

Bullying Prevention & Intervention

Tiers 1, 2 & 3

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The negative psychological and physical repercussions of bullying are extensive. Bullying is associated with school absences (Smith, Talamelli, Cowie, Naylor, & Chauhan, 2004); poor academic performance (Smokowski & Kopasz, 2005); mental health pathology such as depression, anxiety, and suicidality (Swearer, Grills, Haye, & Cary, 2004); physical health issues (Rigby, 1999; Srabstein, McCarter, Shao, & Huang, 2006; Van Cleave & Davis, 2006); delinquency and criminal behavior (Baldry & Farrington, 2000); and other forms of aggression such as dating violence (Espelage & Holt, 2007; Wolfe, Crooks, Chiodo, & Jaffe, 2009). As a result school prevention and intervention procedures have been enacted to terminate these interactions. Researchers have indicated that bully-victims (i.e., students who are victimized and who also perpetrate bullying) are the most psychologically impaired group (Nansel et al., 2001; Swearer, Song, Cary, Eagle, & Mickelson, 2001). Although prevalence rates vary from school to school, results of a large-scale study indicate that students' involvement in bullying (combining bullies, victims, bully-victims, and bystanders) was approximately 75% (Josephson Institute, 2010). While bullying poses a huge public health concern, it is less visible and identifiable than many other problematic behaviors.

What is Bullying?

Olweus (1993) defines bullying as a subset of aggression that is characterized by 1) purposeful actions (i.e., intention to harm); 2) repetition (i.e., the behaviors occur frequently); and 3) a power imbalance (i.e., the victim is unable to defend him/herself). That is, bullying is the repeated and aggressive use of power. This definition differentiates bullying from other forms of aggression and harassment. Bullying can take physical, verbal, and relational. Bullying behaviors may include pushing, shoving, kicking, spreading rumors, excluding individuals from a group, threatening, name-calling, and "ganging up" on others (Swearer, 2001). Additionally, bullying can occur electronically via social media or various other means of communication. As with other forms of bullying, cyberbullying should be discussed at the school-wide and district level, so that it can be included in overall school bullying plans and procedures.

Roles in Bullying

Students involved in bullying play a variety of roles, including perpetrators, victims, bully-victims (i.e., individuals who both perpetrate bullying and are victimized themselves), bystanders (i.e., individuals who observe bullying), and uninvolved youth (i.e., individuals who report little



or no involvement in bullying). Importantly, these roles should be considered dynamic: students tend to move in and out of roles over time and across situations. A student who engages in bullying in one situation may be victimized in another, or a student who is uninvolved in bullying in elementary school may find him or herself heavily involved in bullying in high school.

Developing Policies to Address Bullying

Currently, most states have laws mandating that schools develop policies to address bullying. Schools should refer to the requirements of their state laws and regulations, as well as available model policies when forming their own (Swearer, Espelage, & Napolitano, 2009). Srabstein and colleagues (2008) created a set of requirements that must be included in bullying policies. Policies must address and include the following areas:

- Legal definition of bullying
- Prohibition of bullying
- Recognition that bullying presents a public health threat
- Call for programs that prevent and intervene in bullying (in some cases, funding is provided to establish these programs)

Other components of these policies include clearly outlined procedures for investigating the incidents (Russlynn, 2010), reporting bullying incidents, delivering disciplinary actions, and providing assistance for victims, such as mental health services (Swearer et al., 2009). Comprehensive anti-bullying policies must include more strategies than merely identifying and punishing perpetrators, because relying on punishment alone is unlikely to result in a reduction in bullying.

Distinguishing Bullying and Harassment

Russlynn (2010) argues that it is important to consider the distinction between anti-harassment policies, which are determined by the Office for Civil Rights (OCR), and anti-bullying policies. It is crucial that educators follow the procedures delineated in the discriminatory harassment policies. Although many bullying behaviors may fall under these policies, educators often need to respond differently to harassment than they would to bullying. Harassment involves discriminatory behaviors that are directly related to race, national origin, disability, or gender. In contrast, anti-bullying policies can go beyond these four to include other personal characteristics. While harassment can cause an overall hostile school environment and interfere with students' abilities to benefit from educational services and/or participate in activities, it does not necessarily include the components associated with bullying (i.e., intent to harm, contact with a specific individual or group, and repetition).



Establishing the Prevalence of Bullying in a School

Although various prevalence estimates appear in the research literature, a seminal study suggests that roughly 30% of adolescents in grades 6 through 10 in the U.S. report involvement in bullying experiences as the bully, the victim, or both. In particular, in a large representative sample of adolescents, 13% of students reported being a bully, 11% reported being a victim of bullying, and 6% reported being both a bully and a victim (Nansel et al., 2001). Larger prevalence rates may appear when studies include prevalence rates for youth involved as bystanders. More recent investigations have found similar prevalence rates for bullying victimization ranging from roughly 20% to 28% of adolescents reporting victimization (Finkelhor,

Ormrod, Turner, & Hamby, 2005; Robers, Zhang, Truman, & Snyder, 2010). Among students who self-identify as victims of bullying behaviors, students in special education report higher rates of physical bullying, as well as higher rates of verbal, relational, and physical bullying from teachers and staff than students not involved in special education (Hartley, Bauman, Nixon, & Davis, 2015).

It is important to note that each study published on the prevalence of bullying likely uses different methodologies (e.g., type of bullying assessed, item wording, time frame that the bullying occurred) which influences prevalence estimates, limiting the degree to which we can assume our own bullying prevalence rates mirror those reported in large scale studies. To educators this concern, schools can use a comprehensive bully survey that can be administered to students, staff, and parents to obtain a current estimate of the prevalence rates of bullying at that school, to determine what type of bullying (e.g., physical, verbal, relational, cyber) is most commonly occurring, and where these behaviors are happening most frequently. This specific information can be useful in tailoring interventions for specific school settings and populations. It is also critical to do a follow-up assessment following the implementation of any school-wide, small group, or individualized interventions. The “Resources” section of this brief includes a comprehensive bullying assessment compendium published by the Centers for Disease Control in 2011.



Selecting Programming to Address Bullying

Programs that are designed to reduce bullying are most effective when bullying is addressed from both a prevention and intervention standpoint. In other words, programs produce the best results when schools incorporate three tiers of increasingly intensive intervention (Espelage & Swearer, 2008). At the tier-one level, considerable attention should be paid to strategies to prevent the likelihood that bullying would occur (i.e., building a positive caring

climate; providing ways to effectively report bullying; increasing communication; developing positive school values; etc.). Characteristics of schools that have low levels of bullying include a positive school climate in which students are engaged in activities and where adults respond effectively to bullying (Espelage & Swearer, 2008). In Ttofi, Farrington, and Baldry's (2008) cross-study analysis of effective programs, common elements included:

- Parent training
- Increased playground supervision
- Non-punitive disciplinary methods
- Home-school communication
- Effective classroom rules
- Effective classroom management
- Use of training videos

Additionally, teachers should establish warm relationships with students and parents should be aware of their children's peer relationships. Students must also be trained to understand bullying when they see or experience it and know what they can do to report, and how to intervene. The three-tiered framework of Positive Behavior Intervention and Supports also provides a vehicle to prevent bullying behaviors and to address problems when they do appear.

In secondary prevention (i.e., efforts to intervene early when bullying occurs), it is crucial that educators develop a confidential reporting system for students, and that reported incidents are followed-up with consistently. Students who are victims or observers should have clear ways to

report bullying. In secondary prevention, it is also crucial that all school personnel and staff (e.g., bus drivers, pre-service teachers, and cafeteria workers) are trained to understand the seriousness of bullying, and to report it consistently and quickly when observed or reported by students (Espelage & Swearer, 2008). Home-school communication is also vital to ensure that adults in both settings collaborate to improve the educational and behavioral outcomes for students. When bullying is reported, it is also critical that there is a plan for adults to intervene quickly and provide counseling, training and other supports to victims, as well as therapy and consequences, when necessary, for students who engage in bullying.



Obtaining Data About Bullying

Bullying manifests itself differently in different schools. For example, in some schools, physical bullying is common, while in others, verbal or relational bullying is common. Because these differences from school to school are common, no single prevention or intervention plan can be expected to work in every school (Swearer, Espelage, Vaillancourt, & Hymel, 2010). Data such as office referrals, incidence reports, case studies, focus groups, and survey methodology that take into account the perceptions of students, parents,

and staff are important to gather (Swearer, Espelage, & Napolitano, 2009). Schools should collect data and use those data to determine and prioritize prevention and intervention strategies (Swearer et al., 2010).

Regardless of whether schools administer school-wide surveys or use them to target specific populations, schools may create their own measure or use an existing one (Brown & Demaray, n.d.). However, self-report data may not be valid or sufficient indices of behavior change as these interventions are implemented (Swearer et al., 2010), so it may be advantageous to supplement this information with disciplinary referrals or incidence reports to paint an even clearer picture of the bullying issues (Brown & Demaray, n.d.). Schools should avoid failing to consider larger scale factors (e.g., community influences), so other influential demographic variables such as race, gender, and disability status should also be included in data collection efforts (Swearer et al., 2010). Utilizing questionnaires has a side benefit of raising awareness of the issue, which is a part of best practice at the school-level for change prior to implementation of an intervention or school-wide program (Whitted & Dupper, 2005). Data collection should continue even after an intervention or program has begun. Monitoring outcome data provides information on effectiveness and fidelity as well as guide decisions on any changes that must be made (Stevens, de Bourdeaudhuij, & Van Oost, 2001).

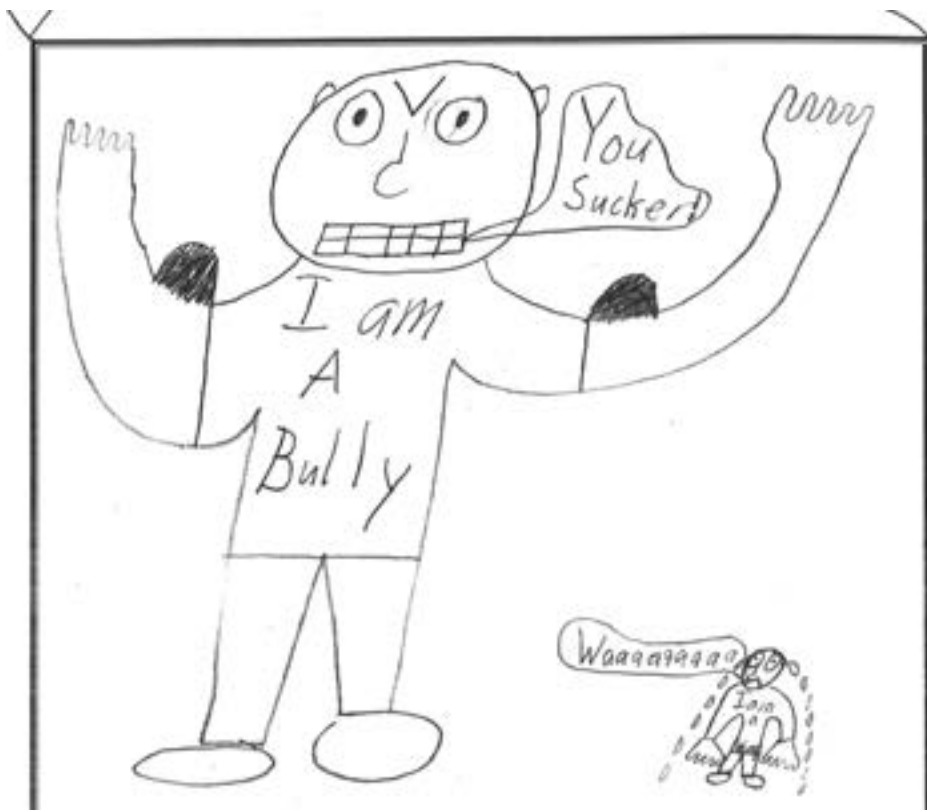
Example of Using Site-Specific Data to Make Choices

Collecting local bullying data can help educators make simple changes to reduce bullying that do not necessarily require the full-fledged implementation of a complete intervention program. For instance, in one Midwestern middle school, survey data were used to guide decisions that drastically reduced the frequency of bullying. Specifically, student self-report data were collected using the Bully Survey-Student Version (Swearer, 2001), and among other variables, students were asked questions pertaining to which students were typically involved in bullying, types of bullying, frequency, settings in which the bullying occurred, and reasons for why students bullied from the perspectives of a victim, bully, and bystander. Responses from the surveys indicated that bullying commonly occurred in the hallway. To address this problem, school administrators decided to shorten the students' passing time so they had three minutes to get to class instead of seven. Due to the time constraint and limited opportunities for students to linger and bully their peers, lev-

els of bullying decreased. However, this intervention would be ineffective in a school in which bullying does not frequently occur in the hallway. This example illustrates just one of many ways schools can use their own bullying data to guide intervention decisions.

What Do We Know About Bullying Prevention?

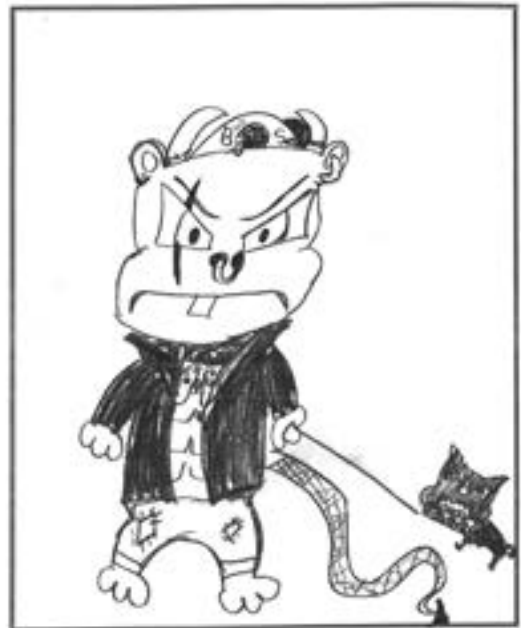
Dozens of anti-bullying programs have been created and marketed in the past few decades; however, only a select few are empirically supported as effective



at reducing bullying. A separate program brief, entitled “Examples of Bullying Prevention and Intervention Programs,” has been compiled to assist schools in identifying evidence-based bullying prevention and intervention programs to guide schools in selected programs that best fit their needs. It is important to note that some of these interventions focus on students who are victimized, while some focus predominantly on students who bully. Other programs take into account factors such as school violence and/or target the climate of the school as a whole (Smokowski & Kopasz, 2005). When choosing an intervention, schools should consider the unique components and targeted skills of each instead of adopting a “one size fits all” approach.

Conclusion

Given the detrimental impact bullying has on students who are involved in these interactions, regardless of whether they are a bully, victim, bully-victim, or bystander, it is reassuring that many school policies and school-wide intervention programs which are evidence-based have surfaced to address this issue. However, schools must not



Student Draw-a-Bully drawings in this document are courtesy of Susan Swearer’s *Empowerment Initiative*. <http://empowerment.unl.edu/>.

endorse a “one size fits all” approach. Instead, the best intervention efforts are guided by local data that can best inform schools of specific factors (e.g., settings, forms of bullying) that warrant intervention and are realistically aligned with the resources that are available to the school.



Resources on Bullying Prevention and Intervention

See *Examples of Bullying Prevention and Intervention Programs* resource brief for further information about specific examples of well-known and evidence based bullying prevention and intervention programs. *Interventions for Bullying Behaviors* strategy brief focuses generally on programs which intervene with bullies and victims, and *The Target Bullying Intervention Program* program brief focuses on one specific bully intervention, the Target Bullying Intervention Program.

All of these are available at: <http://k12engagement.unl.edu>.

Federal “Dear Colleagues Letters”

These letters provide guidance to educators related to issues of bullying.

July 25, 2000

The U.S. Department of Education Office of Civil Rights (OCR) and Office of Special Education and Rehabilitation (OSERS) wrote this “Dear Colleagues Letter” to provide an overview of existing legal and educational principles related to school students who are harassed based on

a disability. This letter increases awareness of this issue and serves as a reminder of the educational and legal responsibilities that institutions have to protect students by preventing this and responding accordingly to disability harassment.

<http://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocr/docs/disabharassltr.html>.

October 26, 2010

The U.S. Department of Education Office of the Assistant Secretary for Civil Rights (OCR) wrote this “Dear Colleagues Letter” to offer support for state departments of education and local school districts movements to adopt anti-bullying policies to reduce bullying in schools. This letter offers a reminder that some student misconduct that falls under an institution’s anti-bullying policy may also fall under federal antidiscrimination laws, enforceable by the Department’s Office for Civil Rights (OCR). This letter discusses the possibility that schools may limit the response to student misconduct an application of its anti-bullying disciplinary policy, thus failing to properly consider if the situation should also results in discriminatory harassment.

<http://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocr/letters/colleague-201010.html>.

October 21, 2014

This U.S. Department of Education letter explains that the bullying of a student with a disability can result in a denial of FAPE under Section 504 that must be remedied; it also reiterates schools’ obligations to address conduct that may constitute a disability based harassment violation and explains that a school must also remedy the denial of FAPE resulting from disability-based harassment. Following an overview of the federal protections for students with disabilities in schools, the guidance elaborates on the elements of a disability-based harassment violation and a FAPE violation, discusses how OCR generally analyzes complaints involving bullying of students with disabilities on each of these bases, and then concludes with a series of hypothetical examples.

<http://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocr/letters/colleague-bullying-201410.pdf>.

August 20, 2013

The U.S. Department of Education Office of Special Education and Rehabilitation Services (OSERS) wrote this “Dear Colleagues Letter” to provide information to school districts of their responsibilities in addressing bullying of students with disabilities under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). This letter include strategies that schools can use can implement to prevent and respond to bullying, as well as additional information and resources on this topic.

<https://www2.ed.gov/policy/speced/guid/idea/memosdcltrs/bullyingdcl-8-20-13.pdf>

August 20, 2013

The U.S. Department of Education’s (OSERS) attached document offers evidence-based practices schools can use to effectively prevent and address bullying. It is recommended that these strategies be embedded within a comprehensive behavioral framework that establishes a positive school environment that sets high student expectations and delivers evidence-based

instruction and interventions to address student needs. This document provides information of evidence-based practices schools can use to address bullying. <https://www2.ed.gov/policy/speced/guid/idea/memosdcltrs/bullyingdcl-enclosure-8-20-13.pdf>

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