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Investigating, Educating, and Intervening:
The Target Bullying Project at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln

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School Psychological Practice and Bullying

As some researchers have observed, U.S. researchers have historically lagged behind our international counterparts in investigating bullying among youth (Swearer & Espelage, 2004). However, as bullying and victimization rightly entered the media spotlight, U.S. researchers began recognizing the importance of research to enhance our knowledge of these phenomena (i.e. Nansel, Overpeck, Pilla, Ruan, Simons-Morton, & Scheidt, 2001). Our research base for school-based practitioners continues to expand. For example, we know that rates of bullying increase when students transition from elementary to middle school (Pellegrini & Long, 2002). We have learned that frequent victimization is associated with a multitude of negative outcomes such as depression and anxiety (Craig, 1998; Swearer, Song, Cary, Eagle, & Mickelson, 2001), as well as increased school refusal (Salmon, James, Cassidy, & Javaloyes, 2000), and absenteeism (Slee, 1994). Indeed, many of us have witnessed first-hand the distress that frequent victimization can have on the students that we serve.

It is for precisely this reason that school psychologists are well-suited to address bullying and its associated sequelae within our schools. As a profession, we understand the individual ecologies of the schools that we work in and how those factors impact the daily lives of students. According to NASP's *Blueprint for Training and Practice III* (Ysseldyke et al., 2006), one of our functional competencies as school psychologists is the ability to use data-based decision making to enhance outcomes for students. Through data-based decision making, we have the opportunity to identify bullying behaviors, modify the ecology of the schools to reduce or eliminate victimization, and truly enhance educational and social experiences for all youth.   These are exciting times to be school psychologists dedicated to reducing bullying in schools. With the recent publication of a meta-analysis on school bullying interventions by Merrell and colleagues (2008), it has become more evident that significant work remains to be done. The purpose of the current article is to detail how the Target Bullying research team at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln has partnered with several schools and school districts to use data-based decision-making in order to reduce bullying and victimization.

Target Bullying Research and Intervention System

Over the last decade, the Target Bully research team at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln has collaborated with many schools and school districts to identify where bullying occurs and how to reduce its prevalence. As our experience has grown, we have developed methods and instruments to identify critical concerns of staff members and students. Therefore, we typically begin this consultation by interviewing school administrators and if needed, distributing the Bully Survey (Swearer, 2001) to all students and when possible, teachers and/or parents. This procedure allows us to get a picture of the scope of bullying from the perspectives of students who are bullying, students who are victimized, students who engage in both behaviors, students who observe bullying, and finally, students who are not involved in bullying. The Bully Survey System also provides data on where students are bullied, by whom (i.e. older students, students the same age, etc.), and what type of bullying is occurring (i.e. physical, relational, cyberbullying, etc). These data are compiled, analyzed, and presented to school staff specifically for the purposes of designing school-wide interventions.

Reviewing student data on bullying in their school allows teachers and administrators to detect patterns and understand the complexity of these behaviors that they may not have previously known. As part of a larger longitudinal study, we administered self-report surveys to students multiple times over several years. During the fourth year of this longitudinal study, one school implemented a school-wide bullying intervention program that they hoped would reduce bullying in their school. Indeed, over the next year students reported fewer incidents of victimization and fewer students self-identified as bullies (Swearer & Siebecker, 2008). Similar consultations have indicated that students often report being bullied in consistent areas within their school. Students in one rural school district reported that bullying frequently occurs on their bus both to and from school (Swearer & Babl, 2007). In our anecdotal experience, each school has individual physical locations where bullying occurs more frequently than in other locations. Listed below are several "hot spots" we have discovered through our surveys with school-age youth.

Top 10 Most Common Places Students are Bullied in School:

1. Hallway
2. Academic Class
3. Gym
4. Bus
5. Cafeteria
6. Recess
7. Homeroom
8. Outside Before School
9. Outside After School
10. "Other"

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Collaborating with schools to investigate bullying has also allowed us to contribute to the growing knowledge base. We recently concluded an investigation of an individual cognitive-behavioral intervention for use with students who bully others (Swearer & Givens, 2006). This intervention program was offered to parents and teachers of students who had received an office referral for bullying others. The child's parents chose whether the student would participate in an one-on-one cognitive-behavioral intervention with a therapist, or would be given the usual consequence of in-school suspension. In all cases, parents chose the intervention, suggesting that parents would like their children who are involved in bullying to receive help.

Our collaborative research has investigated bullying and its relation to depression and anxiety (Swearer et al., 2001), locus of control (Cary, 2004), theory of mind (Babl et al., 2007), and most recently, homophobia (Swearer, Babl, Givens, & Turner, 2007). It is our hope that by understanding the associated sequelae of bullying, we can assist school personnel, parents, and students with not only reducing bullying, but also providing help for the associated sequelae of bullying.

This is an exciting time to be a school psychologist involved with combating bullying in schools. In many respects it seems an uphill battle because of the often held belief that bullying is "part of growing up." However, our expertise and training as data-based decision makers has increasingly made school psychologists the most logical choice to lead anti-bullying teams within schools and direct district level efforts. We here at the University of Nebraska - Lincoln challenge each of you to treat bullying as a problem that can be solved in your practica, internships, and eventually your careers. For more information on Target Bully at the University of Nebraska – Lincoln, please visit www.targetbully.com and http://brnet.unl.edu.