

Pennsylvania Takes a Stand Against Bullying

Contributed by Jane Riese, MSW, LSW

No longer a "kids will be kids" phenomenon, school officials across Pennsylvania and the United States are standing up to the school bully. And this is good news to those of us who are interested in child welfare. Finally, we as a society have begun to recognize bullying as genuine abuse, not so very different from domestic violence. The child who is targeted may walk into the school building each morning, not wondering whether bullying will take place, but when.

Bullied students may carry that anxious knot-in-the-stomach, walking-on-eggshells sense that harm may come at any time. And school social justice proponents are now saying, "Enough!"

Bullying, defined by Dr. Dan Olweus, the grandfather of the movement, occurs when a student is being mistreated intentionally by one or more peers, in either overt or indirect ways. These mean behaviors are usually repeated over a period of time, and there is a power differential between the bullied child and the student who's committing the offenses.

Bullying is prevalent in our schools. It is estimated that about 20% of students are involved in bully/victim problems, although it is not always easy for the well-meaning teacher or hall monitor to detect. Students most often wait for opportunities to abuse their peers when adults are either absent or preoccupied. Or, the aggressive behaviors are more subtle, such as passing nasty notes, shooting glaring glances across the classroom, or spreading rumors online. Students may become accustomed to a climate of rudeness and antagonism, often expecting their peers to be disrespectful. And what's worse is that the students who bully may be cheered on by the observers as they perform their negative acts against others. In an attempt to believe that they're immune to being next, many kids feel that victims are "asking for it." Realistically, is there something schools can do to bring about change?

There is. But experts insist that the quick-fix approach won't work. There isn't a magic eight- or ten-session curriculum that will systematically change students' behavior and the school climate. What has been proven effective is a comprehensive school-wide approach aimed at slowly and steadily changing staff and student attitudes, so that children no longer gain power and status among their peer group for bullying others.

The Olweus Bullying Prevention Program was designed by Professor Dan Olweus of the University of Bergen in Norway in the early 1980s to reduce and prevent bully/victim problems at elementary, middle, and junior high schools. This research-based "Blueprint for Violence Prevention" program was selected by the University of Colorado as one of the top ten violence prevention programs in the nation. In addition to building intervention skills in the adults in a school setting, an important goal of Olweus's model is to build a sense of community among students and staff. This increases the opportunity to enhance positive connections among everyone at school, thus shifting the school climate toward respect and consideration and away from student-to-student abuse. The program is designed for students in kindergarten through eighth grade and has been successfully implemented in a number of countries, including Norway, the United States, Canada, Germany, and the United Kingdom.

The Olweus model is not a curriculum; rather, it is a school-wide program with interventions at several levels: School-wide level includes administering a survey to all students, forming a Bullying Prevention Coordinating Committee, training all staff (teachers, bus drivers, and all support staff), developing school-wide rules against bullying, involving parents and implementing a coordinated system of supervision.

Classroom level includes training teachers in the facilitation of class (circle) meetings for community building, training teachers and students in effective interventions in bully/victim incidents, encouraging a positive school climate and meetings with parents.

Individual level includes meeting with children who bully, children who are being bullied, and those who are onlookers.

The Olweus Bullying Prevention Program has been found to be effective in these areas:

Significant reduction in the rate at which students report being bullied and bullying others.

Reduction in students' reports of other antisocial behaviors, such as vandalism, fighting, theft, and truancy.

Significant improvement in the "social climate" of the class and the school.

In 1999, Family-Child Resources became the first organization to receive a grant from the Pennsylvania Commission on Crime and Delinquency to implement the Olweus program in several schools in York County. Pennsylvania then played a key role in program expansion by hosting a first-in-the-nation Training of Trainers for the Olweus Bullying Prevention Program. Dr. Olweus and Dr. Susan Limber, American Blueprint co-author from Clemson University, along with four other nationally known expert trainers, came together in December 2001 to train 30 people from across the Commonwealth to become certified trainers who would aid Pennsylvania schools in program implementation. This effort was supported by the Governor's Community Partnership for Safe Children, the Pennsylvania Department of Education, and the Center for Safe Schools. Since then, numerous other national Trainings of Trainers have been held throughout the United States.

Interest in this topic is far reaching in the U.S., as evidenced by the multitudes of books, curricula, magazine and newspaper articles published in the past few years. Nearly 30 states have recently adopted anti-bullying legislation, with Pennsylvania's anti-bullying legislation pending. The Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA), part of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, launched the second tier of its National Bullying Public Awareness and Prevention Campaign geared toward "twens," or kids between the ages of 9 and 13. And interest goes beyond the school house; residential settings and community groups are seeking information, as are workplaces. Unfortunately, the "bully" exists in every age-group.

It's time we pay attention to the deep hurts of those children who are victimized, to the needs of the kids who abuse others to gain attention or power, and to the vast majority of students in schools, neither victimized nor bullying,

who stand on the sidelines, deciding how to react as they witness these offenses; deciding how school life ought to be. And for those of us who were once bullied ourselves, or who are parents or professionals concerned about the well-being of young people in today's challenging world, we move with determination toward social justice in schools, where all children should feel included, welcome, happy, and safe.

For more information regarding the Olweus Bullying Prevention Program, please contact Family-Child Resources at (717) 757-1227.

Source

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

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