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Bullying

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Boys Town

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Bullying

Amanda B. Siebecker and Susan M. Swearer

Definition

Bullying may be the most prevalent type of aggression experienced by school-aged youth. Bullying has been defined as any form of aggression in which one student or group of students repeatedly harasses a target (i.e., victim) verbally or physically. The three key components or characteristics of bullying behaviors are (1) the behavior is intended to harm, (2) the behavior occurs repeatedly over time, and (3) there is an imbalance of power. While bullying is a subset of aggression, these three characteristics should be present for the behavior to be considered bullying. For example, punching someone in the face is a single act of aggression, unless it occurs over and over again and the target is unable to defend him or herself. In addition, the imbalance of power need not be physical; it can take the form of intellectual or a perceived power differential (i.e.) social status).

Bullying behaviors have been further refined to include either direct or indirect behaviors and relational or physical aggression. Direct forms of bullying include face-to-face confrontation, which may be phys-

ical (i.e., punching) or verbal (i.e., name-calling). Indirect bullying, on the other hand, includes a third party. Indirect bullying may take the form of spreading rumors, teasing, threatening, or harassing and may be communicated verbally, on the Internet, using text messaging, graffiti, among other forms. Relational bullying is considered a form of aggression where the relationship is under attack. For example, a student may get others to leave the target out of a group, thus removing supportive relationships and damaging relationships. Physical bullying includes the more stereotypical bullying behaviors such as hitting, kicking and punching.

Researchers and educators are recognizing that bullying is not relegated to absolute roles, rather students engage in bullying and victimization in multiple roles. Specifically, participants in bullying interactions include people other than the bully and the victim. Rather, involvement in bullying occurs along a continuum and there are at least four roles along this continuum: bullies, victims, bully victims, and bystanders. Bullies are students who engage in victimizing a target. Victims are those students who are repeatedly victimized by a bully and have difficulty defending themselves. Bully victims are students who both bully others and who are victimized by others. Finally, bystanders are those students who observe the bullying interaction. Two types of bystanders have been identified in the literature: passive and active. Passive bystanders standby and silently observe the bullying while active bystanders engage in encouraging the bully or defending the victim. The continuum illustrates that students can function in multiple roles and that these roles are not fixed nor are mutually exclusive.

Prevalence

Determining the prevalence of bullying among schooled youth is a difficult task. Currently there is no standard method of measuring bullying; therefore determining the frequency with which it occurs is somewhat problematic. In a recent study of 15,686 students in grades six through ten, 29.9% of students reported involvement in bullying (13% bullies, 10.6% victims, and 6% bully victims). Another study found that 88% of students observe bullying as a bystander and 77% of students are the victim of bullying. Worldwide rates of bullying behaviors range from 3% to 20%.

Impact

While bullying is increasingly being recognized as a serious problem in schools, researchers and educators are still in the beginning stages of understanding the long- and short-term impact of bullying. Studies have found that students involved in bullying are at greater risk for internalizing and externalizing problems than those who are not involved in bullying. Students may be at higher risk for psychosocial problems, behavior and academic problems, relationship problems, and legal problems. Even more concerning is that the effects of bullying can be seen long after children are no longer in school.

A recent meta-analytic review of the research on victims of bullying found that victims of bullying may be more likely to be depressed, lonely, anxious, and experience low self-esteem and negative self-concept. In addition, as a result of this psychosocial maladjustment, victims may also experience peer relationship problems. Victims may experience lower academic grades from difficulty concentrating or increased truancy due to fears of being victimized. Victims appear to lack social support from their peers. Research suggests that peer support is an important component in dealing with the stress of being bullied. When students are isolated from their

peers they lose an important support system and are left to deal with the bullying on their own. Victims may also take actions into their own hands when they feel as though nothing is being done to help them. For example, bullying was found to be the common denominator in 2/3 of the 37 school shootings investigated by the Secret Service.

Like victims, bullies also experience psychosocial problems. However, the research presents a somewhat more ambiguous picture of bullies. Some studies have found that they may be the most depressed or least depressed and may suffer from anxiety, specifically, social anxiety. Bullies may be rejected by others (peers or adults) or they may be popular and accepted by others. They are also at high risk for substance abuse and school dropout. In addition, bullies are also at risk for problems in adulthood. Specifically, 60% of students who were identified as bullies in grades 6-9 were convicted of a crime by the age of 24.

Bully victims are likely the most impaired group along the bully/victim continuum because they experience a combination of the effects experienced by both bullies and victims. Bully victims have been found to experience the highest levels of depression, anxiety, and aggression compared to bullies, victims, and notinvolved students. They are also at the highest risk for suicidal ideation.

Gender Differences

It appears that boys tend to be more involved in bullying in all participant roles when compared to girls. However, when relational aggression is included in studies of bullying, the gender disparity is more equal. Overall, research is somewhat unclear regarding specific gender differences in bullying behavior. Previous research indicated that boys were more involved in bullying. However, more recent studies that have included relational bullying in their definition reveal a slightly different picture.

Boys tend to experience more physical bullying while girls experience more relational bullying. While boys may experience relational bullying, girls are more likely to be targeted and are more affected by this form of bullying than are boys. In general, it appears that boys and girls are equally likely to be bullies but girls are more likely to be victims. Little research has investigated gender differences in bully victims and bystanders roles.

Development

From a developmental perspective, the incidence of bullying looks like a bell curve in that bullying steadily increases toward the end of elementary school (grades 4 and 5), peaks in middle school (grades 6-8), and declines in high school. While bullying steadily decreases, as students get older, it may never completely disappear. Research suggests that students may change tactics, for example, reports of sexual harassment increase at about the time reports of bullying decrease. This suggests that the form of bullying tends to follow a developmental pathway. Bullying in elementary schools tends to include more overt physical aggression. Whereas, bullying in middle and high school includes more covert behaviors (i.e., verbal teasing, social exclusion). Therefore, as physical bullying decreases relational bullying may remain constant. Unfortunately, as students get older, they are more likely to join in bullying and less likely to help victims.

Ecological Perspective

Bullying should be conceptualized as behavior resulting from an interaction between the child and his or her environment. Therefore, the problem does not simply lie within the child; rather it is the result of a number of factors such as child characteristics, school and community and home environment, learning history, societal norms, and peers. An environment may contribute

to incidence of bullying by harboring a climate where bullying is accepted as normal and as a right of passage, where there is little supervision by adults, or a lack of adult intervention when bullying is observed, or by ignoring victim reports of bullying.

Conclusion

Bullying is a complex phenomenon, which is adversely affecting the majority of school-aged youth. There are long-term psychological and behavioral consequences associated with involvement in bullying (i.e., suicidal ideation and criminal behavior). While research is still uncovering new facets of the bullying dynamic, it is important to recognize there are multiple roles that students can employ in bullying interactions. In addition, bullying is not only direct, physical aggression; rather it can take the form of direct verbal aggression or indirect harassment. Bullying is not only a problem among boys but is increasingly being recognized as a problem among girls. Finally, if we are to begin understanding bullying behavior, we must consider it from both ecological and developmental perspectives.

See also: Aggressiveness; School violence

Suggested Reading

- Espelage, D.L., & S.M. Swearer (editors) (2004). *Bullying in American Schools: A Social-Ecological Perspective on Prevention and Intervention*. Mahwah, N.J.: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Garbarino, J. and E. Delara (2002). *And Words Can Hurt Forever: How to Protect Adolescents from Bullying, Harassment, and Emotional Violence*. New York, N.Y.: Free Press.
- Smith, P. K., Pepler, D., & Rigby, K. (2004). *Bullying in Schools: How Successful Can Interventions Be?* New York: Cambridge University Press.