Bullying is a problem that threatens the well-being of children and adolescents across the world; estimates are that up to 50% of children are perpetrators or victims. Numerous school shootings recently have been linked to bullying. Bullying has been defined in many ways, and there is some disagreement about what behaviors constitute bullying. The most widely used definition, provided by Olweus, a leading researcher, states that people are bullied when they are repeatedly exposed to negative actions from others. Olweus proposed three key components of bullying: intent to harm another person, behavior repeated over time, and imbalance in power between the bully and victim. This definition includes behaviors as diverse as physical abuse, threats of harm, teasing, social exclusion, spreading rumors, damage of property, and theft. Some believe that an imbalance of power need not be present. However, others suggest physical, psychological, or social power differences must exist to constitute bullying. Other definitions state that bullying may be conducted for the purpose of displaying dominance.

Historically, most attention has been focused on direct forms of bullying, including overt physical and verbal aggression. Direct physical bullying includes behaviors like hitting, kicking, and pushing and sexual aggression such as touching, pinching, and groping. Direct verbal bullying includes behaviors such as name calling, teasing, and threats of harm. Additional forms of bullying have been identified, including the use of intimidation; bullying based on one’s race, ethnicity, culture, appearance, or ability; and sexual harassment or using sexual references to make someone uncomfortable. Often, children are both victims and perpetrators of bullying.

Recently, much attention has been given to indirect forms of bullying, which are sometimes referred to as social or relational bullying. This type of bullying is more covert in nature and often has the goal of damaging the victim’s social relationships or reputation. Relational bullying includes behaviors such as spreading rumors, social exclusion, friendship manipulation, and gossiping.

Gender Differences

Differences have been found between the ways boys and girls use and respond to bullying. Traditionally, bullying was thought to be more of a male phenomenon and that bullying was more prevalent among males. This bullying was direct in nature; it included physical assault or threat of assault. More recently, researchers have found girls to be equally involved in bullying, but they have the tendency to use more indirect means of aggression such as relational bullying. This has led to the terms boy bullying (referring to direct aggression) and girl bullying (indirect aggression). However, it appears that the distinction between gendered forms of bullying is more complex than previously thought. While research supports the concept that boys are involved in more direct forms of bullying than girls, recent research has found that boys and girls show equal involvement in indirect bullying, but they respond to it differently. More specifically, some researchers believe that indirect forms of bullying appear more harmful to girls than to boys.

Prevalence
There appears to be a high prevalence of bullying worldwide, with general prevalence rates ranging from 11% to 50% of school children. Bullying has been assessed in numerous countries in North America, Europe, and Asia. Most countries report prevalence estimates of 10% to 20% of students being involved with bullying. The prevalence of bullying in the United States is one of the highest in the world; most estimates are that between 20% and 30% of all U.S. school children are involved. However, these rates are likely underestimates of the actual prevalence of bullying due to underreporting by students, exclusion of relational bullying, and unawareness of the extent of bullying in schools by teachers and parents. There may be prevalence differences between urban and rural areas. Recent research on bullying in small or rural schools reported much higher rates of bullying, with upwards of 80% of students reporting involvement in bullying. Bullying has been shown to begin as early as the toddler years, and it increases through middle school. Bullying behavior tends to peak during junior high and then slowly decline throughout high school.

Outcomes
Bullying has been associated with a number of adverse outcomes for both the bully and the victim. More specifically, bullying has been shown to affect psychosocial well-being, academic achievement, and physical health. Some long-term outcomes have also been associated with bullying.

Victims
Victims experience problems with depression, anxiety, low self-esteem, aggression, relationship problems, social isolation, loneliness, substance abuse, psychosomatic symptoms, and even suicide. In terms of academics, victims of bullying exhibit school refusal behavior (contributing to frequent school absences), dislike of school, reduced participation in school activities, and lower academic achievement than nonbullied peers. Children who are frequent victims of bullying may also report more headaches, stomachaches, and other somatic complaints, which could lead to greater healthcare utilization and costs. Long-term outcomes of being victimized include continued depression and anxiety as well as relationship problems.

Bullies
Bullies exhibit many externalizing problems, including aggression, antisocial behavior, conduct problems, delinquency, substance use, and early sexual experiences. They have also been shown to experience internalizing problems, such as anxiety and depression. Some bullies experience victimization, negative reputations, and difficulties with peer relationships. Academic outcomes associated with bullies include truancy, low academic achievement, and dropping out of school. Long-term consequences of bullying may include sustained antisocial behavior, abuse, domestic violence, substance abuse, and trouble with authorities.

Treatment and Prevention Programs
Numerous prevention and treatment programs have been developed to address school bullying. Overall, research has shown modest but consistently positive effects of such programs.

The Olweus Bully Program
The Olweus Bully Program is a comprehensive, schoolwide program designed to reduce and prevent bullying problems among school children. A secondary aim of this program is to improve peer relations at school. This program can be used with children in elementary school, middle school, or junior high school. The Olweus program has been shown to be effective in reducing bullying, improving the social

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climate within schools, and reducing antisocial behaviors. This program has been successfully implemented in several countries around the world.

The Olweus Bully Program seeks to reduce bullying through restructuring the school environment and intervening at three levels: the school, the classroom, and the individual. This program strives to make the school a safe learning environment for all students and to reduce the negative effects associated with being a victim and a bully. Some of the key aspects of the program include identifying bullies and victims through administration of the Olweus Bully/Victim Questionnaire, formation of a bullying prevention coordinating committee, staff training, development of schoolwide rules against bullying, supervision during break periods, regular classroom meetings about bullying and peer relations, class parent meetings, and individual work with those identified as bullies or victims and their parents. Educators are trained to work with individuals to reduce certain behaviors known to be risk factors for bullying. These risk factors include impulsivity, dominant personality, lack of empathy, difficulty following rules, low frustration tolerance, positive attitudes toward violence, and decreased interest in school. The Olweus Bully Program also seeks to intervene with students who have known risk factors, such as having friends with positive attitudes toward violence, lack of parental warmth and involvement, overly permissive parenting, harsh discipline, lack of parental supervision, and school attitudes that are indifferent to or accepting of bullying behavior. Outcome studies on this program have shown it to reduce bullying behaviors by 33% to 64%.

The Steps to Respect Program

The Steps to Respect Program is a bullying prevention program for elementary students that seeks to create a safe and respectful school climate through bullying prevention. Educators, students, and families are encouraged to reduce the problem of bullying at the schoolwide level. The main objectives of this program are to increase prosocial beliefs and behaviors, to increase personal responsibility for bullying (including the responsibility of bystanders to intervene), to understand that aggression is an unacceptable route to power, and to increase access to peers and adults for functional and emotional support.

There are three phases to this program. The first phase involves getting the school to commit to the program through developing a bullying prevention steering team to create bullying policies and consequences for bullying behavior. The second phase involves training the staff to recognize bullying and effectively deal with its occurrence. Families are also educated about the program at this time. The third phase involves implementing the program by having educators deliver skill lessons to children, helping children learn and practice bullying prevention skills, and teaching prosocial skills. Throughout this instruction, children should learn how to recognize, refuse, and report bullying.

See also
Child Maltreatment; Conduct Disorder; Externalizing Problems of Childhood; Mental Health Issues in the Schools; School Counseling; School Psychology; School Refusal Behavior

Further Readings


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