
REMAPPING DEBATE

Asking "Why" and "Why Not"

Action against middle school bullying still hampered by myths

Original Reporting | By Timothy Martinez | Education

December 7, 2010 — The repercussions of bullying — including multiple suicides by victims, including cases in [Massachusetts](#) and in [Texas](#) — have become more visible this year. So, too, has the [“potential for casual, breathtaking cruelty” carried out via the internet](#), a phenomenon known as cyberbullying. In late-November, the New Jersey state legislature overwhelmingly passed enhanced anti-bullying legislation shortly after the suicide of a college student victimized by bullying.

Nevertheless, the belief that bullying is simply a rite of passage that does not ultimately do much harm is still alive and well. The view persists despite a strong consensus among experts that bullying or being bullied is not an inevitable part of growing up.

Bullying does remain a common occurrence within schools, especially middle schools. According to the latest Indicators of School Crime and Safety report released by the National Center For Education Statistics, covering the 2007 school year, 43 percent of 6th graders, 36 percent of 7th graders, and 37 percent of 8th graders reported having been bullied.

The types of bullying included in the study range from physical bullying, like being pushed, to social and emotional bullying, such as being intentionally excluded from an activity. While forms of physical bullying have long been assumed to be the most harmful on students, a growing number of researchers are claiming that emotional abuse, even something as seemingly minor as name-calling, can have a profound effect on a middle school student.

In a study released in the July issue of the American Journal of Psychiatry, scientists found that even verbal abuse from peers can increase depression, anxiety, anger-hostility, dissociation, and drug use. The study also found that relatively minor verbal abuse from peers could have physical effects on the brain, with those changes increasing with the amount of exposure to abuse.

Likewise, various studies have shown that bullies are at higher risk for engaging in criminal activity later in life. Bullies themselves are more prone to suffer from headaches, backaches, and sleeping difficulties.

Kids being kids?

Liane Roseman, co-chair of the Connecticut chapter of the Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network, said that GLSEN encounters resistance “all the time” to the idea that bullying is a serious problem

that can and should be eliminated. She said there is an “instinctive response” for teachers and school administrators to say: “It’s just kids being kids. I was bullied. I was fine. What’s the big deal?”

GLSEN runs a “no name-calling campaign” in middle schools. Roseman says that a key part of its mission is to show people that bullying “is not kids being kids, it is not acceptable, it is not necessary, it is not justifiable [and] it needs to be completely eradicated.”

Stacy Skalski, a school psychologist and director of public policy at the National Association of School Psychologists, said, “We hear oftentimes from people that say ‘oh, that’s just a natural part of growing up.’ But, the desire to bully is not just a normal part of growing up.”

“Nothing is inevitable,” said Robert Blum, chair of the Department of Population, Family & Reproductive Health at Johns Hopkins. “Bullying is a socially learned behavior.”

Sue Thomas, one of the leaders of the Olweus Bullying Prevention Program, said that her program, too, continues to meet resistance from staff and parents who think that bullying is just a part of growing up.

In fact, more researchers are saying that bullying is not an inevitable part of growing up. “Nothing is inevitable,” said Robert Blum, chair of the Department of Population, Family & Reproductive Health at Johns Hopkins. “Bullying is a socially learned behavior. Some people believe this is just normal growing up behavior, but there’s nothing normal about it.”

Blum said that a school’s environment and whether a student feels or doesn’t feel connected to it is associated with every positive outcome and every negative outcome. “When a young person has the feeling that he or she belongs in a school and the students are treated fairly, there is less likely to be aggressive behavior,” he said.

Schools where teachers say things like “kids will be kids” and “what’s the big deal” often don’t have students that feel safe or connected, said Jane Bluestein, author of *Creating Emotionally Safe Schools*. “Many adults tend to minimize the reality of the experience kids are going through,” and there are adults who use that perception of inevitability as an excuse to ignore the problem and not address it while it’s happening, she said.

Jo Ann Freiberg, an educational consultant with the Connecticut State Department of Education who handles cases of bullying, agrees that part of the problem is that many schools, teachers, and students don’t want to face the problem of bullying squarely. To avoid the reality, they trivialize the problem by “just say[ing] it’s rough-housing.”

According to Thomas, once a school actually surveys its students, most learn that bullying is a major problem after all.

Not just an inner city public school problem

Bullying is not just an issue for public schools. Although there is no study restricted to middle schools that compares public and private schools, there are studies that provide that comparison for public and private schools combined. These studies show that the incidence of bullying is similar across school types.

Statistics from the Department of Justice and Department of Education reveal that 32 percent of 6th through 12th grade public school students in 2007 reported being bullied, only slightly higher than the 29 percent of private school students who reported these problems. Likewise, a recent survey of high school students conducted by the Josephson Institute of Ethics showed that incidence varied little among school types. In fact, students in private religious schools reported to have been bullied slightly more than their counterparts in public schools.

Simple steps, but steps not taken

While Bluestein acknowledges that “there is no quick fix to the problem,” there is little disagreement about how essential it is for there to be a comprehensive, school-wide effort to create a positive and safe climate.

Blum, who pioneered the idea of school connectedness in promoting adolescent health, pointed out that anti-bullying measures can be quite straightforward: something as simple as having a school administrator stand in front of the school every morning to greet and acknowledge students could increase the level of comfort and decrease bullying. (For more examples see the box below.)

Basic Anti-Bullying Tactics

- Creating clear expectations and standards of behavior across the school.
- Minimizing the opportunities to bully by monitoring areas where bullying occurs the most.
- Creating an environment where kids feel comfortable going to adults with a problem.
- Consistently and promptly intervening in instances of bullying.
- Empowering bystanders to intervene safely and effectively when they witness bullying.
- Involving parents so that they do not ignore either their child being a victim of bullying or a perpetrator of bullying.
- Ensuring that school staff exhibits the same kind of respectful behavior with each other and with students that they expect students to have amongst themselves.

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