Interventions for Bullying: What Childhood Professionals Can Do

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Peer aggression is a serious problem both in terms of its prevalence and its short- and long-term consequences. Estimates of the number of bullies and victims in schools vary according to the definition of bullying, but there is a general consensus that approximately 7-14% of children repeatedly bully their peers, and 10-18% of children are regularly victimized (Olweus, 1993b; Pelligrini, Bartini, & Brooks, 1999). Bullying is particularly a problem within the United States; one recent study of American middle school students (Duncan, 1999b) found that as many as 28% of children acknowledge being bullies, and 25% of children report being victims of bullying. This behavior is related to serious outcomes not only for the targets of bullying but also for the bullies, themselves.

Studies have shown that children who are bullies have an increased risk of developing problematic behaviors in adulthood, such as alcohol abuse and violent criminality (Farrington, 1991; Olweus, 1993b). In fact, Olweus (1993b), a leading researcher in the field, showed that 60% of boys who were characterized as bullies in grades 6-9 had at least one conviction by the age of 24. Childhood victimization is also related to serious negative outcomes in adulthood. People who are victimized as children have a greater tendency to be depressed and have low self-esteem, even though they are no longer victimized as adults (Olweus, 1993a).

Not only is bullying a serious problem in and of itself, but being the target of bullies has been linked to being a victim of child abuse. In particular, Duncan (1999a) found that children who were physically and/or sexually abused by adults were more likely to also report having been bullied by peers. Moreover, the combination of being assaulted by adults and by children can cause a great deal of psychological distress. Duncan (1999a) found that although victims of child abuse were not significantly different from nonabused children in terms of psychological distress, those who were victims of both child abuse and bullying displayed a much higher level of distress than other children.

Despite its prevalence, the problem of bullying has only recently received serious attention, and thus not many interventions have been developed and tested. This article reviews different types of interventions and discusses their strengths and weaknesses. Moreover, it describes how the interventions can be implemented by childhood professionals working with children in different settings.

Introduction

There are many forms of bullying, but two main components that define bullying are that it is a negative action occurring repeatedly over time, and that there is a power differential between the bully and the victim (Olweus, 1991). The interventions discussed in this article focus primarily on reducing physical and verbal bullying, but some of the principles may be applied toward indirect bullying (i.e., social exclusion) as well. Moreover, although many of the tactics may be used to help children who are both bullies and victims, they are mainly geared toward those who are either bullies or victims, and not both.

In developing interventions to reduce bullying, it is important to understand the cyclical nature of the phenomenon (Bernstein & Watson, 1997). Bullies and victims tend to have complementary characteristics that reinforce the bullying relationship. Bullies are generally impulsive, and have a need to feel powerful by dominating others. They tend to have been raised by caregivers that model aggressive behavior and do not teach them to control their impulses. Moreover, physical bullies tend to be bigger and stronger than their peers, and so, by behaving aggressively, they are usually successful in getting the results they seek (for example, power, tangible rewards, and/or attention) (Olweus, 1993b). Victims, on the other hand, tend to be weaker than their peers and are more likely to be passive, insecure, and anxious even before being attacked by bullies (Olweus, 1993b). Thus, they are easy targets who are unlikely to fight back. These characteristics of bullies and victims help explain the stability of their relationship. When bullies harass victims, they are rewarded by feeling powerful and gaining the attention of others. At the same time, victims become even more fearful and insecure, and this makes them more vulnerable to future attacks. Thus, as time goes by, the bullying not only continues, but escalates in intensity (Bernstein & Watson, 1997).

The problem of bullying not only affects bullies and victims, but bystanders as well. Bullying creates an environment where children may become fearful even if they are not the direct targets of peer aggression. They may feel a lack of control, and decide that if they try to stick up for victims, they will be targeted themselves. Thus, bullies, victims, and bystanders are all part of the bullying cycle, and all three should be part of the solution. Accordingly, interventions that will be most effective are those that are broad and include all children (Slaby, 1994).

Many different kinds of interventions have been implemented to reduce bullying. Some are very broad, taking a "whole-school" approach; some emphasize the roles of parents, teachers, or other adults in preventing or resolving bullying conflicts; and others focus on the children themselves. Each approach has its strengths and weaknesses, and the effectiveness of each depends in part on the age of the children involved.

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"Whole-School" Interventions

Some of the most effective interventions for bullying are implemented on a school-wide basis and become an integral part of the curriculum In these programs, school personnel increase awareness of the problem, publicize explicit rules, and foster routine class discussions (Farrington, 1991)

Perhaps the best-known of these "whole-school" approaches was developed by Olweus and Roland in 1983 (Olweus, 1993a) This was a highly successful large-scale intervention (42 schools, grades 1-9) conducted in Bergen, Norway In this program, the schools reduced bullying in two ways First, they raised awareness of the problem among parents and children. Parents were encouraged to be involved through regular meetings with teachers Moreover, they were sent folders providing information on bullying. Children were involved by attending class meetings in which bullying problems and possible solutions were discussed They were also shown a video displaying bullying episodes and their repercussions

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A second way that this intervention worked was by creating an environment in which there was little opportunity for bullying to occur A key feature was greater adult supervision of students, particularly on the playground, where bullying was more likely to occur These adults were better equipped to intervene and control the bullying, because they were provided with booklets containing practical information and suggestions The program also reduced bullying through specific class rules that were firmly and consistently enforced

This "whole-school" intervention was highly successful and reduced bullying by at least 50 % during the first two years of its introduction (Olweus, 1993b) It included not only bullies, but also victims and bystanders All children watched the video, helped create the class rules, and participated in the class discussions This is one aspect of the intervention that contributed to its effectiveness. Bullies were restricted in their ability to harass victims and may have developed empathy by watching the video and participating in the class discussions Victims were empowered by helping develop the class rules. Most important, bystanders took responsibility for the bullying through their participation in the class discussions and rule development

Because Olweus's intervention is so comprehensive, it is appropriate for a wide age range of children, particularly those in elementary and middle school. Moreover, different aspects of the intervention may work better for different age groups Younger children may respond better to the direct participation of parents and teachers, whereas older children may respond better to child-centered components of the program.

Other intervention techniques have been developed that enhance the role of either the parents and childhood professionals or of the children in reducing aggression

Intervention Techniques for Parents and Childhood Professionals

Behavioral Techniques

Some interventions focus on the roles of parents, teachers, or other adults in resolving bullying conflicts One way that teachers (or any professional who works with groups of children) can respond was described by Slaby and Roedell (1982). According to this approach, a teacher should not immediately punish the bully, but instead should try to empower the victim Thus, when confronted with a bullying situation, the teacher should physically turn to the victim and encourage him or her to stand up to the bully in an assertive, nonaggressive manner (i e , by saying, "You can tell him/her to stop pushing you"). The teacher should still be present to support the victim and intervene in the situation when necessary but should not completely take over In this way, the bully does not get the attention he or she seeks, the victim is empowered, and the bystanders see that the victim can stand up to the bully. This intervention technique is most appropriate for younger children (preschool and early elementary school), when the bullying situation is not dangerous, teachers can get actively involved, and bullying patterns have not yet been set Teachers should also intervene in the bullying conflicts of older children, but, because they can be more dangerous (especially now that weapons are so readily available), immediate, direct intervention may be more appropriate.

The above technique shows a way in which adults can respond once the bullying has occurred. However, there are also techniques that can be used by parents, teachers, or other adults to help prevent bullying from occurring and to prepare children if it does. Adults can help both bullies and victims through role-playing (Slaby, 1994) This may help bullies develop empathy and think of the consequences of their actions (e.g , bullies can play the role of victim so that they can experience how it feels). Moreover, it helps victims practice assertive responses to conflict situations For bullies, adults should set firm, consistent limits on aggressive behavior, help them develop constructive strategies for getting what they want, and provide them with adequate supervision At the same time, adults can teach victimized children assertive, nonaggressive

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behaviors, such as maintaining eye contact, standing tall, and keeping a firm voice, as well as encourage them to develop new abilities and to join structured peer groups (team sports, music groups, and so forth). This will increase self-esteem and help these children develop friendships. Finally, adults can encourage "bystander" children to get help when bullying occurs and can show them how to intervene, when appropriate.

Cognitive Techniques

The techniques described above are mostly interventions that try to modify children's behavior directly. However, teachers can also use cognitive interventions to control bullying and victimization. These programs try to change children's behaviors by modifying their maladaptive thought patterns and beliefs. In particular, they try to teach children to process social cues more thoroughly and to think about the consequences of their actions. Cognitive interventions can be designed for children of all ages, but they are generally most effective for children in middle childhood and early adolescence (elementary and middle school). Before that time, children have more limited cognitive abilities, and, thus, these interventions need to be simpler. After that time, the thought patterns of aggressive and nonaggressive children become increasingly differentiated (Slaby & Guerra, 1988), suggesting that maladaptive cognitions become more ingrained and difficult to modify.

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One cognitive intervention program was Slaby's "Aggressors, Victims, and Bystanders" middle school curriculum (1994). The development of this curriculum was based on the results of an assessment study that attempted to identify distinct patterns of thought for children who are aggressors, victims, and bystanders. It was thought that once these patterns were understood, children in each group could be trained to think like "nonviolent problem-solvers." There were several major findings of this study that were incorporated into the intervention. Aggressors were shown to believe that violence can be used to gain respect and that it is often the only alternative to victimization. Moreover, they were impulsive and inflexible in their processing of social information. Victims (particularly boys) believed that interpersonal violence is acceptable. They were not assertive and seemed to have poor communication skills. Finally, bystanders who support violence tended to believe that they could have no effect on the violence of others and that it is none of their business. Some bystanders even encouraged violence in others.

The "Aggressors, Victims, and Bystanders" curriculum was developed around these and other findings of the assessment study. It was administered in 23 classes in three public middle schools. Some of the main goals of the program were: to teach critical thinking and impulse control, to challenge beliefs that contribute to aggression, to teach effective communication strategies, to encourage social perspective-taking, and to foster prosocial problem-solving. These skills were conveyed in 20 lessons through lectures, discussions, role-playing activities, and group projects.

This program was moderately successful in improving problem-solving and lessening aggression and victimization among the children that participated. Moreover, although it was not completely effective, it was the first violence prevention curriculum to address victims and bystanders, as well as aggressors. Thus, it is a useful prototype for future bullying interventions.

Child-Centered Interventions

Some programs engage the children themselves in resolving the conflicts of peers. Examples of this type of intervention include peer mediation and bully courts. In peer mediation programs, participating children attend training sessions in which they learn conflict resolution and negotiation skills. These children then serve as impartial mediators in the disputes of others (Gerber & Terry-Day, 1999). In the bully court programs, children who have been elected by peers serve as "justices" in bullying "trials." Under the supervision of adults, they hear complaints of bullying and decide on punishments (Laslett, 1982).

Both of these types of programs have shown some success, but more formal testing is needed (Gerber & Terry-Day, 1999; Laslett, 1982; Olweus, 1991). In any case, the programs have several potential strengths and weaknesses. They have the potential to be more effective than traditional types of interventions, because the mediating is done by peers that the children respect, rather than by adults. Moreover, in addition to reducing violence in the schools, these programs can reduce the amount of time school administrators spend dealing with student conflicts and can enhance the self-esteem, leadership ability, and problem-solving skills of the "mediators" and "justices" who participate (Gerber & Terry-Day, 1999; Laslett, 1982). On the other hand, there are also potential drawbacks to the programs. Victims may be afraid or embarrassed to tell on bullies, particularly to peers. The "mediators" or "justices" may have difficulty remaining impartial and may be intimidated by bullies. Finally, the programs seem to focus more on punishment than on prevention (Olweus, 1991).

This kind of intervention is more appropriate for

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older children (middle school and high school), because older children tend to be more concerned with how peers perceive them than with how adults perceive them Moreover, older children are more likely to have the maturity necessary to be peer mediators or to serve on bully courts.

Conclusions

This article described three types of interventions that can be used to prevent or reduce bullying: the "whole-school" approach, techniques for parents and childhood professionals, and child-centered interventions. Although many of these intervention techniques apply to teachers in school settings, the main principles can be used by any professional working with children. The "whole-school" and child-centered approaches can be used by professionals working with groups of children in any institutional setting, including summer camps and residential facilities. In addition, many of the suggestions for parents and teachers can be used by any adult who works with children, including pediatricians and social workers These professionals can not only use the techniques directly, but can also suggest them to the parents with whom they interact

Each of the programs described has its strengths and weaknesses and may work best for specific populations. In particular, although the "whole school" approach can be used for children from a wide range of ages, the parent/childhood professional techniques described may be more effective for younger children, and the child-centered techniques may be more appropriate for older children However, regardless of the approach, it is important for all interventions to address the problems not only of bullies but also of victims and bystanders.

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