

PERSONAL PRACTICE

Practical approaches to reduce the impact of bullying

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Bullying can have significant and long term adverse effects on the health and behaviour of children. Not only does the victim suffer psychological and possibly physical damage, but the persistent bullies are at risk of continuing their aggressive, antisocial behaviour. Approximately one third of British schoolchildren report bullying.¹ Achieving a reduction in the rate of bullying in schools would be a highly effective public health measure for the 21st century. This article considers interventions that may reduce bullying and ways in which victims of bullying can be helped.

Recognising bullying

Bullying is not always obvious. Most bullying takes place away from the scrutiny of adults and the victim often feels unable to report what is happening because of fear of reprisal. Other sorts of bullying may be so subtle as to be dismissed as teasing, which is often considered to be acceptable. If the teasing involves intimidation and results in distress, it clearly falls within the definition of bullying.

In order to clearly recognise bullying for what it is, a definition of bullying is needed. Various authors have defined bullying; there are two essential elements:

- the deliberate use of aggression to cause physical pain and/or emotional distress
- an unequal power relationship between the bully and victim.

The unequal power relationship links bullying with racism and other unacceptable forms of abuse, and distinguishes it from the playground fight between two children of equal power. Bullying is manifest in many ways—it can be direct or indirect. Direct bullying consists of physical aggression, hurtful words or unpleasant faces and gestures. Boys engage in direct bullying about four times more frequently than girls. Indirect bullying involves ignoring, isolation or denying wishes, and is used more frequently by girls.²

The typical bully

The typical bully tends to be involved in a range of antisocial and aggressive behaviours and, contrary to popular belief, is not insecure, cowardly or friendless. The following characteristics are typical of the aggressive bully:

- aggressive to any person, no matter what position of authority
- poor impulse control
- sees violence as a positive quality
- wishes to dominate
- physically and emotionally strong
- insensitive to the feelings of others
- good self esteem.

Bullies often gather a small group around them and then select a single victim who is isolated from any protective relationships. The bully's followers get involved partly to protect themselves and partly to have the status of belonging to the group. Some of these children can be regarded as "passive bullies" who feel rather guilty for taking part. Approximately 20% of bullies are also victims as much as they are bullies. A combination of low self esteem and provocative aggression is an indication of a disturbed child and their motivation for the bullying is likely to be due to abnormal psychopathology rather than the pure excitement derived from aggressive display and having power over others.²

Changing attitudes

Until a society is prepared to deal with bullying in all its forms and wherever it occurs, there is little chance that other types of aggressive and destructive behaviour will reduce in frequency. Our attitude to bullying is critical because it sets the standard for the general level of aggression that is thought to be acceptable in society. Bullying is clearly evident in many adult institutions. The unequal power relationship that is implicit in the relationship between an adult and child means that the control of children by adults can easily slip from the acceptable into bullying behaviour. Everyone involved in child care should constantly bear this in mind.

The portrayal of aggressive behaviour on television and video does appear to be associated with aggression in certain children. This association is likely to be mediated by complex interactions between viewing and aggression, which in turn are affected by other related variables.³ Children especially vulnerable to the effects of screen violence include those who already tend to react aggressively, children with low ability and restricted social life, and younger children.⁴

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Supporting the victims of bullying

The most effective way to support victims of bullying is to stop it happening in the first place, and this should be the primary focus for any antibullying policy. Victims of bullying only break out of the trap of fear and secrecy when they feel that they are likely to be believed and protected by those in authority. Creating an awareness of bullying and declaring that bullying is unacceptable allows children to talk more freely. Doctors should ask about bullying when children present with psychosomatic symptoms, unexplained absence from school, and acts of deliberate self harm.⁵

Some children can be identified as being predisposed to become a victim of bullying. Typical features include:

- anxious temperament
- low self esteem
- insecurity and lack of friends
- emotionally reactive
- easily dominated
- not particularly aggressive.

Adults who look after children should be aware that these children are vulnerable to the attention of bullies. Supervision of children after an episode of bullying must be sufficient to protect potential victims. Classroom based interventions such as “circle of friends” may promote victims’ prosocial behaviour.⁶ Some victims with significantly deficient psychosocial development or psychological symptoms that have arisen after being bullied may warrant referral to child and adolescent mental health services.

Teaching children acceptable behaviour

Most of the preventive actions against bullying should be started at home before a child enters school. Parents have the important task of preparing their children to fit into the social world outside the family. By the time children start school they should have been taught to have a reasonable level of aggression control. Children vary a great deal in how easily they learn to be socially competent, but however slow they may be, the process is the same. Adults who care for children must:

- set an example of good relationships
- have good aggression control themselves
- teach the child that violent aggression is unacceptable
- stop any show of unacceptable aggression immediately
- identify and name the adverse effects of unacceptable aggression
- describe how the victim of aggression feels
- teach caring and empathic relationships.

Note that several items of the list involve teaching. This is an important point that underlines the necessity for active prevention of bullying. It is no good expecting children to naturally grow out of their aggression without adult intervention. Children who are constitutionally predisposed to aggressive behaviour as a result of their genetic, hormonal or temperamental make up will require special attention to prevent the development of aggression and bullying, but the process of learning lessons taught to them by their parents and other adults is just the same.

Supervising aggressive children

Supervision is crucially important in the prevention of bullying. The level of supervision that each child requires will vary. Children who are constitutionally aggressive or developmentally immature may need a high level of supervision at an age where many of their peers can be safely left to play. Although the promotion of supervision may sound an impractical and superficial approach, most bullying takes place when normal supervision is at its lowest. Good supervision is not only effective, but it allows any bullying to be dealt with immediately before too much damage is done. Useful strategies include identifying high risk areas and particular times of day when bullying is more likely to occur. The use of spot checks may help, and some schools have found that video cameras reduce bullying even if they are dummies.

Channelling aggressive behaviour into acceptable activities

One of the advantages of channelling aggression into sports or formal group activities is that they usually have a high level of supervision. The rules of behaviour are clear and have to be applied consistently under close supervision. Sport and competitive games have the potential to provide an excellent basis for channelling and managing aggression. Another approach is to encourage activities that promote behaviour that is incompatible with aggression, such as caring for plants, pets or people.

Providing additional resources for children at risk of becoming bullies

Children with hard to handle temperaments are at risk of difficult behaviour, including aggression, tempers, and irritability.⁷ These children can be identified in the preschool period by characteristics such as irregular, unpredictable eating and sleeping habits, strong, mostly negative moods, and a slow adaptation to new situations. Such children are reported to push, hit, and fight more in nursery school.⁸ Parents may need encouragement and support from primary care staff to teach these children to be gentle and respectful of others.

Some children who live in adverse home environments appear to be predisposed to become bullies.⁹ Family factors that predispose children to bullying include:

- a negative emotional attitude from the primary caretaker, characterised by lack of warmth and lack of involvement
- a tolerant or even permissive attitude to aggression, with no clear limits for aggressive behaviour
- a power assertion approach to child rearing, where physical punishment and violent emotional outbursts are the usual control methods.

In theory, families with the above styles of interaction could be targeted for parent training programmes to promote more developmentally appropriate parenting. Unfortunately, some parents in these vulnerable families may

not find parent training programmes either accessible or helpful.¹⁰

Discouraging bullying in schools

The school itself may influence the development of aggressive behaviour.¹¹ Several studies show that even if school intake factors are controlled for, bullying and aggression occur more frequently in schools with low staff morale, high teacher turnover, unclear standards for behaviour, inconsistent methods of discipline, poor organisation, inadequate supervision, and a lack of awareness of children as individuals.

Olweus's seminal work in Bergen schools showed that relatively simple interventions that raise awareness of bullying behaviour in schools and set standards that promote prosocial behaviour can have a significant effect on rates of bullying. Over a 20 month period, Olweus's programme led to a 50% reduction in bullying, fewer new victims, less general antisocial behaviour, a better climate of cooperation, and greater pupil satisfaction with school life.¹² Important elements of the programme include:

- the awareness and involvement of the whole school and all the parents
- raising awareness of bullying by means of a questionnaire survey
- a school conference day on all the implications of bullying
- a shared responsibility for bullying that includes onlookers
- an agreement to include and protect those who tend to be excluded and victimised
- the development of clear rules against bullying
- regular class meetings to enforce the rules
- an effective method for reporting bullying
- "serious talks" with bullies and victims and their parents.

Antibullying programme manuals developed in the United Kingdom are now available.¹³

Dealing with a bullying incident

The fact that adults are taking bullying seriously will have a powerful effect on children, especially if they see adults coming together and acting in unity. The serious discussion of a bullying episode involving everyone concerned is an important step to take whether at home or at school. The seriousness with which adults take the bullying can be enhanced by exaggerating the formality of the occasion and of the discussion, even if it occurs within the informality of a family home. Bullies should never be allowed get away with it, but all too often punishment involves the use of anger, aggression or humiliation—precisely what is not wanted. Aggressive, angry punishments are likely to be ineffective and may even encourage further bullying. By far the most effective punishment is to insist that the bully makes amends for the distress that has been caused. There are a number of different ways that a bully might make amends to a victim, for example:

- a public apology
- a private apology, face to face
- an apology in writing

Key messages

- Bullying takes place when there is a deliberate use of aggression to cause physical pain or emotional distress within an unequal power relationship
- Bullying is a form of violence to children that is often overlooked or dismissed as being unimportant; in fact bullying is costly to individuals and to society
- Excessive childhood aggression may be reduced by encouraging parents actively to teach prosocial behaviour to young children
- Successful interventions for established bullying focus on reducing the acceptability of bullying within institutions, ensuring that bullies are discovered and enforcing non-aggressive punishments, which may involve acts of reparation to victims

- a gift or a special favour for the victim
 - an offer of future protection from bullying.
- Care has to be taken that any contact between the bully and the victim is with the victim's agreement and is closely supervised to make sure that it is successful. This type of reparation by the bully is not an easy option, but it can be surprisingly effective and gets to the heart of the matter by getting bullies to face the consequences of their behaviour and making it clear that bullying is unacceptable, that it has a cost, and should not be repeated.

In the aftermath of an episode of bullying, aggressive bullies will need high levels of supervision to prevent further bullying and reprisals on victims who may have reported them. This supervision may need to continue for many months. Referral to child and adolescent mental health services may be warranted for seriously aggressive children. Although interventions for these children are not well researched, the pernicious nature of childhood aggression and the potentially serious sequelae in adult life should prompt child and adolescent psychiatry teams to give some priority to these children.

Children who become involved in bullying by being led into it or by wishing to seem one of the gang are generally easier to deal with. The desire for self protection and the easy option is usually the driving force behind the bullying rather than a purely aggressive motive. In the case of an easily led, passive bully it is usually particularly effective to increase the child's feelings of guilt and so exaggerate the possible costs of bullying so that bullying no longer seems the easy option. Anxious bullies who are both instigators and victims of bullying may require specialist assessment by child and adolescent mental health services to understand the precipitants to their bullying behaviour so that a management plan can be devised. Child and adolescent mental health services cannot deal with bullying behaviour in isolation and multiagency involvement is often needed to address a bully's needs.

Challenging the bully caught in the act

Bullies who are caught in the act can be very difficult to deal with because they will easily turn their aggression to whoever tries to intervene. It is usually best to remove the victim from the scene as quickly as possible, telling a bully that he or she will be dealt with later without specifying how or when. The bully is likely to worry about what may happen and will have a chance to reflect on what has been done wrong. There is no point in being aggressive with a bully. Aggression only breeds more aggression. Any physical intervention will almost certainly lead to someone getting hurt, unless the bully is very young. And if the bully is a teenager, some form of damage is predictable. Very rarely it may be necessary to get physically involved to protect a victim in which case it is best to obtain as much additional help as possible.

Learning lessons from episodes of bullying

Every time bullying takes place it marks a failure:

- the bully has failed to learn that bullying is unacceptable
- there has been a failure to teach the bully aggression control
- the victim has failed to be assertive enough and has failed to be protected
- there has been a failure in adult supervision.

These points highlight the fact that responsibility for a bullying episode should not be focused on the bully alone. Parents, teachers, other adults, the bully, and their victims all have a part to play in preventing bullying. All possible preventive strategies need to be reviewed following an episode of bullying, as well as a further consideration of the factors that predispose to bullying. Although it should be made clear to bullies that they are responsible for their own actions, it is important that the adults responsible for the supervision and teaching of aggression control should also take

some responsibility. Parents and teachers must therefore cooperate to improve supervision and training to try and prevent a repetition of the bullying. It is all too easy to make excuses and blame others. Preconceived ideas need to be challenged and excuses such as, "I can't do anything about it—I have tried everything", or, "It is nothing to do with me—you deal with it", should not be accepted.

Summary

Bullying has serious long term consequences for all concerned. The cost of ignoring bullying is great, and it is no longer acceptable to view bullying as a normal part of everyday life that children have to learn to tolerate. Effective strategies exist to reduce the frequency of bullying and to make this type of aggressive behaviour less likely to occur.

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