Bully Free Classrooms

What is Bullying?

Bullying can include any behaviors initiated by one or more students against a victim that are deliberate and hurtful, and are repeated over time. Children may be bullied physically, emotionally or verbally or with a combination of these. Bullying may be seen as direct behaviors such as teasing, taunting, threatening, hitting or kicking, stealing or damaging things, calling names, picking on children, making them do things that they don't want to do, etc.

It can also include indirect behaviors that cause a child to feel socially isolated. Examples of this type of bullying could be leaving the student out of activities, spreading rumors, making him/her feel uncomfortable or scared, telling nasty stories, not allowing the person to speak to other children or be spoken to, etc. This is also called relational aggression, which is primarily, but not exclusively associated with girls' bullying strategies.

The key components of bullying are that it is unprovoked and that the physical or psychological intimidation occurs repeatedly over time and creates an ongoing pattern of harassment or abuse. The bully is often physically stronger than the victim, or is perceived as such, so that it is difficult for the victim to defend him or herself and there is often an imbalance of power.

Identifying Bullies & Victims

The following lists were taken from Dan Olweus' (1993) book, Bullying at School, which is an informative and accessible book that we highly recommend to teachers.

Possible signs of being a bully (Olweus, 1993)

- May tease (repeatedly) in nasty ways, taunt, intimidate, threaten, ridicule, hit, and damage belongings of other students; this may be displayed toward many children, but typically they select in particular weaker and relatively defenseless students as their targets. Also, many bullies induce some of their followers to do the "dirty work" while they themselves keep in the background
- May be physically stronger than their classmates and their victims in particular; may be the same age as or somewhat older than their victims; are physically effective in play activities, sports, and fights (applies particularly to boys)
- May have strong needs to dominate and subdue other students, to assert themselves with power and threat, and to get their own way; they may brag about their actual or imagined superiority.
- May be hot tempered, easily angered, impulsive, and have low frustration

tolerance; they have difficulty conforming to rules and tolerating adversities and delays, and may try to gain advantage by cheating

- May be generally oppositional, defiant, and aggressive toward adults, and may be frightening to adults (depending on the age and physical strength of the young person); are generally good at "talking themselves out of" difficult situations.
- May be seen as being tough, hardened, and may show little empathy with students who are victimized
- Are often not anxious or insecure and they typically have a relatively positive view of themselves (average or better than average self esteem)
- May engage in other antisocial behaviors at a relatively early age
- May be average, above or below average in popularity, but often have support from at least a small number of peers; in junior high, bullies are likely to be less popular than in primary school
- May show normal academic development in elementary school, but may show academic decline in junior high as attitude becomes more and more negative

Possible primary signs of being a victim (Olweus, 1993)

- May be repeatedly teased in a nasty way, called names, ridiculed, intimidated, subdued
- May be made fun of and laughed at in a derisive way
- May be picked on, pushed around, punched, and cannot defend themselves adequately
- May have quarrels or fights from which they try to withdraw (frequently crying)
- May have their books, money, or other belongings taken, damaged, or scattered around
- May have bruises, injuries, cuts, scratches, or torn clothing that cannot be given a natural explanation

Possible secondary signs of being a victim (Olweus, 1993)

- May often be alone and excluded from the peer group during breaks, do not seem to have a single good friend in the class
- May be chosen among the last in team games
- May try to stay close to the teacher or other adults during breaks
- May have difficulty speaking up in class and give an anxious and insecure impression
- May appear distressed, unhappy, depressed and tearful
- May show sudden or gradual deterioration of school work

Possible signs of being a provocative victim (Olweus, 1993)

- May be hot-tempered and attempt to fight or answer back when attacked or insulted, but usually not very effectively
- May be hyperactive, restless, un-concentrated, and generally offensive and tension-creating; may be clumsy and immature with irritating habits
- May be actively disliked also by adults, including the teacher
- May themselves try to bully weaker students

How does the Bully/Victim Relationship Emerge?

Perhaps one of the most important things for teachers to remember is that bullies and victims do not necessarily enter the classroom with the destiny of becoming a bully or victim. Once the bully/victim relationship is set in place, however, it is hard to change. The two children may enter into complementary roles, in that the bully and victim react almost simultaneously to what each other are doing. Often, these complementary actions can create positive feedback that helps to maintain the relationship. As time goes on, this interaction becomes more and more stable and harder to stop, especially if it is encouraged and supported by peers, a lack of empathy for the victim, and a lack of intervention on behalf of the teacher and/or school. The entire classroom is in fact a part of the bullying dynamic: the children who gather to encourage the bully, the children who stand on the sidelines as passive bystanders, the children who run away the minute they see a confrontation, all tend to repeat these role over time. Everybody eventually "knows" their position in the pattern. Teachers and administrators can alter the dynamic by taking a united stand against bullying behaviors, realizing that it can be a problem in any school, and that it is not just a "part of growing up," and by making sure that the entire class knows what to do if they witness the emergence of a bully/victim relationship.

It is easiest for teachers to prevent bullying when they know the warning signs, but sometimes it is hard to see the dynamic in action. The bully may assume a certain posture and stand by the victim's locker. Only the victim knows that this means: "give me your lunch money-or else!" Often the interactions occur far too quickly or are too subtle for a teacher who is preoccupied with twenty-eight other students to notice. Thus, considering the growing populations in our schools, it is important for the administration to make sure that its classrooms are adequately staffed with teachers and aides who understand the "symptoms" of the bully/victim relationship. Also, at times, bullying behavior appears simply because children do not understand the full impact of their actions, and so it is important to make sure that kids know the rules at the beginning of the year. A successful preventative measure is to clearly explain the different kinds of bullying behavior and state that it will not be tolerated in this classroom. It is also important to tell children what to do if they are being bullied, if they see other children being bullied, or if they realize that they are bullying others: As every group of children is different, each teacher knows what

procedure might be best for each class. It helps if teachers explain how "telling teachers about something important that they should know" is not always the same as "tattling." It is critical for teachers to be open and sensitive to the needs of potential victims. Remember, a school that takes a firm and unified stand against this behavior is far more likely to prevent it!

Who Becomes a Bully? Who Becomes a Victim?

It is important to remember that no child is predestined to be a bully, nor is any child predestined to be a victim. Some children will most likely always be more shy and reserved; others will always have more difficulty empathizing with others and crave control. However, this does not mean that they always have to become bullies and victims. It is when these aspects such as temperament, personal variables and behavior modeled for the children combine with other factors such as lack of school policy against bullying, or a teacher who looks the other way, that the bullying behavior may surface. Only if conditions are absolutely right, and all of these potentials come together will the relationship emerge. Certain temperamental traits that may have been reinforced in the home--such as aggression--do increase the likelihood that a child might assume the role of a bully in the right circumstances. That is not to say that all children who bully come from homes in which aggressive behavior exists. Indeed, many children who bully come from homes in which parents are more permissive-who remain rather uninvolved in their children's lives, either out of choice or out of an inability to provide more guidance. Studies have shown that children with aggressive tendencies are less likely to demonstrate empathy, and more likely to attribute their motives to external events. Therefore, they are likely to believe that the victim "brought on" the bullying behavior himself or herself. It is also a myth that aggressors are trying to mask low self-esteem. Often, they are actually trying to maintain what is in fact a rather exaggerated sense of self-importance and entitlement for their peers. Because their behavior is usually socially motivated, aggressive children are more likely to find aggressive playmates who reinforce their behavior, increasing the potential bully's confidence and enabling the pattern to emerge. Sometimes, these peers may even assume the roles of "henchmen," who do the bully's "dirty work" as the bully directs them and looks on.

A victim also may display certain characteristics. Often, victims have not learned certain skills that one must have to stand up for oneself, such as appropriate eye-contact, or a knack for understanding and fending off teasing. Sometimes, children who tend to be victims interpret ambiguous signals as threats, and react with fear and avoidance, making themselves appear to be "easy targets." These children often attribute outcomes to "internal events," i.e. themselves, and the bullying dynamic can be very detrimental to self-esteem. This unhappy self-image, however, is easier to change. These children are likely to respond quite well to a social skills training program that would teach them the requisite skills that they need to survive the playground. There is also a category of "provocative victims," who overtly act in ways that provoke others to interact with them in negative ways. These cases are more complex, and changing this pattern of behavior is often more difficult. Remember, in the end, victims are not to blame for being attacked!

What can be Done?

For teachers, it is important that they do not provide the conditions in which bullies and victims are able to manifest themselves. Easier said than done, right?

Things that they can do

- Create a peer environment that sanctions against, rather than ignores or condones, the kinds of continuing hurtful actions that occur in bully/victim relationships.
- Take into account the fact that many factors help to maintain the bully/victim relationship, therefore the most successful interventions take place simultaneously at the individual, peer, classroom, school and family levels.

Suggestions for all teachers and administrations:

- Develop an anti-bullying school policy
- Consultation between teachers, students, parents and other school personnel
- Backed up by curriculum work and existing policies
- Playground improvements
- Peer support services such as peer counseling.
- Increase adult supervision at key times (lunch, recess, etc.)
- Create a short questionnaire or survey given to students and adults
- Ascertain the level and nature of bully/victim problems in school
- Create awareness of extent of problem
- Discuss at staff meetings and with children and parents
- Raise parental awareness
- Parent-teacher conferences
- Parent newsletters
- PTA meetings

Explore possible SST (social skills training) programs:

- Develop empathy among all children
- Develop anger management skills for bullies
- Effective conflict-resolution skills for bullies
- Assertiveness training for victims In the classroom
- Classroom discussion - agree on classroom rules regarding bullying
- Role play exercises - how to assist victims, etc.
- Give clear message that bullying is not acceptable at school
- Consistently use agreed upon rules and punishments
- Encourage reporting of bullying
- Praise for avoidance of bullying