

## Bullying in Schools: What Is It and What Can Be Done About It?

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... providing nonpartisan information and research on education issues to Indiana policymakers and other education stakeholders to improve education.

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According to a recent study, nearly 30% of American youth reported involvement in bullying, with 13% reporting being the aggressor, 11% the victim, and 6% both bullies and victims.<sup>1</sup> Although it is often dismissed as a part of growing up, bullying can have serious and long-lasting consequences. Victims of bullying may suffer academically,<sup>2</sup> and being persistently bullied can lead to reduced self-esteem and lower self-worth.<sup>3</sup> Even years after bullying has ceased, former victims report higher levels of depression and lower self-esteem than other adults. Sometimes, the consequences can be deadly: in the United States, school shootings—including Columbine—have demonstrated the extremes to which some victimized adolescents can go in seeking revenge against their perceived tormentors. In fact, a 2002 federal report indicated that in 37 school shootings examined, nearly three-quarters (71%) of the attackers reported feeling bullied or persecuted prior to the attacks.<sup>4</sup>

The *No Child Left Behind Act* includes a provision for safe schools. Although this section focuses mainly on violent crimes at school, school bullying must also be examined as a potential threat to the safety of schools. While bullying should not be the single factor in labeling a school unsafe, it should be considered a serious detriment to a school's learning environment. In fact, some consider bullying the most common form of school violence.

Bullying and victimization can take several forms, both overt and covert. Verbal aggression, which can include taunting and calling other children names, and physical aggression, such as pushing, hitting, slapping, or otherwise physically attacking victims, are kinds of bullying that clearly are easier to detect, and so are often much easier to discourage. A more hidden and insidious form of intimidation, covert bullying, involves "relational aggression": starting rumors about someone or getting them ostracized by other kids. It is using the social network of one's clique, classroom, or school to emotionally attack someone. If done effectively, the victim might not even know who initiated the

attack. Not only are these covert actions harder to detect and thus more difficult to stop, but in some ways they can be more harmful. While the pain of a physical attack often fades quickly, being a social outcast can last for months or years, and the social and emotional impact can persist into adulthood. These two kinds of aggression—overt and covert—are not mutually exclusive. Bullies may use both on the same individuals and at the same time.

Bullying and aggression may be in response to real or perceived slights, or due to an inability to engage in more positive interactions with peers. Much of the theoretical work on bullies has viewed them in the same light as other aggressive children: socially rejected by their peers, they fall into default associations with other aggressive, rejected youth who reinforce their behavior.<sup>5</sup> A number of interventions have been implemented based on this view. These programs often teach social skills in order to both provide alternatives to aggression in conflict situations, and help cultivate ties to mainstream peers by improving the social standing of aggressive individuals. Unfortunately, these programs have often had rather moderate success in reducing aggression and bullying.

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Part of the problem stems from the fact that not all bullies are socially marginalized or lacking in social skills. Many bullies are actually very socially skilled—when (and to whom) they want to be.<sup>6</sup> A number of studies show that bullies belong to large cliques, often have many friends, and tend to be leaders of their groups.<sup>7</sup> Further, they are very well-known, and can be considered cool and popular by others.<sup>8</sup> Bullying can be a way to establish a kind of social status: being tough, dominant, and considered “cool.” Unfortunately, aggression can be a very effective way of displaying higher social status. By picking on socially marginalized individuals—or marginalizing the individuals they pick on—bullies show that they are in control, and can actually draw the approval of more popular peers who dislike the victim.

The research on bullying has classified victimized children and adolescents into two categories. Victims are those kids who get picked on by others. “Aggressive-victims” or “bully-victims” are children and adolescents who are aggressors and pick on some kids, but are themselves victims of other bullies. While victims are not limited to any one kind of child—unfortunately anyone could be a target—children who are awkward or shy and who have smaller groups of friends are at greater risk. There is usually safety in numbers: having a lot of friends can quite literally offer physical protection against bullying. Further, starting a confrontation with a popular peer might actually result in the bully being socially marginalized him/herself. But children who are unpopular among their peers and have few friends are more likely to be targets of bullying.

Bully-victims lack many social skills and have problems getting along with others, and thus tend to have very few friends and are the most likely to be socially isolated. Basically, these kids tend to be socially alienated: they react to classmates with dislike and hostility, and inspire the same feelings in others. In many ways, these are the children who are at risk for the worst long-term outcomes. They may suffer all the torment of being victimized, but also have the risks of increased deviancy and violence that comes with being an aggressor.

## Indiana Data on Bullying and School Violence

Most states, including Indiana, do not yet collect information on bullying incidences, although the accumulation and dissemination of such data would seem to be useful in examining bullying in schools. Therefore, data for Indiana reported here focuses on students’ reports of feeling safe, as well as school reports of physical violence and fights on school grounds. However, incidences of physical fighting cannot necessarily be considered the same as incidences of bullying. In addition, reports that detail only physical intimidation or violence neglect the importance of covert bullying, such as verbal abuse and social marginalization. As a result, data should be interpreted with caution as to the extent to which this information accurately represents the prevalence of bullying in Indiana schools.

According to *Quality Counts 2003*, 92% of Indiana fourth graders reported that they feel very or somewhat safe in their schools, compared to a national average of 90%. Ninety percent of eighth graders reported feeling safe at school, compared to 88% nationally.<sup>9</sup>

Incidences of bullying tend to be highest at the middle-school level. Indiana’s data, at least those reports that include incidences of physical violence, seemingly reflect this trend; in 1998 the Indiana Prevention Resource Center reported that 40%, 39%, and 39%, respectively of 6th, 7th, and 8th graders stated having been in a physical fight at least once at school, compared to 36% of 9th graders and 23% of 12th graders.<sup>10</sup> According to a 2001 Indiana Department of Education report, over 49% of the 2000-2001 school suspensions and close to 35% of expulsions were a result of disruptive behavior.<sup>11</sup> Therefore, the largest category of expulsions and suspensions is behavioral problems, not deadly weapon possession or other crimes.

## Conclusions and Recommendations

There is no simple answer to the problem of bullying. There is not just one kind of child who bullies, nor one kind of individual who is victimized. The complex mix of individual characteristics and social contexts produces the behaviors, and it may be that only through addressing both of those elements can bullying be eliminated.

Intervention and prevention are two possible ways to reduce bullying incidences, although interventions aimed at individual bullies have not been all that effective. This is due to what Robert Cairns has called “correlated constraints”: once a behavior is established, a variety of factors within the individual and in their social context align to support that behavior, and constrain avenues for change. As such, in addition to changing the attitude and behavior of the bully, successful interventions need to change the atmosphere of the school which supports bullying. If, after all, an adolescent is considered cool, tough, and popular because he or she picks on others, it may be very hard to get them to change that behavior and jeopardize that status. If, on the other hand, bullying is seen by all students as harmful and disapproved of, this alone might dissuade many bullies from using aggression. Some intervention programs are effective, but clearly require a significant commitment from many individuals in order to work, and are rather resource-intensive.

- The State should work with school districts to facilitate the implementation and assessment of bullying intervention programs. One of the more effective programs, developed by Dan Olweus in Norway, involves a multi-level approach to prevention, in which clear school-wide rules against bullying are established, and teachers and staff are trained to recognize and deal with bullying and victimization. There are classroom meetings in which bullying and victimization are discussed with all students in an attempt to refute the idea that such behavior is in any way cool or acceptable. Bullies and victims are identified, and both kinds of children are individually counseled to give them social skills necessary to avoid their behaviors and situations. Finally, the parents of bullies and victims are conferred with in an attempt to enlist their help.

- As intervention requires a “team” effort, the State must work to disseminate information to parents about bullying, including information about the important role of parent involvement in reducing incidences of bullying.
- The State must work with school districts to facilitate the implementation of intervention and prevention programs.
- The State must continually assess the implementation and effects of anti-bullying efforts in school districts in order to determine the most efficient and effective programs for bullying prevention.

Prevention, rather than intervention, may prove more economical in terms of both cost and effectiveness, as research has found that preventing problem behavior is often more successful than intervening once the behavior has already been established.<sup>12</sup> Since a majority of the research has focused on late childhood and adolescence, it has largely examined the consolidation (i.e., what makes it become a general pattern of behavior, as well as what increases its intensity) and maintenance (what makes it persist) of bullying, rather than its origins. Indeed, while there has been work showing peer-group support for aggressive behavior as early as the first grade,<sup>13</sup> little research has looked at incidence and causes of bullying in very young children.

- Basic research, following children longitudinally from entry to school at kindergarten on through the school years, is necessary to fully elucidate the origins and consolidation of bullying, which will help in prevention efforts. The State should encourage and back research examining incidence and causes of bullying in very young children. Such research examining when and why bullying first begins will undoubtedly suggest targets for effective intervention prior to these origins.
- As there is currently a lack of information on the frequency of bullying incidences in Indiana schools, the State should consider calling for school

districts to report incidences of bullying as part of the safe schools requirements for *No Child Left Behind*. Although bullying should not in and of itself be considered a reason for labeling a school unsafe, schools with high incidences of bullying must be identified and provided with the information and resources to address the problem. In addition, the State should publicize aggregated data on school bullying in a database such as the Indiana Department of Education’s ASAP system.

Twenty-two states have adopted policies to deal with school bullying; Indiana is not one of the states. However, because research has shown mixed results as to the effects of state anti-bullying policies, the State may better serve school districts by working with them individually on bullying intervention and prevention programs, or

- The State could look into sponsoring a statewide program similar to the Maine Project Against Bullying. The project takes a research-based approach to examining school bullying and has the goal of organizing and disseminating information on proven techniques and programs that can help reduce and work toward eliminating bullying in schools.<sup>14</sup>

*final report and findings of the safe school initiative: Implications for the prevention of school attacks in the United States*. U.S. Dept. of Education & U.S. Secret Service, Washington, D.C. Online at [http://www.secretservice.gov/ntac/ssi\\_final\\_report.pdf](http://www.secretservice.gov/ntac/ssi_final_report.pdf)

<sup>5</sup> Pellegrini, A. D., Bartini, M., & Brooks, F. (1999). School bullies, victims, and aggressive victims: Factors relating to group affiliation and victimization in early adolescence. *Journal of Educational Psychology, 91*, 216-224.

<sup>6</sup> Sutton, J., Smith, P. K., & Swettenham, J. (1999). Bullying and “theory of mind”: A critique of the “social skills deficit” view of anti-social behaviour. *Social Development, 8*, 117-127.

<sup>7</sup> Salmivalli, C., Huttunen, A., & Lagerspetz, K. (1997). Peer networks and bullying in school. *Scandinavian Journal of Psychology, 38*, 305-312.

<sup>8</sup> Adler, P. A., & Adler, P. (1995). Dynamics of inclusion and exclusion in preadolescent cliques. *Social Psychology Quarterly, 58*, 145-162; Estell, D. B., Farmer, T. W., & Cairns, B. D. (2003).

Bullies and victims in rural African American youth: Individual characteristics and social network placement. Manuscript under review at *Child Development*.

<sup>9</sup> *Quality Counts 2003*. (2003) School climate: School safety. *Education Week on the Web*, available online at <http://www.edweek.org/sreports/qc03/reports/climate-t1b.cfm>

<sup>10</sup> Indiana Prevention Resource Center at Indiana University. (1998). *Alcohol, tobacco, and other drug use by Indiana children and adolescents: The Indiana Prevention Resource Center survey 1998*. Online at [http://www.drugs.indiana.edu/drug\\_stats/youth98.html](http://www.drugs.indiana.edu/drug_stats/youth98.html)

<sup>11</sup> Indiana Department of Education (IDOE). (2002). *The road to world class education: 2001 annual performance report*. Online at <http://ideanet.doe.state.in.us/special/road/2002annualreport.pdf>

<sup>12</sup> Cairns, R. B., & Cairns, B. D. (1994). *Lifelines and risks: Pathways of youth in our time*. Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press.

<sup>13</sup> Estell, D. B., Cairns, R. B., Farmer, T. W., & Cairns, B. D. (2002). Aggression in inner-city early elementary classrooms: Individual and peer group configurations. *Merrill-Palmer Quarterly, 48*, 52-76.

<sup>14</sup> More information available on The Maine Project Against Bullying Web site, <http://lincoln.midcoast.com/%7EWps/against/bullying.html>

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## Footnotes

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<sup>1</sup> Nansel, T. R., Overpeck, M., Pilla, R. S., Ruan, W. J., Simons-Morton, B., & Scheidt, P. (2001). Bullying behaviors among US youth: Prevalence and association with psychosocial adjustment. *JAMA, 285*, 2094-2100.

<sup>2</sup> Kochenderfer, B. J., & Ladd, G. W. (1996). Peer victimization: Cause or consequence of school maladjustment? *Child Development, 67*, 1305-1317.

<sup>3</sup> Bjorkqvist, K., Ekman, K., & Lagerspetz, K. (1982). Bullies and victims: Their ego picture, ideal ego picture, and normative ego picture. *Scandinavian Journal of Psychology, 23*, 307-313.

<sup>4</sup> Vossekuil, B., Fein, R., Reddy, M., Borum, R., & Modzeleski, W. (2002). *The*

## Additional Resources on Bullying

### Research Studies & Reports

Cairns, R. B., & Cairns, B. D. (1994). *Lifelines and risks: Pathways of youth in our time*. Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press.

Farmer, T. W. (2000). The social dynamics of aggressive and disruptive behavior in school: Implications for behavioral consultation. *Journal of Educational & Psychological Consultation, 11*, 299-321.

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Olweus, D. (1993). *Bullying at school: What we know and what we can do*. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers.

Simmons, R. (2002). *Odd girl out: The hidden culture of aggression in girls*. New York: Harcourt Brace.

### Websites

Bully B'Ware Productions: <http://www.bullybeware.com/>

Bullying Online: <http://www.bullying.co.uk/>

ERIC Clearinghouse on Counseling and Student Services (ERIC/CASS) Virtual Library on bullying in schools: <http://ericcass.uncg.edu/virtuallib/bullying/bullyingbook.html>

Maine Project Against Bullying: <http://lincoln.midcoast.com/~wps/against/bullying.html>

Safe & Responsive Schools Project: <http://www.indiana.edu/~safeschl/>

The Ophelia Project, a program to reduce relational aggression: <http://www.opheliaproject.org/>

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