INFORMATION CAPSULE
Research Services

BULLYING IN SCHOOLS

At A Glance

Bullying is a serious problem facing many schools across the country. Approximately 30 percent of students in grades 6-10 are involved in bullying, as a perpetrator, victim, or both. Numerous studies have documented the long-term negative academic, physical, and emotional effects of bullying on bullies, their victims, and bystanders. Essential components of effective anti-bullying programs are reviewed.

BACKGROUND

Bullying is a widespread problem in our schools and communities and has a negative impact on school climate and on students' opportunity to learn (Shellard and Turner, 2004; Lumsden, 2002). Students need an environment that is safe and secure and where they are treated with respect. Once thought of as a rite of passage or harmless behavior that helps build character, bullying is now known to have long-term academic, physical, and emotional effects on bullies, their victims, and bystanders.

Bullying has two key components: physical or psychological abuse or harassment occurring repeatedly over time and an imbalance of power (U.S. Department of Justice, 2004; Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory, 2001; Olweus, 1993). There are three forms of bullying: physical (including hitting, kicking, spitting, pushing, stealing, and destruction of property), verbal (such as taunting, malicious teasing, name calling, and making threats), and psychological (including spreading rumors, manipulating social relationships, exclusion from a peer group, extortion, and intimidation) (Cohn and Canter, 2003; Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, 2001; Koki, 1999; National Resource Center for Safe Schools, 1999).

INCIDENCE OF BULLYING

Bullying is the most common form of violence in our society. Studies have found that approximately 30 percent of students in grades 6-10 are involved in bullying, as a perpetrator, victim, or both (Fight Crime: Invest in Kids, 2003; Harris and Willoughby, 2003; Cohn and Canter, 2003; Bowman, 2001; Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory, 2001). A survey commissioned by the Kaiser Family Foundation found that more age 8 to 15 year old students picked teasing and bullying as "big problems" than drugs or alcohol, racism, AIDS, or pressure to have sex (Fight Crime: Invest in Kids, 2003).

Bullying tends to increase through the elementary grades, peak in middle school, and drop off by grades 11 and 12 (Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory, 2001; Olweus, 1993). The *Indicators of School Crime and Safety: 2004* report found no significant difference in the percent of males and females that reported being bullied (8 percent of males versus 7 percent of females) (DeVoe et al., 2004). Bullying by boys uses more physical aggression, while bullying by girls is often more subtle and takes the form of teasing and social exclusion. Few differences were found in involvement in bullying by race or ethnicity. The *Indicators of School Crime and Safety: 2004* report found that white students were slightly more likely than Hispanic and Black students to report being bullied (8 percent of white students versus 6 percent each of Hispanic and Black students) (DeVoe, 2004).

CONSEQUENCES OF BULLYING

Victims of bullying often have difficulty concentrating on their schoolwork and may experience a decline in academic performance. They have higher than normal absenteeism and dropout rates and may show signs of loneliness. They have trouble making social and emotional adjustments, difficulty making friends, and poor relationships with classmates. They often suffer humiliation, insecurity, and loss of self-esteem and may develop a fear of going to school. The impact of frequent bullying can accompany victims into adulthood, where they appear to be at greater risk of depression and other mental health problems (Shellard, 2002; Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, 2001).

Bullies also experience negative consequences. They are often less popular when they get to high school, have few friends, and are more likely to engage in criminal activity. Bullying behavior has also been linked to other forms of antisocial behavior, such as vandalism, shoplifting, skipping and dropping out of school, fighting, and drug and alcohol use (Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, 2001).

Bullying has been found to have an effect on bystanders. Those who witness bullying are more likely to exhibit increased depression, anxiety, anger, posttraumatic stress, alcohol use, and low grades (Shellard, 2002). Students who regularly witness bullying at school suffer from a less secure learning environment, the fear that the bully may target them next, and the feeling that teachers and other adults are either unable or unwilling to control bullies' behavior (Shellard and Turner, 2004).

BULLYING PREVENTION PROGRAMS

The Olweus Bullying Prevention Program, developed and refined in Norway in the 1980s, is a well known initiative for reducing bullying (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2004; American Federation of Teachers, 2000; Starr, 2000; Olweus and Limber, 1999). The defining characteristics of Olweus' program are that primary responsibility for solving problems is placed upon the adults at the school (rather than on parents or students), the entire school population is targeted (not just a few problem students), and the program is a permanent component of the school environment, not a temporary remedial program. School administrators, teachers, parents, members of the community, bullies, victims, bystanders, and the silent majority of students are all involved in the program.

STRATEGIES FOR DEVELOPING A BULLYING PREVENTION PROGRAM

The frequency with which bullying occurs can be reduced by creating a positive school climate that fosters respect and sets high standards for interpersonal behavior (Cohn and Canter, 2003; Banks, 1997). Effective bullying prevention programs must restructure the learning environment to create a climate characterized by supportive adult involvement, positive adult role models, firm limits, and consistent sanctions for bullying behavior (Cohn and Canter, 2003; Starr, 2000). A further review of the literature on successful bullying programs has identified the following general strategies as essential components of effective programs:

- Implement a comprehensive schoolwide program.

- Intervene early.

- Assess the extent of the problem.

- Principal provides leadership.

- Conduct staff training.

- Establish clear anti-bullying rules and policies.

- Integrate anti-bullying themes into the curriculum.

- Work individually with students.

- Create a safe physical environment.

- Involve and educate parents.

- Be aware of bullying prevention approaches that don't work:

  - Inconsistent "canned" programs without clear measures of effectiveness.
  - Adopting a "zero tolerance" policy.
  - Implementing reactive measures.
  - Providing self-esteem training for bullies.
  - Encouraging victims to simply "stand up" to bullies.

SUMMARY

Bullying is a serious problem facing many schools across the country. Approximately 30 percent of students in grades 6-10 are involved in bullying, as a perpetrator, victim, or both. Numerous studies have documented the long-term negative academic, physical, and emotional effects of bullying on bullies, their victims, and bystanders. Effective bullying prevention programs help to make schools safe and positive places for students to learn and interact with their peers. A further review of the research on successful bullying prevention programs has identified general strategies that are essential components of effective programs, including implementation of a comprehensive schoolwide program, staff training, establishment of clear rules, integration of anti-bullying themes into the curriculum, and involvement of parents.

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

For a detailed discussion of this issue and a listing of references, please refer to the complete report, *Literature Review on Bullying*, available from Miami-Dade County Public Schools' Research Services.