Dispelling the Myths of Bullying

ABSTRACT
School violence is a widespread and serious social problem. Much of school violence involves bullying, a practice found in school settings around the world. The effects of bullying are traumatic and long lasting. New technology has engendered a new form of bullying: cyberbullying. This article describes various forms of bullying (verbal, physical, relational, and cyber) and offers several anti-bullying tactics.

Kirsten* started her senior year with optimism and confidence. But by graduation, she was anxious, traumatized, and glad that high school was ending. A bully had ruined her senior year. The source of the bullying utterly surprised Kirsten: It was Belinda, with whom she had been good friends since elementary school. There were several things Kirsten did not know about the behavior of bullies; for example, bullying can occur anywhere, bullies have friends and admirers, and bullying is often a social event. The damage from bullying extends beyond the target; like tossing a

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large stone into a mud puddle, the splash from bullying soils the perpetrators and even bystanders. There has been a great deal of research interest in the past decade in bullying behavior; unfortunately, principals, teachers, and nurses have yet to incorporate these basic findings into their daily practices. In Kirsten’s case, despite repeated trips to the school nurse’s office for somatic symptoms, the nurse failed to recognize that peer harassment was causing Kirsten’s stress.

**BULLYING AND WHAT IS KNOWN ABOUT IT**

Bullying is a worldwide phenomenon with adverse effects that can be felt for many years afterward (Dussich & Maekoya, 2007). The modern study of bullying began with Olweus in Sweden in the 1970s (Olweus, 1978). After three boys in Norway who had been targeted by bullies committed suicide in 1983, Olweus was commissioned by the Norwegian government to study the phenomenon. In the course of his studies, Olweus found that 20% of Norwegian children had been bullied (Olweus, 1993). Since the seminal work of Olweus, many more studies have been completed worldwide, leading to a better understanding of the prevalence, etiology, and potential remediation of bullying behavior.

Olweus’ definition of bullying includes the repeated negative actions of one or more students toward a victim (Olweus, 2001). Commonalities among other definitions include a systematic abuse of power involving repetition, harm, and unequal power (Nansel & Overpeck, 2003). A careful distinction is made to exclude playful teasing, one-time aggression, and joking. The essential elements of bullying are that it is both clearly malicious and unwarranted.

**BULLYING PREVALENCE**

The number of incidents actually reported to school officials is low, as many cases may go unreported (Stassen Berger, 2007). In one U.S. study of students in grades 4 through 12, 45% of children reported having been targets or agents of bullying (Hoover & Olsen, 2001). A similar survey at a South African parochial high school reported that 90% of students had either been victims of or witnessed bullying during their high school years (Dussich & Maekoya, 2007). Bullying is relatively uncommon in Japan, with 1.6 cases per 1,000 children reported to school officials (Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology, 2005, as cited in Dussich & Maekoya, 2007). In the United States, the National Crime Victimization Survey found that only 7% of students ages 12 to 18 stated that they had been targets of bullies within the past 6 months (DeVoe et al., 2004). However, Nansel et al. (2001) found in their study of students in grades 6 through 10 that approximately 30% of U.S. youth were involved in bullying, either as victims (10.6%), perpetrators (13%), or both (6.3%).

In addition, Nansel et al. (2001) learned that both the targets and perpetrators experienced significantly higher rates of emotional problems and poorer psychosocial adjustment. Smoking and poorer academic achievement were associated with all individuals involved in the bullying experience (victims, perpetrators, and those who had acted as both). However, bullying’s effects were not identical. For example, higher rates of alcohol abuse were reported by the perpetrators. Making friends was more difficult for the victims but was easier for those who bullied. Indeed, bullying was socially enhancing, as bullies were admired by friends.

**CATEGORIES OF BULLYING**

Bullying behavior falls into four general categories: verbal, physical, relational, and the newest form, cyber. The various kinds of bullying can also have multiple foci; offensive behavior may target and incorporate gender, race, homophobia, or interfaith issues.

**Verbal Bullying**

British researchers found that verbal aggression was the most frequent method of bullying, occurring at similar rates with both boys and girls (Rivers & Smith, 1994). Racial and gender slurs are often components of the verbal assaults. Slander (defined as malicious and untrue statements) and name calling are the most common bullying methods (Dussich & Maekoya, 2007). And although sticks and stones do break bones, aggressive verbal attacks may live on indefinitely, as described in *And Words Can Hurt Forever* (Gabarino & deLara, 2002). Gabarino and deLara wrote that verbal attacks were perceived by a child who had been bullied as “psychological stabbings” (p. 24); other teenagers said they desired more supervision by teachers and school administrators due to the verbal attacks.

**Physical Bullying**

Like many kinds of abuse occurring on a continuum, physical bullying can range from slight shoving to burns and broken bones (Dussich & Maekoya, 2007). Clearly, an overt physical attack on school grounds will be addressed by school disciplinar-
ians. However, physical abuse often occurs after school and off school grounds, where the school has no jurisdiction. And after 37 separate acts of targeted school violence (with the most famous occurring at Columbine High School in 1999), the U.S. Secret Service issued a report stating that three quarters of the attackers (n = 29) had been physically bullied, attacked, or injured by others.

Relational Bullying

Encouragement to shun and ignore the victim are common forms of non-physical bullying (Dussich & Maekoya, 2007). The objective is to disrupt shared relationships between peers and is more common among girls than boys (Raskauskas & Stoltz, 2004). Gossip and manipulation of friendships comprise the indirect attacks of relational bullying. Because of its indirect nature, relational bullying may go unrecognized by parents and teachers. Nevertheless, the effects of this kind of bullying become more pronounced over time, as peer approval is vital to adolescents. Victims experience isolation and humiliation.

Cyberbullying

Cyberbullying is a newly identified form of bullying, and its occurrence is common. Approximately 90% of teenagers report using the Internet at least once per week, and approximately one third (32%) state that they have been targets of a spectrum of annoying and intimidating messages (Lenhart, 2007). These messages may come in the form of private text messages or e-mails, pictures posted without permission (especially unbecoming or embarrassing photos), and rumors spread via e-mail, text messages, or social networking Web sites. These Web sites (Facebook.com and MySpace.com are the best known) have mushroomed in popularity; tens of millions of Internet users visit them daily.

Research efforts with a focus on cyberbullying are still in a preliminary state. One of the few completed investigations of cyberbullying involved 177 seventh graders in an urban setting (Li, 2007). More than half (54%) of the students had suffered the usual forms of bullying (verbal, physical, and relational), with one quarter of them bullied via electronic communication tools. Girls outnumbered boys as victims of cyberbullying (60% of victims were girls). Most cyberbullying victims did not report the Web-based bullying activity to adults, either at school or at home (Li, 2007).

INDIVIDUAL EXAMPLE

Kirsten, whose senior year was ruined by a bully, did report the incidents to adults. Kirsten informed the school principal that Belinda had created an “I hate Kirsten” Web page on MySpace.com. Kirsten’s principal listened supportively but stated she had no power to stop the
bullying, as the behavior did not occur on school grounds. Kirsten argued that because an invitation to join the “I hate Kirsten” Web page had been sent to 75 students, it was a hot topic of conversation in the hallways and was thus occurring on school grounds. But Belinda wasn’t through yet. She tried more indirect tactics, such as moving Kirsten’s assigned chair to the corner of the room between classes. When Kirsten asked the teacher why her chair had been moved, the teacher replied that he had not moved it. Belinda and her peers giggled and whispered as Kirsten moved her chair back to its usual spot. Belinda also tried to turn other students against Kirsten through malicious gossip.

Finally, Kirsten appealed to the school counselor, who invited Belinda into his office for a chat. Belinda raised her voice, loudly denying the charges. “If you’re innocent, why are you yelling?” the counselor replied. Belinda then understood that she was suspect and ceased her behavior for the remaining 3 weeks of Kirsten’s senior year.

**WHAT PSYCHIATRIC NURSES CAN DO**

Although it is doubtful that bullying can be completely prevented, nurses can take action in several ways:

- Understand and validate that bullying is a daily occurrence for some students.
- Become an anti-bullying advocate. Although some schools may have a zero-tolerance policy for bullying, it may refer primarily to physical aggression rather than the more subtle relational bullying and cyberbullying. Educate teachers, administrators, and parents about the realities (frequency and kinds) of bullying. Bullying can happen in any school setting.
- Get acquainted with conflict resolution programs (Olweus, 1993; Smith, 1997). In Norway and the United Kingdom, these programs have decreased bullying in school systems by 30% to 50%. There are also Web-based resources, including “Operation Respect” (http://www.operationrespect.org), a program founded by singer, activist, and anti-bullying advocate Paul Yarrow of the folk group Peter, Paul, and Mary. The program, which seeks to create coercion-free, optimal learning environments for youth, teaches the four characteristics of a caring community: healthy expression of feelings; caring, compassion, and cooperation; creative resolution of conflicts; and appreciation of differences. The curriculum is free and is sponsored by McGraw-Hill.

**REFERENCES**


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