

Bullying in Schools: How Can the ACT Against Violence Project Help?

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In response to the school shootings at Columbine and other schools throughout the United States, the Department of Secret Service and the Department of Education launched a nationwide investigation to understand school-based attacks and explore how future attacks could be prevented. This special collaboration culminated with the publication of the *Final Report and Findings of the Safe School Initiative: Implications for the Prevention of School Attacks in the United States*. While the investigation yielded no accurate or useful profile of school attackers, it did reveal the key finding that many of the attackers felt bullied, persecuted or injured by others prior to the attack. The team of researchers strongly encouraged ongoing efforts to prevent bullying in schools throughout the United States.

Just how common is bullying in U. S. schools? According to a study sponsored by the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development - NICHD (2001), bullying is widespread with more than 16 percent of school children reporting other students had bullied them. Nansel, Overpeck, Pilla, Ruan, Simons-Morton, and Scheidt (2001) surveyed 15,686 students in grades 6 through 10 in public and private schools throughout the United States and found that 29.9% of the sample had been involved with bullying. Specifically, 13.0% of the students reported being bullies, 10.6% reported being bullied, while 6.3% reported being both a bully and bullied. The study also revealed that males were more likely than females to be both perpetrators and targets of bullying. The Occurrence of bullying was higher among 6th- through 8th-grade students than among 9th and 10th-grade students. Both the perpetrators and the targets of bullying experienced poorer psychosocial adjustment (Nansel et al., 2001). What exactly is bullying? According to Olweus (1993), a well known researcher and expert in the field, bullying is aggressive behavior that is intended to cause injury and distress, occurs repetitively over time and transpires in a relationship in which there is an imbalance of power or strength. Bullying is normally divided into three common types- verbal bullying (e.g., taunting, teasing name-calling), physical bullying (e.g., kicking, punching, shoving) and psychological or non-verbal/non physical bullying (e.g. threatening, obscene gestures). While bullying is commonly associated with one perpetrator and a target, Gross (2002) promotes a broader understanding of bullying by introducing the notion of a bystander. Since a majority of bullying instances occur in the presence of other individuals, Gross claims that we are all either bullies, bullied, or bystanders. Craig and Pelter (1997) found that the bystanders in their study joined in the bullying, observed passively or actively tried to stop the bullying.

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How can bullying be addressed? In May 2002, the American Medical Association hosted an Educational Forum on Adolescent Health, where physicians, psychologists, health educators, and other professionals met to try to answer this question. The forum, which focused exclusively on youth bullying, brought together leading experts in the field to present relevant research, discuss related problems, offer various solutions and identify areas for further research. One of the programs highly lauded at the forum for effectively addressing bullying was the Olweus Bullying Prevention Program. The Olweus Bullying Prevention Program, a Blueprints model program, is widely recognized and utilized throughout the world. This multilevel, multi-component school-based program targets students in elementary, middle and junior high schools. Intervening at three levels, the school level, the classroom level and the individual level, the program attempts to restructure existing school environments by reducing opportunities and rewards for bullying. Program evaluation efforts have consistently yielded powerful and impressive findings. The program has been shown to result in: a substantial reduction in reports of bullying and victimization; a considerable reduction in students' reports of general antisocial behavior such as vandalism, fighting, theft and truancy; and noteworthy improvements in the social climate with students reporting more positive social relationships and more positive attitudes toward schoolwork (Olweus, Limber, & Mihalic, 1999).

Bullying has become a serious public health problem which merits serious and immediate attention. Because bullying occurs predominantly in schools, it is incumbent upon school officials to take steps toward addressing and preventing it. However, expecting schools to address this problem alone is completely unacceptable. As noted by Limber (2003), school efforts are usually greatly enhanced when parental and community support are available. Thus, fine programs like the Olweus Bullying Prevention Program may be greatly enhanced by initiatives which include parents and community members. One

such prevention program which has recently captured the country's attention is the ACT Against Violence Project.

One of only a few violence prevention programs that focuses on early childhood, *ACT--Adults and Children Together--Against Violence* is a national anti-violence initiative that emphasizes the vital role that parents and other adults can play in providing a learning environment for young children that helps to protect them from violence and injury. Developed by the American Psychological Association (APA) in collaboration with the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC), the program is based on research findings that demonstrate that early childhood is an important time for learning, that most violent behavior is learned--often early in life--and that adults can play an important role in preventing violence in the lives of children. *ACT Against Violence* is an intervention that focuses on young children by targeting key adults (e.g., parents and professionals), who raise, educate, and provide care for them.

True to the guidelines outlined in the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) publication *Best Practices of Youth Violence Prevention* (Thornton, Craft, Dahlberg, Lynch, & Baer, 2000), the ACT Training Program is a social-cognitive intervention that is based on the following assumptions: violence results in part from an individual's lack of problem-solving and social skills needed to deal with conflicts; children learn by observing and imitating adults and others; if children learn social skills, they can improve their ability to avoid becoming involved in aggressive and violent situations, and, adults can learn to model and teach social skills that will help children deal with their social relationships in a non-aggressive way.

The critical role of families has been consistently acknowledged by child development theories and there is mounting evidence that effective parenting reduces youth problems (Kumpfer & Alvarado, 2003). Effective parenting, consisting of positive discipline, adequate monitoring and supervision, and modeling of positive social skills, can serve as a powerful protective factor. In focusing on the early years, the ACT program underscores two critical strategies: the importance of having early intervention/primary prevention as part of interventions, and strengthening parenting skills as a way to influence children's behaviors and prevent violence.

Other adults are targeted through The ACT *National Training Program*. The program's goals are to: (a) make early violence prevention visible in the community, and (b) educate adults about their important role in creating healthy and safe environments for children that will protect them from violence. ACT addresses early violence prevention through capacity building and community involvement. Professionals from a variety of agencies and functions who work with families and young children participate in a 3-day workshop that prepares them to disseminate to adults in their communities evidence-based information and skills on positive child development, the development of aggression, anger management, social problem solving, parenting and alternatives to physical discipline, and media literacy.

Through the ACT Program, APA makes a unique contribution by giving adults the knowledge, skills and abilities needed to prevent violence in the lives of our children. To learn more about ACT, please visit www.actagainstviolence.org, or contact Julia Silva at jsilva@apa.org.

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