

A Statement from NJ Coalition for Bullying Awareness and Prevention, 1/10/13

Bullying in School is Child Abuse

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Bullying involves a child being intentionally and repeatedly hurt, physically or psychologically, by others in a relationship characterized by an imbalance of power between the targeted child and those doing harm. The power imbalance may be a function of actual or perceived membership in a minority group, differences in physical or psychological strength, or popularity, or across a wide range of other characteristics and disparities. The power imbalance renders bullying a form of abuse rather than a conflict. Evidence from cross-sectional as well as longitudinal studies indicates that the experience of being chronically bullied as a child - generally defined as bullying occurring at least two to three times per month - causes significant harm, often lasting into adulthood.

Bullying in school occurs over extended time periods - the typical pattern is months or even years - and therefore provides multiple opportunities for educators and other school staff to be aware it is occurring. Schools have custodial responsibility for students, i.e., in loco parentis. Staff and administrators can facilitate bullying through inaction, indirect encouragement, establishing or permitting a "bullying culture," and modeling bullying-like behavior. Alternatively, staff and administrators can establish effective reporting and investigatory procedures, create a culture of caring and responsiveness to vulnerable and hurt children, and can establish evidence-based and systematic approaches to bullying. Indeed, 48 states in the United States have established anti-bullying laws that require proactive and strong responses to bullying in school. Nevertheless, these laws have remained separate and apart from regulations and laws in the child welfare system.

We argue that bullying is indeed a child welfare matter. If staff and administrators ignore or facilitate peer bullying, the criteria for accepted standards of child neglect are fulfilled, albeit on an institutional level. By permitting peer bullying through inaction or direct actions the school is guilty of failing to provide adequate supervision, failure to attend to the child's psychological and emotional needs, and failure to protect the child from harm. Moreover, when staff and administrators directly bully children through 'put-downs', grade deflation, ostracizing or isolating, this behavior should be characterized as child abuse. We suggest that school bullying should therefore be seen as an instance of (institutional) child abuse and neglect, and the phenomenon brought within the purview and structures used to address child abuse and neglect, including corresponding laws and regulations. That is, there should be a duty to report, and the involvement of social service agencies and child advocates. Construing childhood bullying in this way will lead to more effective prevention and addressing of bullying, and safer, better lives for children. //