

Conceptualizing Help for Students Victimized by Bullies*

Friends, family, and teachers can and do make a difference in victims' post-bullying adjustment process. They need to learn about effective, supportive communication for bullied victims because not all messages—even those meant to be supportive—are equally effective, and receiving suboptimal support may impede victims' readjustment. On the other hand, the positive effect of emotional support, which is found to function across cultures, is encouraging. It signifies the importance of supportive communication and illuminates a promising path for victims to escape.

Masaki Matsunaga (2010)

A great deal has been written about bullying (see the sample of citations at the end of this resource). However, designs for how schools should help those victimized often amount to laundry lists of interventions. The focus here is on conceptualizing the nature and scope of the school's role in helping those who are victimized and the importance of embedding the efforts into a unified, comprehensive, and equitable system of student and learning supports.

What Will Help Victims

Think first about prevention. However, given that bullying can't be completely eliminated, schools must plan ways to immediately help those victimized. And plans must be made for providing ongoing assistance if there are indications that a student is still being bullied and/or that the effects are continuing to interfere with a student's functioning at school and general well-being.

Preventing bullying, of course, is something all schools want to do. However, as is widely acknowledged, this requires more than implementing an empirically-supported bullying prevention program. Such programs can be helpful, but are quite limited in their long-term impact, and they often work against efforts to improve how schools address other barriers to learning and teaching and re-engage disconnected students.

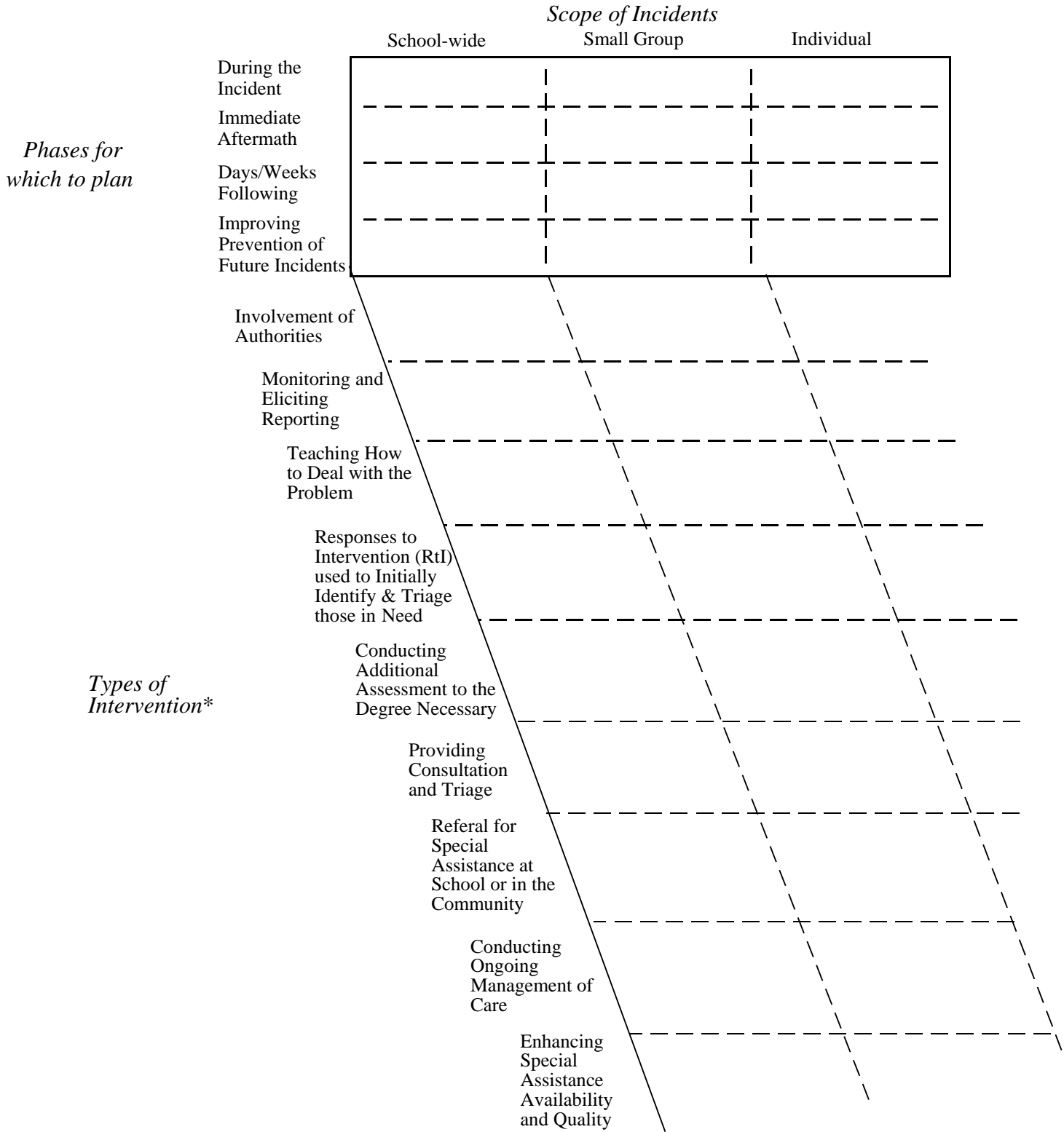
Fundamentally, preventing bullying and many other problems at schools requires an approach that enhances a caring, supportive, and safe environment and continuously promotes a sense of community. That is, prevention is related to strategies from which an improved school climate emerges. Such strategies aim at transforming schools so that they do much more to enhance equity of opportunity for student success and well-being and provide essential supports for teachers to be effective.

Given that bullying prevention is a long-term and rather elusive goal, it is essential for schools to play a significant role in helping those who are victimized by bullying (including cyberbullying) and other psychosocial and educational conditions. Such help can be conceptualized in terms of (a) the scope of the incidents, (b) phases for which planning is needed, and (c) types of intervention (see the Exhibit on the following page). Operationalizing all this calls for the involvement of a range of school staff, peers, and folks at home and in the community.

*The material in this document was culled from the literature by Selina Flores as part of her work with the national Center for Mental Health in Schools at UCLA.

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A Framework for Helping those Victimized



*Interventions are implemented school-wide, in classrooms, school offices, at home, and in various community locales.

The framework underscores that planning special assistance for those victimized by bullies mainly differs in intervention content and not in the basic dimensions and elements illustrated. That is, the framework also applies to dealing with crises and various other incidents involving victims.

With specific respect to bullying, the first concern is providing immediate support for and ensuring the safety of those victimized. This requires the involvement of school administrators and sometimes the police. If the school is not taking appropriate actions, district, school board, and even state officials may need to be contacted.

It is essential to account for the reality that students often do not report being bullied (e.g., they are embarrassed, ashamed, afraid of being seen as a “tattler”). Therefore, constant attention is needed to monitoring for bullying and facilitating reporting.

Given all that feasibly can be done to enhance safety, schools then need to work with staff and families to develop ways to prevent further bullying. This requires interventions aimed at bullies and bystanders, as well as those victimized. There is considerable emphasis in the literature on helping all three parties using counseling, social-emotional learning, and involvement in prosocial activities.

Examples of Online Resources for Helping Those Victimized

Any websearch turns up many sites offering “tips” and advice. Here are a few:

- >*How to Talk with Educators at Your Child’s School About Bullying: Tips for Parents of Bullied Children* – From the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services’ StopBullyingNow campaign –
<http://www.cms.k12.nc.us/mediaroom/backtoschool/Documents/Bullying-Prevention%20Tips%20for%20Parents/Tips-How%20To%20Talk%20To%20Educators.pdf>
- >Helpguide.com – *Dealing with Bullying: Helping Bullied Kids and Teens* –
<http://www.helpguide.org/articles/abuse/dealing-with-bullying.htm>
- >The *Family Matters* website lists out 100 tips (25 at a time) for helping youngsters who have been victimized. The first 25 are at <http://www.ronitbaras.com/focus-on-the-family-parenting-family/bullying-12-how-to-help-bullying-victims/>

Examples of Advice

Adapted from: Education.com – http://www.education.com/reference/article/Ref_What_Do_if_Your/

- Never tell the student to ignore the bullying. What the youngster may “hear” is that you are going to ignore it. (And, if the student was able to simply ignore it, he or she likely would not have told you about it.)
- Don’t blame the student who is being bullied or assume that the youngster did something to provoke the bullying.
- Listen carefully to what the student tells you about the bullying. Ask him or her to describe who was involved and how and where each bullying episode happened.
- Learn as much as you can about the bullying tactics used (e.g., who? when? where? and witnesses?)
- Empathize. Tell him/her that bullying is wrong, not their fault, and that you are glad he or she had the courage to tell you about it. Ask what he or she thinks can be done to help. Assure him or her that you will think about what needs to be done and you will let him or her know what you are going to do.
- Even if you disagree with how the student handled the situation, don’t criticize.
- Do not encourage physical retaliation. Hitting another student is not likely to end the problem, and it could get him/her suspended or expelled or escalate the situation.
- Check your emotions. A protective instinct stirs strong emotions.

Concluding Comments

It is unlikely that a safe learning environment will emerge simply by developing a better “bullying prevention” program. Such programs can help, but ultimately what a school needs is a unified, comprehensive, and equitable system for addressing barriers to development and learning and re-engaging disconnected students.

The time has come for schools to move away from stand-alone programs for addressing problems such as bullying. Just adding another program worsens the marginalized, fragmented, and piecemeal status of student and learning supports.

Rather than pursuing yet another discrete program, it is essential to use each concern that rises to a high policy level as an opportunity to catalyze and leverage systemic change. The aim should be to take another step toward transforming how schools go about ensuring that all students have an equal opportunity to succeed at school and beyond. It is time to embed advocacy for discrete programs into advocacy for unifying and developing a comprehensive and equitable system.

Addressing barriers to learning and teaching and re-engaging disconnected students is a school improvement imperative. Developing and implementing a unified, comprehensive, and equitable system of student and learning supports is the next evolutionary stage in meeting this imperative.* It is the missing component in efforts to enhance school safety, close the achievement gap, reduce dropout rates, shut down the pipeline from schools to prisons, and promote well-being and social justice.

*See the *National Initiative for Transforming Student and Learning Supports* – <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/newinitiative.html>

For More Links to Matters Related to Bullying and Cyberbullying,

see the following Center's Quick Finds and documents:

- > *Bullying* - <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/qf/bully.htm>
- > *Social networks and social emotional development* - <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/qf/socialnetworks.html>
- > *Youth and Socially Interactive Technologies* - <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/youth/socint.pdf>
- > *Social networking and peer relationships* -- <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/socialnet.pdf>

For a developmental psychopathological perspective of peer victimization, see the May-June 2015 (v. 44) special issue of the *Journal of Clinical Child and Adolescent Psychology*.

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