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Bullies, Victims and the Problem of School Violence

By Dr. Paul O'Connell

Recent examples of violence in Canadian and U.S. schools raise questions such as “how could these events have occurred?” or “what kind of person could do something like that?”

In many instances, the young people involved have a history of difficulties fitting in with peers at school. These adjustment difficulties often include a history of problems with bullying or victimization.

Bullying is negative action - physical or verbal - that has a hostile intent, involves a power differential, may be repeated over time, and can involve one or more perpetrators and recipients. Bullying may also be “relational,” involving social manipulation that causes distress to a victim (e.g., gossiping, spreading rumours, or encouraging others to exclude a person). This type of bullying is more common among girls.

How much of a problem is bullying?

Bullying seems to be a very common occurrence. In surveys of over 4,700 Ontario elementary and middle-school children, 38% of students reported being victimized at least “once or twice” during the term; 15% reported being victimized “more than once or twice” during the term. Twenty-nine percent of children admitted to bullying others “once or twice” during the term, while 6% reported bullying others “more than once or twice” during the term.

There are good reasons to be concerned about all students when bullying occurs. Children have a right to feel secure at school; bullying harms this sense of security. Victims of bullying may become anxious, withdrawn, or depressed. Bullies are at risk for continued involvement in antisocial and criminal behaviour throughout adolescence and adulthood. Children who witness bullying may begin to accept it as unavoidable. In some cases, witnesses may join bullies in harming victims. In the worst-case scenario, dominant aggressive children can attract others with antisocial tendencies to form groups or gangs.

What can be done to solve the problem?

A “whole-school” approach to reducing bullying involves students, teachers, parents, and administrators in the development of clear rules and consequences that discourage all forms of aggression. With a whole-school policy, children know that they can prevent bullying because adults will follow through to protect all students.

A first goal may be to raise awareness by encouraging all members of the school community to meet and discuss the problem. Allowing parents, teachers, administrators, and students to describe their experiences with bullying and victimization will help determine the extent and seriousness of the problem. This process will also demonstrate to those who minimize the significance of

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aggression that bullying is not simply “roughhousing,” “a phase,” or a case of “boys will be boys.” ’

An important idea in the whole-school approach is to develop expectations for behaviour that are framed positively. For example, a guiding principle can be that all children in the school have the right to feel safe at school. This safe-school orientation contrasts with an anti-bullying orientation, where considerable energy is devoted to dealing with rule violations. This doesn’t mean, of course, that consequences don’t exist. Teachers and administrators will need to monitor and document instances of bullying behaviour and take action against persistent problems. Consequences for bullying should include having bullies make amends that serve to develop positive attitudes and/or skills. As examples, perpetrators might:

- 1) engage in activities that promote perspective taking and empathy (e.g., developing role plays related to frustration and anger management);
- 2) review conflict resolution strategies and apply them to the situation at hand or a future incident;

- 3) observe and report on positive role models and acts of kindness around the school;

- 4) participate in some form of caring act within the school;

- 5) complete activities that enable the aggressive child to reflect on his or her own strengths and weaknesses, or;

- 6) participate on the Safe School Committee at the school.

In persistent and / or extreme cases, more punitive consequences may need to be used. These can include involvement of parents, in school suspension, and police involvement. The underlying principle, however, remains the same: All students need to feel safe at school.