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## The effects of bullying on elementary students

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### Abstract

Bullying is an ever-present problem occurring within elementary schools across the world. Bullying creates personal, social and emotional, as well as academic problems for the victim. Therefore, the purpose of this paper is to investigate the various interventions that are implemented in elementary schools in order to combat the effects of bullying. Internal and external characteristics of victims, bullies, and bystanders will be identified. Gender differences related to bullying will be described, as well the effects bullying has on elementary students. Finally, numerous interventions aimed at reducing the effects of bullying will be discussed.

# THE EFFECTS OF BULLYING ON ELEMENTARY STUDENTS

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## Abstract

Bullying is an ever-present problem occurring within elementary schools across the world. Bullying creates personal, social and emotional, as well as academic problems for the victim. Therefore, the purpose of this paper is to investigate the various interventions that are implemented in elementary schools in order to combat the effects of bullying. Internal and external characteristics of victims, bullies, and bystanders will be identified. Gender differences related to bullying will be described, as well the effects bullying has on elementary students. Finally, numerous interventions aimed at reducing the effects of bullying will be discussed.

## The Effects of Bullying on Elementary Students

School bullying is a serious and prevalent problem among elementary students. Bullying not only impacts the victim's school performance, but causes emotional, social, and developmental problems (DeRosier, 2004). According to Cole, Cornell, and Sheras (2006), school bullying has increased in severity since the media's representation of school shootings, provoked by students who were victims of bullying, has intensified. School shootings pose as serious consequences of bullying. However, most bullying occurs in covert ways, in areas where no adults are around, which makes it hard for counselors to notice bullying in its true form (Cole et al., 2006). Due to the increasing severity of bullying in schools, national studies have been conducted to determine the extent of bullying and the impact it has on elementary students.

### *Rationale and Statistics*

Bullying has been identified as one of the most terrible forms of violence within schools and is likely to impact a large array of students (Bauman & Del Rio, 2006). Thus, it is important to combat this issue in elementary schools in order for problems to subside before becoming a major problem in later years. Counselors must be aware of and understand the prevalence of bullying in order to develop appropriate intervention procedures to alleviate the effects of bullying on elementary students. Early intervention is key to reducing and eliminating the effects of bullying.

Bullying in elementary schools is a prevalent problem facing many elementary youth. In a survey completed by sixth through tenth graders, almost one in five students disclosed that they have bullied their classmates (Cole et al., 2006). Staniszewski (2003) noted that “in a national study of bullying, 13% of sixth graders reported being a victim of bullying at least once a week, 10% reported being responsible for bullying someone, and in a study of third graders, approximately 40% of the children reporting being victims of physical or verbal aggression” (p. 431). In another study completed with kindergarteners, almost half of the kindergarteners reported bullying of some kind (Staniszewski, 2003). Furthermore, in another study, more than 50% of the people who reported being a bully in elementary school had some kind of criminal record ten to fifteen years later (Bauman & Del Rio, 2006). These national reports indicate that bullying is a serious problem, with increasing victimization occurring with younger children, resulting in more serious problems later in life.

It is important to note that bias is likely to occur within self-report survey methods. Bias may occur due to students not reporting bullying events, or not reporting being a bully themselves. If this is the case, the national statistics would likely increase if students reported more accurately. Due to these startling statistics of bully victimization, interventions aimed at reducing aggression need to be considered in order for school to be safe and conducive to learning.

Because bullying is a serious concern in schools, it is critical that programs be implemented at the elementary level in order to combat the effects early on. Children who exhibit aggression at a young age may have problems with aggression or delinquency when they are older (Teglasi & Rothman, 2001). If the bullying problem is not addressed in younger children, it may lead to more serious problems later on in life. It is also important to understand the motivation of the bully so counselors can not only help victims cope with bullying, but help bullies develop appropriate social skills and work through their own feelings and problems. Developing and implementing intervention programs to combat bullying early on is just one task of a school counselor.

The purpose of this paper is to investigate various intervention programs that have been established to combat bullying behaviors in elementary schools. Once counselors become aware of the severe impact that bullying has on elementary students, they will be able to develop and implement appropriate programs to alleviate the problem. Ultimately, these anti-bullying programs should help reduce the effects of bullying in elementary schools as well as increase students' safety levels at school.

### Definitions of Bullying

Bullying has been defined in many ways in the research. A comprehensive definition of bullying is "negative actions which may be physical or verbal, have hostile intent, are repeated over time, involve a power differential, and may

involve one or more perpetrators and recipients” (O’Connell, Pepler, & Craig, 1999, p. 438). Another researcher defined bullying as “a repeated aggression in which one or more persons intend to harm or disturb another person physically, verbally, or psychologically” (Veenstra, Lindenberg, Oldehinkel, De Winter, Verhulst, & Ormel, 2005, p. 672). Yet another researcher described bullying as “repetitive aggression directed at a peer who is unable to defend him or herself...and occurs in direct or indirect forms” (Shapiro, 2005, p. 700).

Bullying can be physical, verbal, and relational or social (Cole et al., 2006).

Physical bullying is a direct form of bullying that can include physical violent acts such as beating or punching, whereas verbal bullying is indirect and consists of mockery and hurtful remarks on the victim (Shapiro, 2005; Cole et al., 2006).

Whether physical or verbal, bullying is a power differential between the individuals involved (Cole et al., 2006).

According to Cole et al. (2006), bullying can also be social or relational. This type of bullying involves controlling a person’s social group by influencing peers to not befriend the victim. Furthermore, social bullying may include spreading false rumors about the victim in order to get others not to like them. In essence, the social bully tries to turn others away from the victim in an attempt to minimize his or her friendship group. Social bullying can also be described as psychological bullying, which includes isolation of the victim as well as gossiping about them (Veenstra et al., 2005). Social bullying in terms of exclusion and

friendship withdrawal was reported as the worst form of bullying (Bauman & Del Rio, 2006).

### Characteristics of Bullying

Children involved in bullying episodes may exhibit certain characteristics which place them at a greater risk of being victimized, whether it be as a bully, victim, or bystander. Research conducted on victims and bullies indicated there may be specific characteristics that describe who is likely to become a victim, a bully, or a bystander (Veenstra et al., 2005). These three roles and specific characteristics associated with them will be described subsequently.

#### *The Bully*

According to Veenstra et al. (2005), children identified as bullies tend to have more violent, stubborn, rebellious, and overbearing tendencies towards their classmates. Because bullies are often fighting for power and control, they tend to feel less anxious and insecure when bullying others. Bullies also tend to be disruptive and lower achievers in the classroom (Veenstra et al., 2005). Bullies may exhibit excessive anger and are at a greater risk of becoming involved in criminal acts when they get older (Shapiro, 2005). According to Stevens, Van Oost, and de Bourdeaudhuij (2000), because bullies have more power and control they also tend to be popular, thus having more power in recruiting others into bullying.

Home lives for bullies may be less than desirable, which may put them at risk for bullying others. Children who witness parental depression or isolation, and experience discipline in authoritarian ways may be at risk for becoming bullies themselves (Shapiro, 2005). Asserting control may be the bully's only way of achieving needs not met in the home. Thus, parenting styles may play a role in the aggression bullies possess. When parents use physical abuse or disregard and disrespect the children, they may actually teach the children to use these same methods at school (Veenstra et al., 2005) because children will actually emulate aggressive actions they witness from their parents and engage in these behaviors at school. Therefore, parents who have improper problem-solving skills and are quick to use violence against others may teach their children these unacceptable and offensive techniques (Veenstra et al., 2005). The community or neighborhood in which the bully resides may also be an indicator of bully behaviors. If the child experiences higher rates of crime in the neighborhood, this may place him or her at a higher risk of becoming a bully (Veenstra et al., 2005).

### *The Victim*

Victims may also possess certain characteristics which place them at a higher risk of being targets of bullying. According to Veenstra et al. (2005), "victims tend to exhibit poor psychological functioning, tend to be more withdrawn, depressed, anxious, cautious, quiet, and insecure than others" (p. 675). Children who are bullied may also be shy or introverted, depressed, show weakness, and

cry easily (Shapiro, 2005). Victims of bullying may show their weakness through their lack of self-confidence, which may also hinder their coping strategies (Hall, 2006). Furthermore, children who are bullied may not know or understand appropriate coping skills, which may enable them to become targets of bullying. According to Veenstra and colleagues (2005), parenting styles may be directly associated with bully victimization. For example, parents who overprotect their children and leave little room for their child's independence may place their child at a higher risk of becoming victimized by bullies (Veenstra et al., 2005). Bullies may observe their peers being overprotected, which may lead to remarks against the child's self-worth. Victims may also come from a lower socio-economic background which places them in danger of being bullied (Veenstra et al., 2005).

### *The Bystander*

Bystanders also have characteristics which play a role in the effects bullying has on elementary students. Bystanders may feel similar things about the victim as the bully does, but may not act upon those feelings. According to Cowie (2000), peers often witness bullying of peers but are reluctant to do anything about it because they may not know how to respond or may choose not to for fear of being victimized themselves. The avoidance of helping others who are suffering may lead to desensitization or lack of empathy for others (Cowie, 2000). Bystanders may believe bullying is acceptable because the victim somehow has deserved it, which rationalizes their participation as bystanders (Frey, Hirschstein,

Snell, Van Schoiack Edstrom, Mackenzie, & Broderick, 2004). Bystanders may actually escalate and reinforce the aggression for the victim, causing the victim to feel ganged up against. According to Frey et al., (2005), “bystanders involved in more than 80% of bullying episodes generally reinforced the aggression” (p. 481).

Overall, there are individual, parental, and community factors that play a role in one’s likelihood of becoming a bully, victim, or bystander of bullying. Gender may also play a part in ones affiliation with bullying. There are definite gender differences in relation to bullying occurring within schools.

### *Gender Differences*

Boys and girls may experience the hardships of bullying in different ways. Boys who are bullies may use more physical means to bullying. Therefore, boys may punch, kick, and use more physical aggression when bullying others. Girls, on the other hand, use social or relational bullying when victimizing others (Cowie, 2000). Girls spread rumors or gossip and may turn friends away from the victim by manipulating events. Damaging personal relationships through manipulation is an ultimate way girls tend to socially bully others.

The play environment for boys and girls is different and may be correlated to the types of bullying that occurs. Since boys tend to play in larger areas with more people (and less intimate friendships), aggression may take a more physical form (O’Connell et al., 1999). On the other hand, girls tend to play in smaller groups with more close and intimate friends. This environment may be more

susceptible to the use of more indirect methods of aggression and bullying (O'Connell et al., 1999).

For both boys and girls, relational bullying has been cited as the worst kind of bullying due to the psychological impact it has on its victims (Bauman & Del Rio, 2006). More indirect forms of bullying, such as social or relational, are reported more often by girls (Frey et al., 2005). Furthermore, maternal support and protection seemed to be correlated to increased bullying for both girls and boys (Veenstra et al., 2005).

### Symptoms and Outcomes of Bullying

As an outcome of bullying, victims may experience symptoms which will eventually present a severe risk to optimal development and negatively impact learning in the classroom (Veenstra et al., 2005). Bullying may cause the victim to express physical complaints resulting from fear and anxiety and lead to school absenteeism, poor academics, and overall distraction in the classroom (Bauman & Del Rio, 2006). However, not only do victims experience symptoms of bullying, but bullies themselves may suffer internal and external consequences as well. In a sense, the bully may suffer symptoms due to bullying as well. Symptoms may be physical, social, and emotional in nature.

#### *Physical Symptoms*

According to Veenstra et al. (2005), there are physical symptoms children may experience as a result of bullying. Health may decline as just one result of

bullying, and children who are physically bullied may have stomach or back aches and joint problems. These physical symptoms may actually exist or be the victim's way of avoiding school (Veenstra et al., 2005).

### *Social Symptoms*

Social symptoms victimized children may experience include withdrawal and disconnection from friends and school absenteeism, which may lead to difficulties in relationships later on in life (Fox & Boulton, 2003). Bullies may be disconnected from friends as a result of inappropriate social acts and uncooperative ways of socializing (Veenstra et al., 2005). As a result, bullies may find themselves dropping out of school due to poor social adjustment (Bauman & Del Rio, 2006). In more extreme cases, victims may try to run away from home or even commit suicide as a way to solve their problems (Bauman & Del Rio, 2006).

### *Emotional Symptoms*

Emotional symptoms of bullying are significant and may include, but are not limited to, anxiety, depression, loneliness, and low self-esteem (Fox & Boulton, 2003). Bullies may feel depressed because they use bullying as a way to cover up underlying problems they may be experiencing. For example, bullies may have low self-esteem so they bully other students as a way to feel better about themselves (Fox & Boulton, 2003). Additionally, because bullies tend to be

socially inappropriate, they may have few friends, which may also result in depression.

Children are highly influenced by their peer relationships and affiliations. Thus, these relationships are crucial for children's sense of belonging and happiness, as well as for their sense of well-being and adjustment (Siris & Osterman, 2004). If these peer relationships are declining, victims may have emotional symptoms such as anxiety, loneliness, depression, or low self-esteem (Veenstra et al., 2005).

Bystanders are also significantly influenced by their peers and may feel anxious about their involvement in bullying episodes. Therefore, peer relationships, or lack thereof, may create intense emotional symptoms in the bully, victim, or bystander. According to DeRosier (2004), there is a connection between peer relationships and educational, behavioral, and emotional development. In order to combat the negative effects of bullying, various interventions have been implemented to promote more positive relationships and experiences in school.

### Interventions

Interventions aimed at facilitating the healthy development of children are needed in order to combat the negative effects of bullying. Individual, group, classroom, and school-wide interventions will be addressed. These interventions

should be considered as a way to deescalate the effects of the physical, social, and emotional symptoms of bullying.

### *Individual Interventions*

Individual interventions may need to be tailored to the needs of the bully, victim, and bystander because they all play different roles in bullying. Consequently, each of these individuals may need to learn unique ways of dealing with the situation. The following includes interventions aimed at the bystander, victim, and bully so all parties involved will learn more appropriate ways of dealing with bullying.

*Individual interventions for the bystander.* Frey and colleagues (2005) suggested that bystanders could benefit from learning socially acceptable behaviors such as assertive skills, coping with mixed emotions, and learning how to appropriately respond in uncomfortable situations. Bystanders are often overlooked in terms of an intervention strategy. However, bystanders may need to learn how to become a peer supporter.

Peer supporters find ways to engage in positive responses to bullying and they recognize they have the potential to help the bullying problem (Cowie, 2000). Training bystanders, or peers in general, on direct responses about what to say and do when the situation arises can help students be proactive in solving their own problems.

Peer support may also take the role of befriending. Befriending involves being a friend to the victim by helping him or her out when a bully situation arises (Menesini, Codecasa, Benelli, & Cowie, 2003). Because students' peer relationships are crucial to healthy social development, peer support systems or befriending techniques may be just the intervention needed to assist peers in helping each other feel safe at school. However, research conducted by Cowie (2000) suggested girls are more likely to become peer supports than boys. Thus, there may need to be more proactive efforts in place in order to get more boys involved in peer support efforts.

*Individual interventions for the victim.* Children's relationships with other students is important for elementary students. Therefore, individual interventions should help victims achieve rewarding relationships with their peers. One way to achieve this would be through social skills training where victims learn how to interact with peers in socially appropriate ways. Various skills learned in a social skills training may include learning how to problem solve, relax, and be a positive thinker (Fox & Boulton, 2003). After social skills training, students tend to have higher self-esteem and lower social anxiety (DeRosier, 2004).

*Individual interventions for the bully.* Individual interventions may be aimed at helping bullies reduce their anger levels by teaching them how to handle their aggression (Frey et al., 2005). Baldry and Farrington (2004) suggested utilizing a cognitive-behavioral approach to teach students the consequences of their

aggressive behaviors and train them how to regain control over their vicious behavior. Changing attitudes and behaviors, and increasing individual awareness levels of aggressive behavior and consequences may help reduce personal aggression levels. Overall, teaching appropriate social skills to all students involved in bullying may help reduce episodes or learn how to better handle and cope with bully victimization. It is important to tailor interventions to students' deficits and needs in order to help students combat bullying.

#### *Group Interventions*

Group interventions focusing on the reduction of bully behaviors may be effective in targeting groups of students. A program entitled *Steps to Success* is an example of a program aimed at teaching groups of students social skills and conflict resolution in order to promote healthier relationships (Frey et al., 2005). *Steps to Success* utilizes social skills training in a group format to help students' role play positive and pro-social ways to interact with peers. Conflict resolution is also taught to students in an effort to enhance problem-solving skills and create better peer relationships.

STORIES is yet another intervention that can be implemented within a small group environment. The STORIES program helps students learn about individuality, reflection, communication, and social problem solving (Teglasi & Rothman, 2001). Utilizing components of a story and incorporating them into teaching students about social skills in a group setting is the overall basis of the

STORIES program that includes character goals, feelings, reactions, and intentions. The program is conducted in small groups to all children and is designed to promote positive group interactions (Teglasi & Rothman, 2001).

Overall, students have responded well to this program due to their connection and interest of stories. Results of the program indicate its effectiveness in reducing problematic behaviors associated with bullying.

### *Classroom Interventions*

Teachers may have to deal with bullying on a daily basis. Therefore, establishing a positive classroom environment that is conducive to learning and meets the needs of the students is important. Children have personal and psychological needs that need to be met in order for healthy growth and development and success in school, including feeling capable and competent, being independent, and feeling a sense of belonging (Siris & Osterman, 2004).

A study conducted by Siris and Osterman (2004) suggested one intervention was to include activities and strategies that involve teachers in helping students meet these basic psychological needs in the classroom. For the study, teachers were trained how to develop strategies for meeting students' needs in the classroom, such as structured cooperative activities that provide opportunities for students to work with different peers (Siris & Osterman, 2004). The results of this classroom intervention were higher quality relationships and self-esteem, as well as an increase in social, emotional, and academic behavior (Siris &

Osterman, 2004). If students are able to get their needs met in the classroom, they may be less vulnerable to the effects of bullying.

The Olweus Bully Prevention Program is another classroom intervention designed to increase teachers' awareness about bullying and to involve them in the efforts to reduce bullying. It also was intended to help students resolve bully/victim conflicts in order to achieve more positive peer relationships at school (Kallestad & Olweus, 2003). Teachers implemented the goals of this prevention program and were trained how to respond to bully encounters and on how to teach students better ways to react to such encounters. Overall, teachers became more aware of the bully problems within their classroom and increased their involvement, which helped resolve some of the bully problems at school (Kallestad & Olweus, 2003).

The Project Ploughshares Puppets for Peace Program (P4 program) is another example of a classroom intervention aimed at reducing bullying. Shapiro (2005) conducted a study in which puppets were utilized to demonstrate various direct and indirect bully scenarios in order for students to see the effects bullying has their peers, as well as learn conflict resolution. After the students saw the various scenarios and identified the bully behaviors, they learned four coping strategies, which included "ignoring, saying stop, walking away, and getting help" (Shapiro, 2005, p. 702). Shapiro (2005) thought puppetry would be a good way to get students interested and involved in combating bully problems. Although this

should have been effective in helping students resolve problems, no improvements in reducing bully behaviors were found in the classroom after the intervention was implemented. Even though the program was ineffective in meeting its intention of reducing bullying, one positive effect was that it seemed to increase students' awareness and understanding of bullying concerns (Shapiro, 2005).

### *School-Wide Interventions*

Developing a comprehensive program intervention aimed at reducing bullying should be a school-wide effort. Teachers are with students on a daily basis and play a crucial role in helping reduce the bully victimization that is occurring within the school system. However, even though these key people are with students on a daily basis, bully victimization often goes unnoticed by many educators. According to Bauman and Del Rio (2006), students reported relational bullying as the harshest form of bullying, but some teachers do not even take notice of such behaviors. In fact, "although teachers perceive themselves as intervening often against bullying, observational research shows teachers intercede in only 15% to 18% of classroom bullying episodes" (Frey et al., 2005, p. 480).

Part of the problem is that some teachers believe bullying is normal for the elementary students' developmental age and therefore may be more reluctant to respond to reports about bullying (Bauman & Del Rio, 2006). However, teachers

were more responsive to physical bullying because of its severity than to accounts of relational bullying. If teachers did not respond to reports, students felt that the problems were not resolved and they could not count on their teachers for safety. Safety may be an issue if the bully decides to retaliate on the victim for reporting the event (Frey et al., 2005).

There are some cases in which teachers are reluctant to help resolve bully problems; therefore, it is important to get these key people involved in the efforts to reduce bullying at school. Bauman and Del Rio (2006) suggested getting teachers involved through in-service teacher training or workshops to increase teachers' effectiveness and confidence when dealing with bullies and their victims. School-wide efforts and training may include "zero tolerance" for bullying (Bauman & Del Rio, 2006, p. 229). Zero tolerance provides teachers and administrations with appropriate policies to use when bullying is reported (Bauman & Del Rio, 2006). Thus, a school-wide approach to handling bullying would need to entail teacher training on bullying as well as cooperative efforts to respond when incidences arise. Teachers are an integral part of the school system; therefore, they should be included in effective implementation of an anti-bullying prevention or intervention plan.

Because bullying is so prevalent in schools, a school-wide approach to creating a safe learning environment involving teachers and administration needs to be implemented in order for interventions to be successful. Staniszewski (2003)

suggested the school-wide universal program should reduce bullying in and outside of the classroom and promote more positive interactions between students. Furthermore, efforts should be made to include evaluations on the programs so changes can be made accordingly. Bully prevention “requires a commitment from all members of the educational community” in order for it to be effective and successful (Staniszewski, 2003, p. 435.)

### Conclusion

A substantial number of elementary students are being bullied everyday at school. These victims are experiencing physical, social, emotional, and academic problems as a result. Various research studies have been completed in order to find appropriate interventions to combat bullying in elementary schools. Individual, group, and classroom interventions have been identified. Even though the programs implemented at these levels may be beneficial in reducing the effects of bullying, they may not eliminate problems all together (Menesini et al, 2003). Therefore, a school-wide anti-bullying approach may finally be the key to helping victims of bullying attend a school that is safe and promotes learning. By reducing bully victimization, a safe climate conducive to learning will be created for all students so they can grow and learn to become successful members of society.

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