What We Know About Bullying

What is Bullying?
Bullying is aggressive behavior that is intentional and that involves an imbalance of power or strength. Typically, it is repeated over time. A child who is being bullied has a hard time defending himself or herself.

Bullying can take many forms such as: hitting or punching (physical bullying); teasing or name-calling (verbal bullying); intimidation through gestures or social exclusion (nonverbal bullying or emotional bullying); and sending insulting messages by e-mail (cyber bullying).

Prevalence of Bullying:
• Studies show that between 15-25% of U.S. students are bullied with some frequency (“sometimes or more often”) while 15-20% report that they bully others with some frequency (Melton et al., 1998; Nansel et al., 2001).

• Recent statistics show that while school violence has declined 4% during the past several years, the incidence of behaviors such as bullying, has increased 5% between 1999 and 2001 (U.S. Dept. of Ed., 2002).

• Bullying has been identified as a major concern by schools across the U.S. (NEA3, 2003).

• In surveys of 3rd-8th graders in 14 Massachusetts schools, nearly half who had been frequently bullied reported that the bullying had lasted six months or longer (Mullin-Rindler, 2003).

• Research indicates that children with disabilities or special needs may be at a higher risk of being bullied than other children (see Rigby, 2002, for review).

Bullying and Gender:
• By self-report, boys are more likely than girls to bully others (Nansel et al., 2001; Banks 1997).

• Girls frequently report being bullied by both boys and girls, but boys report that they are most often bullied only by other boys (Melton et al., 1998; Olweus, 1993).

• Verbal bullying is the most frequent form of bullying experienced by both boys and girls. Boys are more likely to be physically bullied by their peers (Olweus, 1993; Nansel et al., 2001); girls are more likely to report being targets of rumor-spreading and sexual comments (Nansel et al., 2001). Girls are more more likely to bully each other through social exclusion (Olweus, 2002).

• Use of derogatory speculation about sexual orientation is so common that many parents do not think of telling their children that it could be hurtful (NEA2, 2003).

Consequences of Bullying:
• Stresses of being bullied can interfere with student’s engagement and learning in school (NEA Today, 1999).

• Children and youth who are bullied are more likely than other children to be depressed, lonely, anxious, have low self-esteem, feel unwell, and think about suicide (Limber, 2002; Olweus, 1993).

• Students who are bullied may fear going to school, using the bathroom, and riding on the school bus (NEA³, 2003).
In a survey of 3rd-8th graders in 14 Massachusetts schools, more than 14% reported that they were often afraid of being bullied (Mullin-Rindler, 2003).

Research shows that bullying can be a sign of other serious antisocial and/or violent behavior. Children and youth who frequently bully their peers are more likely than others to get into frequent fights, be injured in a fight, vandalize or steal property, drink alcohol, smoke, be truant from school, drop out of school, and carry a weapon (Nansel et al., 2003; Olweus, 1993).

Bullying also has an impact on other students at school who are bystanders to bullying (Banks, 1997). Bullying creates a climate of fear and disrespect in schools and has a negative impact on student learning (NEA¹, 2003).

Adult Response to Bullying:

Adults are often unaware of bullying problems (Limber, 2002). In one study, 70% of teachers believed that teachers intervene “almost always” in bullying situations; only 25% of students agreed with this assessment (Charach et al., 1995).

25% of teachers see nothing wrong with bullying or putdowns and consequently intervene in only 4% of bullying incidents (Cohn & Canter, 2002).

Students often feel that adult intervention is infrequent and unhelpful and they often fear that telling adults will only bring more harassment from bullies (Banks, 1997).

In a survey of students in 14 elementary and middle schools in Massachusetts, more than 30% believed that adults did little or nothing to help in bullying incidents (Mullin-Rindler, 2003).

References


Olweus, D. (February 23, 2002). Personal communication.
