

A University Student's Perspective on Bullying Prevention in Schools

As part of her university experiences, Kathryn Moffa worked at the Center for Mental Health in Schools at UCLA. In January 2013 she also began working in a local elementary school as a second grade teaching assistant. Her responsibilities included helping supervise the playground during recess and lunch. To her dismay, she observed a good deal of bullying behavior, both overt and covert, among all age groups.

Katie realized she knew too little about bullying and how to handle the situations she was encountering. And when she observed what other assistants did, she saw that each responded differently and not very effectively. Moreover, she noted that the motivation underlying a bully's behavior was rarely considered or addressed. She asked if training was provided and learned that there wasn't any. (A bullying poster in the lunch area and an assembly held in May was how the school formally addressed the problem. "Most conflicts were resolved by making sure the victim received an apology from the bully, and then both parties were sent in separate directions.")

To inform herself, Katie used the Center's resources to learn more. This led to a decision to share her perspective as another type of information for those using the Center's resources. This brief product highlights what she learned and wanted to share organized around four topics:

- I. *The Long-Term Effects on Bullies of Engaging in Bullying*
- II. *School Policies to Address Bullying*
- III. *An Outline of Techniques and Strategies for Bullying Prevention that Can Be Implemented in Schools Today*
- IV. *Where Schools Can Readily Access Effective Resources*

*This resource was initiated by Kathryn Moffa as part of her work with the national Center for Mental Health in Schools at UCLA.

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The Long-Term Effects on Bullies of Engaging in Bullying

While many who engaged in bullying behavior as youngsters experience few if any residual effects as adults, too many do continue to manifest behaviors that are detrimental to them and those around them. For example, a longitudinal study of Stockholm school boys found that school bullying is connected to ongoing criminal acts (Olweus, 1999). The findings indicate that 36 percent of bullies at ages thirteen to sixteen were convicted three or more times between ages sixteen and twenty-four. Another more recent review concluded that bullying is a “significant risk factor for later offending even after controlling for major childhood risk factors that were measured before school bullying” (Ttofi and Farrington, 2012). Specifically, children who engage in bullying at school were seen twice as likely as non-bullies to participate later in life in criminal behavior.

In general, correlations are widely reported between bullying in school and subsequent abuse of alcohol and drugs, fighting and vandalism, dropping out of school, participating in early sexual activity, and tendencies to abuse partners, spouses, or children (see www.stopbullying.gov). And, of course, their children can suffer in other ways, including some who become bullies (Smokowski and Kopasz, 2005).

School Policies to Address Bullying

In order to address the outcomes and strategies for bullies, the act of bullying must be properly defined and understood. Whitson (2013) defines ‘rude’ and ‘mean’ as a basis for comparison. To be rude is to hurt someone else without intent to do so. To be mean is to do so with the intent of causing emotional and/or physical pain.

Most definitions define bullying in terms of

- an intent to harm,
- a power imbalance, *and*
- repeated acts or threats of aggressive behavior.

It appears that neither federal nor state policies have made a dent in bullying at school. As the Center for Mental Health in Schools (2009) has stressed:

“State legislatures increasingly have addressed bullying at school (including cyberbullying). The acts, however, generally do not allocate funds to enable schools to significantly confront the problem. Nevertheless, the renewed legislative attention has led state and local education agencies to enhance their focus on bullying. Some state education agencies have mainly implemented the letter of the law; others have used the legislation to expand attention to the problem.”

While several federal agencies are involved, states still see it as their responsibility to ensure that legislation fits the specific local needs and sensibilities. As a result, states have different definitions of bullying and varying policies about how to prevent and intervene when bullying arises (Shah and Nirvi, 2012).

At the federal level, recent legislative efforts have include the 2011 *Safe Schools Improvement Act* which focused on amending the *Elementary and Secondary Education Act* (ESEA) enhance efforts to prevent bullying and harassment of students. One goal at the federal level has been to require states to track bullying cases and report statistics to the Education Department. Another goal has been to clarify and promote evidence-based bullying prevention programs.

As policies across the country are implemented, it is expected that parents, schools, and teachers will become clearer about the value of reporting bullying incidents and that the data will encourage greater prevention efforts. In addition, the respective roles of the school, parents, and others in the community should be further clarified (Nicholson and Alastair, 2011).

For information about state policies and initiatives, see

- U.S. Department of Health & Human Services website
<http://www.stopbullying.gov/laws/>
- U.S. Department of Education, Office of Planning, Evaluation and Policy Development, Policy and Program Studies Service (2011). *Analysis of State Bullying Laws and Policies*, Washington, D.C. <http://www.ed.gov/about/offices/list/opepd/ppss/index.html>
- Also see the 2011 report from the Education Commission of the States
<http://www.ecs.org/clearinghouse/94/91/9491.pdf>

Back in 2001, the Center for the Study and Prevention of Violence at the University of Colorado at Boulder offered a synthesis outline of recommended rules and intervention strategies for schools that can be established quickly and at no cost. At the outset, the resulting “Fact Sheet” stresses that for schools to be safe and positive learning environment for ALL students, they must strive to “(1) reduce, if not eliminate, existing bully/victim problems among students in and outside of the school setting; (2) prevent the development of new bully/victim problems; and (3) achieve better peer relations at school and create conditions that allow in particular, victims and bullies to get along and function better in and outside of the school setting.” Then, the fact sheet lays out general rules for improving overall school climate, consequences for bullying behavior, and school. Classroom, and individual level interventions (see Exhibit on the next page).

From the Center for the Study and Prevention of Violence at the University of Colorado at Boulder's Fact Sheet on ***Bullying Prevention: Recommendations for Schools*** (2001)

Recommended General Rules for Improving Overall School Climate

Two general conditions must exist in order to prevent bullying: (1) adults at schools should be aware of the extent of bully/victim problems in their own schools; and (2) these adults should involve themselves in changing the situation.

Schools and classrooms should establish and stick to rules to prevent bullying. Adults must clearly and consistently communicate that bullying is not acceptable behavior. The following rules target all students:

1. We will not bully other students.
2. We will try to help students who are bullied.
3. We will make it a point to include ALL students who are easily left out.
4. When we know somebody is being bullied, we will tell a teacher, parent, or adult we trust.
Students should be assured that telling an adult is not "tattling," but instead students are showing compassion for victims of bullying behavior.

It is important to note that these rules target all students, not just the bullies or victims. The introduction of these rules establish classroom norms or "structures" that can contribute to the prevention of bullying.

Consequences of Bullying Behavior

Establishing rules against bullying necessitates creating positive or negative consequences for following or violating rules. The best results are obtained through a combination of generous verbal praise or other social reinforcements for positive activities and consistent negative consequences for aggressive, rule-violating behavior. Teachers should establish a positive, friendly, and trusting relationship with the class and each individual student. This is especially true for aggressive, acting-out students who may have had negative experiences with adults. It is easier for a student to accept criticism if he/she feels appreciated and liked. Teachers should also be aware of their own behavior. Teachers often serve as "models" for students who respect them and may wish to emulate them. Likewise, students will not respect the teacher or classroom rules against bullying if the teacher is sarcastic, unfair, or abusive.

School-Level Interventions

School-level interventions are designed to improve overall school climate. These interventions target the entire school population.

- Establish a Bullying Prevention Coordinating Committee: This committee will coordinate all aspects of a school's violence prevention efforts, including anti-bullying efforts.
- Administer an Anonymous Questionnaire Survey: A student questionnaire can determine the nature and extent of bully/victim problems in the school.
- Hold a School Conference Day: Raise school and community awareness and involvement by creating a long-term anti-bullying plan. In addition to school personnel, selected students and parents should participate.
- Improve Supervision and Outdoor Environment: Provide adequate number of adults ("teacher density") during lunch, recess, and breaks in an effort to intervene quickly in student conflicts.
- Involve Parents: Conduct meetings with and disseminate information to parents at the school to make them aware of the school's anti-bullying plan of action.

(cont.)

Classroom-Level Interventions

Classroom-level interventions are designed to improve an individual classroom's social climate. These interventions target the entire classroom.

- **Establish Classroom Rules Against Bullying:** Involve students in creating rules against bullying in order to develop a student's personal responsibility for conforming to those rules.
- **Create Positive and Negative Consequences of Bullying:** Establish social reinforcement (i.e., praise, friendly attention) for positive behavior and sanctions for undesirable behavior. The negative consequence should cause discomfort without being perceived as malicious or unfair. Negative consequences should be appropriate and related to the behavior. Extra assignments, such as homework or copying from a dictionary, should not be used.
- **Hold Regular Classroom Meetings:** Provide a forum for students and teachers to develop, clarify, and evaluate rules for anti-bullying behavior.
- **Meet with Parents:** Hold general classroom- or grade-level meetings with parents to improve school-family communication and keep parents informed about anti-bullying efforts.

Individual-Level Interventions

Classroom-level interventions are designed to change or improve the behavior of students in general. These interventions target specific students who are involved in bullying, either as bullies or victims.

- **Serious Talks with the Bully or Bullies:** Initiate immediate talks with the bully/ies. These talks should include:
 - documenting involvement of participation in bullying,
 - sending a clear, strong message that bullying is not acceptable,
 - warning the bully/ies that future behavior will be closely monitored, and
 - warning that additional negative consequences will be administered if bullying behavior does not stop.
- **Serious Talks with the Victim:** Talks with the victim and his/her parents should occur after a bullying incident. These talks should include:
 - documenting specific bullying episode(s) that includes: How did the bullying start? What happened? How did it end? Who participated and in what way?;
 - providing victim with information about the teacher's plan of action in dealing with the bully/ies; and
 - attempting to persuade the victim to immediately report any new bullying episodes or attempts to the teacher.
- **Involve the Parents:** When a bullying situation is discovered, the teacher should contact the parents concerned. Depending on the situation, meetings can be held together with the parents of both the bully/ies and the victim, or to minimize tension meetings can be held with each family separately. A teacher might want to invite the school psychologist, guidance counselor, principal, or vice principal to attend.
- **Change of Class or School:** If anti-bullying measures are in place and the problem persists despite these measures, moving the aggressive student(s) can bring about change. If possible, the aggressive student(s) should be moved before considering moving the victim. This solution should not be taken lightly, and all concerned parents and teachers should plan and consult with each other.

Where Schools Can Readily Access Effective Resources

The Center for Mental Health in Schools at UCLA has developed an Online Clearinghouse with a menu of over 130 Quick Finds. The one on Bullying provides links to Center developed resources and to online resources across the country -- see <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/qf/bully.htm>

For example, from there you can access:

- *Stopbullying.gov* -- a federal government website managed by the U.S. Department of Health & Human Services that provides facts, toolkits, training materials, and more for addressing the problem of bullying. The resources included are based on “the best available research or evidence, reflect best practices in communication science, and have reasonably been determined to not cause harm.” See <http://www.stopbullying.gov/resources>
- *PACER’s National Bullying Prevention Center* – this center “unites, engages and educates communities nationwide to address bullying through creative, relevant and interactive resources. PACER’s bullying prevention resources are designed to benefit all students, including students with disabilities. PACER offers digital-based resources for parents, schools, teens and youth.”

The Center for Mental Health in Schools at UCLA (2005, 2009, 2010) stresses that efforts to address bullying should be embedded into a unifying and comprehensive system of student/learning supports.

In reviewing programs, Katie found the following resources particularly informative with respect to what she experienced on the school playground:

- The *Playground and Lunchroom Questionnaire* (PLCQ) was designed to address bullying behaviors on the playground and in the lunchroom, where the ratio of staff to students can be detrimentally small:
<http://web.ebscohost.com/ehost/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?sid=93f4a0e8-52cb-4572-9a1b-6ef5547790bb%40sessionmgr115&vid=4&hid=122>
- The *Campbell Collaboration* outlines “the most important components” of an effective bullying prevention program (89-90):
<http://web.ebscohost.com/ehost/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?vid=3&sid=35048d08-59d4-4b9b-94f3-8df07a8e89b6%40sessionmgr198&hid=122>
- The *Circle of Courage Model* has four key components to a successful anti-bullying program, including 1) belongingness, 2) mastery, 3) independence, and 4) generosity:
<http://web.ebscohost.com/ehost/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?vid=4&sid=35048d08-59d4-4b9b-94f3-8df07a8e89b6%40sessionmgr198&hid=122>
- The American Educational Research Association’s 2013 analysis of bullying prevention in schools asserts that a *positive school climate* is key in building an effective program. The importance of “hot-spot” location and times, like on the playground and during lunch, is stressed:
<http://www.aera.net/Portals/38/docs/News%20Release/Prevention%20of%20Bullying%20in%20Schools,%20Colleges%20and%20Universities.pdf>

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http://www.oecdobserver.org/news/archivestory.php/aid/434/Bullying_at_school:_tackling_the_problem.html#sthash.38IwJxxa.dpuf
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