman 2002). If children are exposed to poorly managed conflict at home, they will be more aggressive than if they live with a family where aggression is minimal (Georgiou 2008). Other factors include different styles of raising children. Parents who do not provide enough warmth, supervision, and attention to their children increase the chances that those children will be bullies. Georgiou refers to research indicating that parents who abuse their children reinforce negative behavior, thus increasing the chances that their children will be aggressive. Children who are naturally “active,” or have a “hot-headed” temperament, are also more likely to be aggressive, but Olweus (1993) contends that this is less of a contributing factor than the influence of the parents. Georgiou also says that parents who are authoritarian, harsh, and punitive are more likely to raise children who become bullies. Other associations found between family life and bullying include the presence of a
depressed mother and an absence of the father (Connolly and O’Moore 2003). Finally, school climate, poor intervention, and lack of supervision can influence the frequency and severity of bullying problems at any given school.

**Characteristics of Victims**

Although Piotrowski and Hoot (2008) indicate that research is not consistent in identifying a bullying profile, Card and Hodges (2008) and Graham (2010) explain that “shyness” places students at a higher risk and note how physical conditions associated with bullying, such as anxiety, physical weakness, hyperactivity, and emotional dysregulation can lead victims to make frequent visits to the school nurse and also increase absenteeism.

Children with some of these conditions are often viewed as “easy prey” by bullies because they are likely to lack the skills needed to defend themselves and will “satisfy” the aggressor by acting physically and/or emotionally defeated (Card and Hodges 2008). These victims are likely to be disliked and rejected by classmates. Card and Hodges (2008) explain that blatant peer rejection encourages aggression because it allows bullies to perceive victims as targets, thus fulfilling their sense of superiority while their peers cheer the bullying.

Friendships may lower the risk of victimization because friends can offer protection from a bully. On the other hand, if a child is a victim, chances are that he or she will probably not develop friendships, since peers often ostracize a targeted child (Card and Hodges 2008).

A common characteristic that victims tend to share is how their individual differences stand out from their peers. Graham (2010) explains that being highly gifted, having a mental handicap, being overweight, or being a member of an ethnic minority group are specific risk factors. Children favor those who are similar to themselves. Having characteristics that deviate from the norm in the peer group is a definite risk factor for peer victimization (Graham 2010).

**Effects of Bullying on Victims**

Although some adults believe that bullying builds character, recent research on the effects of bullying indicates that it has few if any positive outcomes. Nylund, Nishina, Bellmore, and Graham (2007) contend that peer victimization is associated with a plethora of problems that arise during childhood and adolescence—including psychological and physical complaints and poor school performance—which are exhibited by both the bully and the victim in different degrees.

Students who are bullied will most certainly not enjoy school and will perceive it as unsafe. Card and Hodges (2008) tell how being bullied affects achievement; if students are constantly worried about being attacked, they will be less inclined to focus on academic work. Graham (2010) explains how persistent bullying leads victims to blame themselves and to believe that they “deserve” to be picked on as a result of their shortcomings. Other researchers believe that peer harassment and self-blame prevent students from developing the self-confidence needed to succeed in school. A 2006 study states that victims of bullying “were relatively more lonely, socially anxious, depressed, and low in self-esteem” (Graham, Bellmore, and Mize 2006, 374).

Although peer victimization can be devastating during childhood and adolescent years, it does not necessarily persist throughout an individual’s years in school or into adulthood. Graham (2010) reports that in one study, only a third of students who were reported to be victims at the start of the sixth grade maintained their reputation as victims at the end of the school year, and that there seem to be many temporary cases of bullying linked to “changing situations,” such as delayed pubertal development and a student’s transitioning to a new school.

**Characteristics of Bullies**

In contrast to the negative effects of being bullied, perpetrators of peer victimization do not seem to suffer social difficulties and tend to have healthier mental attitudes (Graham and Bellmore 2007). Graham and Bellmore’s study states that bullies were no more depressed, anxious, or lonely than the normative group. Graham (2010) says that a misconception about bullying is the belief that bullies behave the way they do as a result of low self-esteem. She states that current research on bullying indicates the opposite view—that bullies have an “inflated” sense of self.

Another myth that recent research dispels is the notion that “no one likes a bully.” Graham shows that not only are many bullies regarded highly by their peers, but they also have many friends and enjoy popularity. Some students perceive bullies as “cool,” and may even imitate them because of their admiration. Bullies are also less likely to blame themselves for conflict with others and are more likely to blame their victims (Graham 2010).

**Effective Intervention**

With the rise of bullying in recent years, it is imperative for educators to have a strategic plan to counteract the problem. Unfortunately, many teachers do not have enough training or knowledge on how to respond to bullying (Allen 2010b). Enforcement of a school policy on bullying can be difficult to implement because of the secretive nature of bullying and the limited information that adults can gather on a bullying case (Allen 2010b). Some schools implement zero-tolerance policies, hoping students will get the message that anti-bullying measures are strictly enforced; however, research indicates that these policies, often, do not reduce the problems
but can even exacerbate them (Graham 2010). Although they are appealing to educators who wish for strong consequences for violence, zero-tolerance policies often fail because educators do not use them in a rational manner but, rather, in a way reflecting racial and gender bias and the influence of the community (Black 2010).

Even though there may be guidelines and strategic plans to reduce the incidence of bullying at a given school, educators need to understand that implementing an effective anti-bullying program is not a simple task that can be fulfilled in a single session but, rather, must be a prolonged and detailed effort involving all members of the school community in order to change the culture of bullying (Allen 2010b). Administrators need to remember that schools vary widely in demographics and organization, and that what will work in one school will not necessarily work in another school.

Research on bully intervention programs is mixed. While researchers such as Allen (2010a) indicate that some studies conclude that school programs aimed at reducing bullying are effective, other researchers contend that these programs are ineffectual at best, and that the results of two recent meta-analyses indicate that only one-third of the programs evaluated produced positive effects. Although some anti-bullying programs appear to be failures and can even backfire, leading to an increase in the problem, researchers such as Allen (2010a) indicate that programs having at least a marginal success rate include the following directives: (1) provide parents, staff, and students with education/training and awareness; (2) create a committee to oversee the program; (3) provide clear rules prohibiting bullying and well-disseminated policies; (4) assess needs and measure change through the use of anonymous surveys; and (5) provide support for victims and consequences for bullies.

Novick and Isaacs (2010) discuss the success-versus-failure ratios of school-based bully intervention programs and state that a critical component in decreasing the frequency and intensity of bullying is to educate all members of the community so that bystanders, whether they are adults or peers, become involved. They indicate that students often do not report incidents of bullying to teachers, which can exacerbate a school’s bullying problem, since peer victimization occurs most frequently when there is a lack of adult supervision. Hesitant student involvement has several causes; students often fear that teachers will reveal their identity, which could result in retaliation, or that their report of harassment will be dismissed out-of-hand—both claims can, and do, happen much too often.

Allen (2010b) suggests the use of a reporting form, offering anonymity for students, and Novick and Isaacs (2010) emphasize the need for teachers to create an environment where reporting feels safe and to advise students about the ramifications of not coming forward when there is a problem.

**A Successful Intervention Prevention Program**

While many bullying intervention programs have been reported as failures, or as having only marginal success, some have been quite successful. An example is the Olweus Bullying Prevention Program, currently being used in over 6,000 schools nationwide.

Olweus reports that, in the state of Virginia alone, the following changes took place with the use of their program: (1) a 63 percent decrease in the frequency of children being bullied, (2) a 75 percent decrease in children bullying others, (3) a 31 percent increase in the amount of time that teachers spoke to students about bullying behaviors, and (4) an 81 percent increase in teachers actively trying to prevent bullying in the classroom.

Virginia schools using the program also reported a growth in academic achievement, including an increase in standardized test scores in English, math, science, and history, when they implemented the complete program.

**Help for Teachers**

The Olweus plan provides specific guidelines for teachers in the classroom:

- Establish with students rules and sanctions related to bullying.
- Create an environment encouraging warmth and respect.
- Establish yourself as an authority with responsibility for making the school experience safe.
- Provide students with positive reinforcement for good behavior.
- Respond quickly when bullying occurs and consistently use nonhostile negative consequences for instigators when it happens.
- Listen to parent and student reports involving bullying in your classroom.
- If a bullying incident occurs, notify parents of all involved students and resolve the conflict expeditiously.
- If necessary, refer victims to school counseling.
- Provide opportunities for class discussions during which students can talk about bullying.
- Involve parents in cases involving bullying and provide them with information.

For complete information, including videos, educators can visit the Olweus website at: http://www.olweus.org.

**Conclusion**

Effective anti-bullying programs require intervention by teachers, administrators, and other members of
the school staff. If educators do not intervene, bullies will perceive that lack of action as a license for continued bullying behaviors. It is vitally important to provide professional-development opportunities to enhance teacher skills in dealing with bullying because well-trained teachers will be more likely to intervene in troubling situations when they encounter them.

Intervention should include regular classroom discussions to educate students on the topic, and is a critical component of a good program because peer victimization is more likely to occur in unsupervised situations. Peer “bystanders” need to become engaged by receiving instruction on how, and when, to involve adults.

Bullying can lead to devastating consequences including shootings, suicide, abnormal childhood and adolescent development, poor academic performance, and absenteeism. Although research is mixed on anti-bullying programs, those that work seem to utilize a whole-school approach involving students, parents, faculty, and staff (Allen 2010a). Understanding the process of bullying, the characteristics of bullies and victims, and the appropriate and effective ways to intervene can be the difference between an effective and a poor intervention program. Since today’s society is more diverse than ever before, and victims are usually perceived as different from the larger peer group, Graham (2010) recommends the use of “teachable moments” to emphasize the importance of appreciating individuals who are different. A teacher, for example, can start a discussion with students about how devastating repeated acts of aggression can be toward a student when she or he witnesses such acts. This strategy, along with an emphasis on education, rather than punishment, could lead to a better environment in American schools.

REFERENCES


Holladay, J. 2011. Cyberbullying: The stakes have never been higher for students—or schools. Education Digest 76(5): 4–9.


