

## *Bullying: An Overview for Educators*

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*Dear Mr. Douglas,*

*I need to talk to you about the way kids are teasing Jake. They are saying things like, "Don't play with Jake because you will get Jake-germs." Sometimes when Jake chases them on the playground it's because they have been teasing him, but the teachers don't know it. In line between classes, the kids whisper things about him. You can't hear it, but it happens every day. I don't want to get people in trouble, but you have to do something.*

*Jeff*

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*If somebody has trouble with reading and has special education, kids will say, "Everyone is smart except Natalya, who is dumb." Natalya was even crying in the bathroom last week, but the teacher didn't even know about it.*

*---a second-grader*

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Bullying, a hidden but dangerous threat, affects not only the victim and the bully, but also the bystanders, as these student letters reflect. This article takes a look at how educators can stop the hurtful cycle of bullying in schools.

### ***What is bullying? Who are the bullies?***

Bullying can be defined as repeated physical or psychological intimidation that creates, over time, a pattern of abuse and harassment.<sup>i</sup> One anti-bullying group describes three types of bullies:

- *Physical bullies* hurt people and/or property.
- *Verbal bullies* use humiliating, insulting comments. In contrast to physical bullies, they often go undetected.
- *Relational bullies*, often girls, influence their peers to reject or exclude another child.<sup>ii</sup>

Physical bullies as well as their victims are usually males.<sup>iii</sup> Female bullies resort to more "relational" verbal and manipulative tactics. Bullies often come from homes where punishment is physical and parents are emotionally distant or uninvolved. Bullies do tend to view the world as threatening, often misinterpreting others' behavior.<sup>iv</sup> Some bullies seem motivated by sensation seeking, while others seem

reinforced by the reactions of onlookers.<sup>v</sup> It's a myth that bullies suffer from low self-esteem; research does not support this.

### ***What about the victims? Who are they?***

Surprisingly, bullies do not pick on students because they are different (e.g., wearing glasses, overweight). However, victims are generally younger or weaker, leading researchers to cite *imbalance of power* as a key factor in bullying. The bully's intent is to create fear or distress in the victim.<sup>vi</sup>

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***Discussion Question:*** *How are typical childhood teasing and roughhousing different from bullying? When do parents and educators need to draw the line? How does your school discipline code define harassment and intimidation?*

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### ***How prevalent is the problem of bullying?***

A survey of over 15,000 U.S. students found that 30% reported being involved as a bully or victim or both. Thirteen per cent said they were bullies, while 11% identified themselves as victims. About 6% reported being both bullies and victims as both<sup>vii</sup> (National Resource Center for Safe Schools, 2001). Another study reported that 8% are victimized weekly (regrettably, that study found that teachers intervened in only 4% of the cases).<sup>viii</sup> Physical harassment begins in elementary schools, peaks during the middle school period, and seems to decline through high school. However, verbal harassment remains constant through the upper grades.

### ***How serious is the problem?***

Studies have indicated that 7% of American eighth-graders miss school monthly to avoid being hurt or harassed.<sup>ix</sup> Victims often suffer lifetime consequences (e.g., depression, low self-esteem).<sup>x</sup> News reports have depicted victims who went on to injure or kill their aggressors.

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*I can still remember the year I was "the victim." They put a dead animal in my locker, but I didn't tell anyone. I figured it would only get worse if I told my parents. I still have nightmares about it.*

*---Amanda, a graduate student*

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Bullies as well as their victims suffer the consequences. As many as 60% of bullies may grow up to have a criminal record.<sup>xi</sup> Unfortunately, parents and teachers may not be aware of the problem, or may underestimate its effects. Student surveys indicate that

youth do not believe that adults will help. This brings us to the first step in “bully-proofing” your school: assessment.

***How do you know if bullying is a problem?***

The first step in prevention is to ask students. There are several ways to assess bullying. One effective approach is to survey students (even anonymously) by asking them to respond to the following question: “Is there any place on the way to school, at school, or on the way home from school where you do not feel comfortable and safe?” A further step is to ask students personally or through an essay to offer suggestions about what would make their school a safer place. Many schools have found a silent complaint procedure helpful. Provide students, employees, and parents with silent complaint forms to complete whenever they have a safety concern. [The forms are called “silent” because they do not have to be signed.]

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***Discussion Questions:*** *How do students in your school alert you to unsafe situations? Do you rely merely on adult information? How can you conduct ongoing safety assessments, making them part of the normal school routine? What would you do for younger students?*

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***What do you tell teachers and parents?***

Parents and teachers may question why a school needs bully prevention strategies. To increase awareness, you might show the excellent video, *Set Straight on Bullies*.

Remind teachers and parents that all of us—especially children—are entitled to work and go to school in an environment that is free of fear and intimidation. Adults have a responsibility to protect all students in their care. To protect students, adults must first be aware of the problem situations identified by students. Secondly, adults must endorse and enforce zero tolerance for harassment. Thirdly, adults must be accessible and trustworthy when students approach them with problems or with suggestions. Finally, adults must be willing to share the responsibility for a safe school by supervising all areas of the building and following through on commitments made to students.

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*I used to downplay the problem. Then a police officer said to me, “If an adult did to you what these kids just did to their classmate, you could file assault charges. Just because they are kids in a school does not change the fact that this is a crime.” That really made me think.*  
---Jack, a vice-principal

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### ***What do you tell students?***

The important messages are these:

- We intend to run a safe school where everyone is free to learn without threats, aggression, or intimidation. We will not tolerate physical or verbal harassment.
- Every student has a right to a safe school. Adults do not put up with harassment in their jobs, and you do not have to tolerate it in school.
- If you do not feel safe, we are here to help you. You do not have to deal with a bully by yourself.
- It is okay to let an adult know what is bothering you. If you are concerned because of what is happening to another student, you need to let us know. You will not be laughed at or made to feel bad if you seek adult assistance.
- You are an important part of our safe school. We value your suggestions and we will listen when you offer them. After all, you know this school in ways that we adults do not.

### ***Summary***

Successful prevention programs have relied on these five components:

- Staff development on bullying and its consequences
- Family awareness activities, including policies and an overview of what students and parents can do if they suspect bullying
- Assessment of unsafe and potentially unsafe situations
- Enforcement of a strict policy against harassment and intimidation
- Ongoing review of student and adult perceptions of how to improve the safety of the school.

We hope that this overview provides you with some steps to take in keeping your school safe for all students. For more information, check out the resources and endnotes that follow.

### ***Additional Resources***

Barton, E. A. (2003). *Bully Prevention: Tips and Strategies for School Leaders and Classroom Teachers*. Illinois.

*This book is designed to assist school administrators and teachers in developing, implementing and evaluating anti-bullying programs.*

Garrity, C., Jens, K., Porter, W., Sager, N., & Short-Camilli, C. (1994). *Bully-proofing your school: A comprehensive approach for elementary schools*. Longmont, CO: Sopris West.

*This program has been proven effective in reducing bullying in schools. Includes training materials and handouts.*

Greenbaum, S, Turner, B., & Stevens, R. (1989). *Set straight on bullies*. Malibu, CA: National School Safety Center.

*Handbook and Emmy Award-winning 18-minute videotape. Available from: <http://www.nssc1.org>.*

Kass, D., Evans, P., & Shah, R. (2003). *Bullying prevention is crime prevention. A report by Fight Crime: Invest in Kids.*

Lumsden, L. (2002). Preventing Bullying. ERIC Digest. Oregon, ERIC Clearinghouse on Educational Management, Eugene, OR. Office of Educational Research and Improvement (ED), Washington, DC.

*This digest studies the problem of bullying and its effects on victims.*

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

*Olweus is considered the leading researcher on bullying.*

<http://www.scre.ac.uk/bully/whatisbul.html>

*The Scottish Council for Research in Education (1992) has an informative website with good information for students, parents, and schools.*

Vail, K. (2002). How Girls Hurt. *American School Board Journal* 189(8): 14-18.

*Discusses bullying involving adolescent females, including those deemed "popular"*

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<sup>i</sup> Batche, G.M. & Knoff, H.M. (1994) Bullies and their victims: Understanding a pervasive problem in the schools. *School Psychology Review*, 23 (2), 165-174.

<sup>ii</sup> Bully B'Ware Productions. (1999) More information on bullying. <http://www.bullybeware.com> or call 1-888-552-8559

<sup>iii</sup> Banks, R. (2000). Bullying in schools. *ERIC Review*, 7(1), 12-14. Champaign, IL: ERIC Clearinghouse on Elementary and Early Childhood Education.

<sup>iv</sup> National School Safety Center (1993) School bullying and victimization: NCSS Resource Paper. Malibu, CA: Pepperdine University.

<sup>v</sup> Interview with Dr. Joseph M. Strayhorn, M.D. by Aisha White, Ph.D. Retrieved August 2, 2005, from [http://www.heartwoodethics.org/4-research/newsletters/fromtheheart\\_200501.asp](http://www.heartwoodethics.org/4-research/newsletters/fromtheheart_200501.asp)

<sup>vi</sup> National School Safety Center (1993) School bullying and victimization: NCSS Resource Paper. Malibu, CA: Pepperdine University.

<sup>vii</sup> National Resource Center for Safe Schools (1999). Recognizing and preventing bullying (Fact Sheet No. 4), Portland OR: northwest Regional Educational Laboratory. Retrieved November 19, 2001 from [http://www.safetyzone.org/publications/fact4\\_index.html](http://www.safetyzone.org/publications/fact4_index.html)

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<sup>viii</sup> Skiba, R., & Fontanini, A. (2000). Fast facts: Bullying prevention. Bloomington, IN: Phi Delta Kappa International. Retrieved November 19, 2001

<sup>ix</sup>Banks, R. (2000). Bullying in schools. *ERIC Review*, 7(1), 12-14. Champaign, IL: ERIC Clearinghouse on Elementary and Early Childhood Education.

<sup>x</sup> Interview with Dr. Joseph M. Strayhorn M.D. by Aisha White, Ph.D. Retrieved August 2, 2005, from [http://www.heartwoodethics.org/4-research/newsletters/fromtheheart\\_200501.asp](http://www.heartwoodethics.org/4-research/newsletters/fromtheheart_200501.asp)

<sup>xi</sup> Batche, G.M. & Knoff, H.M. (1994) Bullies and their victims: Understanding a pervasive problem in the schools. *School Psychology Review*, 23 (2), 165-174.