EFFECTIVE INTERVENTION

BULLYING
Comprehensive prevention programs can create a climate that discourages bullying.

Andrea S. Canter

A “normal part of childhood.” A “rite of passage.” While bullying affects 70 percent of all students, it is often overlooked, ignored, or minimized. Bullying persists in schools because of a tolerant culture created by adults and perpetuated by children. Preventing bullying requires changing this culture as much as identifying and intervening with its perpetrators and victims. Left untreated, bullying contributes to academic problems, antisocial behaviors, depression, and even suicide and extreme violence. It is critical that principals work with staff, parents, and students to create a culture where bullying is not tolerated.
Defining Bullying

Bullying occurs when a student is exposed repeatedly to intentional injury or discomfort inflicted by one or more other students. It includes verbal and/or physical assault, obscene gestures or facial expressions, and intentional exclusion. Many acts of “teasing” can have the same impact as more overt acts of intimidation.

However, while most educators would agree with this definition of bullying, many fail to recognize it in their school. Although physical aggression is commonly addressed, many teachers don’t notice verbal bullying such as teasing or shunning. Some consider it an inevitable “rite of passage” that children must learn to “handle” without adult intervention.

Students are even less likely to intervene when they see others being harassed. They may regard the victims as at least partly to blame, consider bullying as simply done in fun, or fear becoming targets themselves. Bullying victims often are insecure, lack the confidence and skill to stand up to the bully, and don’t seek help because they feel they are to blame or fear further harassment if they tell.

Knowing the factors that may place elementary students at high risk of victimization is the first step toward bullying prevention and intervention. Research has identified:

- Self-perception of low social competence;
- Poor peer relationships, including rejection by peers;
- Acting out, anxiety, or depression; and
- Physical weakness.

Factors related to bullying behavior include:

- Physical strength;
- Impulsivity; and
- Little or no empathy.

Identifying Bullying

Educators can use a variety of methods to identify the type and prevalence of bullying in their schools. Surveys can reveal the gap between perceptions of bullying and its true impact on students and school culture. Certain measures can also be used to identify students at risk of becoming perpetrators or victims of bullying. Principals are cautioned that no single source of data should be used in isolation to make decisions about individual students or to “diagnose” a problem.

“Students of all ages need to learn that bullying is unacceptable, that they have a role in stopping it, and that there are effective strategies...to protect themselves.”

All of the measures described here have significant limitations, and in many cases it is necessary to obtain parent consent and student agreement before engaging in an assessment of bullying. Support personnel, such as the school psychologist, are trained to help select and interpret these measures.

Peer nomination. The prevalence of bullying can be calculated by using this method, which requires safeguards to ensure confidentiality and encourage honesty. Ask students to respond privately to such general questions as “Who in your class (or grade) is picked on or teased by other kids?”

Teacher ratings. By using any of several well-researched scales, teachers can rate students’ disruptive and aggressive behaviors, social skills, and academic competence. Teacher ratings also can help identify general needs for prevention and intervention, and help evaluate the effectiveness of such programs over time.

Self-report. Ask older students to rate themselves on characteristics known to be predictive of bullying or being bullied. Combining this information with other sources can help identify students at risk and evaluate the effectiveness of bullying intervention and prevention programs.

Used in combination and over time, these approaches can be powerful means of tracking information about student needs, identifying students at risk, and evaluating the outcomes of intervention and prevention strategies. However, all share the limitations of subjectivity and differences in the perceptions of raters (e.g., peers, teachers, and self-ratings may not agree). Using multiple sources of information increases the reliability of the results.

Implementing Effective Intervention

The most effective bullying prevention programs are comprehensive in scope, addressing harassment at all levels: schoolwide (e.g., formulating and
publicizing new school policy, school assemblies); classroom (e.g., class discussions, enforcing classroom rules against bullying); and individual (e.g., individual and family counseling).

Other promising interventions include assertiveness training for the victims, counseling for families of bullies, and conflict resolution strategies.

Students of all ages need to learn that bullying is unacceptable, that they have a role in stopping it, and that there are effective strategies to both reduce bullying and protect themselves. Particularly in the primary grades, children can learn the difference between “telling” and “tattling”—a distinction that many adults fail to make. Children should be taught and encouraged to use words to solve problems, and know that adults at school will support them if they make positive efforts to stand up for themselves.

Anti-bullying information should be shared with parents through presentations at parent-teacher organization meetings, and through collaboration with community agencies that provide educational programs.

Bullying is a serious problem with long-term consequences. However, well-conducted, comprehensive bullying prevention programs can reduce the number of bullying incidents and create a climate that discourages bullying behavior.

Andrea S. Canter is editor of Communique, the newspaper of the National Association of School Psychologists. Her e-mail address is cqeditor@aol.com.