

Bullying Prevention: What works? What doesn't?

William G. Nicoll, Ph.D.

**Resilience Counseling & Training Center
North Conway, New Hampshire**

Bullying has gained widespread attention as an increasingly serious problem in our communities. Defined as a form of low to high level interpersonal violence (aka: abuse) against another individual, it can take many different forms from physical aggression to threats, teasing, harassment, intimidation or neglect and social exclusion. The most recent national survey indicated that during the period from 6th to 10th grade, approximately 44% of students had engaged in some form of bullying behavior and 41% had been the target of bullying. In addition, with the new social media technologies, cyber bullying has taken the potential for harm to levels heretofore never imagined. Indeed, bullying is now considered to be the most common form of interpersonal violence in our society.

So what is to be done to stop and prevent such behavior? Many programs and policies have emerged over the past few years to meet the new, growing 'market demand' for help from parents and schools. Many, if not most, remind one of H.L. Mencken's famous quote, "*For every complex problem there is a simple, straightforward solution; that is wrong!*" Research evidence indicates that the most common form of "solutions" which do not work are: a) anti-bullying policies in the school and workplace and b) zero tolerance approaches to identifying the bullies and c) campaigns to identify, punish, or expelling perpetrators. These school strategies have consistently failed to provide any significant, long term reductions in bullying behaviors. The social dynamics underlying bullying are far reaching and complex and thus require far more extensive intervention strategies.

Effective interventions to decrease or eliminate bullying, or social aggression, behavior requires a complete and systemic understanding of the problem. To begin, bullying per se, is not a problem, Rather, it must be understood as a symptom of a much broader and deeper underlying problem. Attempts to focus solely on bullying behaviors via anti-bullying policies and punitive consequences along have no impact on student behavior; nor do anti-bullying poster campaigns, one-shot school assembly presentations!. Bullying is a learned behavior! When parents, teachers, school administrators, supervisors, managers, and recreational sports coaches engage in bullying tactics themselves, thereby modeling bullying behavior, we cannot act innocent and surprised when our children model these very same behaviors; we often inadvertently teach bullying behavior. Bullying behaviors occur not only among youth but in the home, in the community, and in the workplace. Further, bullying provides some degree of social reward for the perpetrator by artificially elevating his/her sense of power or status by diminishing others.

To understand why solutions that focus on identifying, punishing or excluding bullies do not work, we merely need to recall the unsuccessful "war on drugs" campaign of the 1980's. Arresting drug dealers on the street corners did nothing to resolve the increasing problem of illegal drug use. The night after a drug dealer is placed under arrest, a new dealer steps in to take his place. The bullying problem is similar; both problems are far more systemic than to ever be resolved by simple zero tolerance policies and punitive reactions.

Prevention via Immunization is the key!

During the 1940's and 50's, the biggest concern most parents considered as threatening the well being of their children was the disease of polio. Indeed, many parents would not let their children swim at the beaches nor attend movie theaters for fear they might contract the feared polio virus. But shielding children from polio was not the answer, nor was it even realistic. And today, we still have never found a

cure for polio. The solution was in prevention via immunization and the inoculating of children with Dr. Salk's vaccine.

We need to take a similar approach to bullying. The simple fact is that we cannot protect or prevent our children from being exposed to bullying. By age ten to eleven, our children are exposed on a daily basis to every social problem or social ill in our society from bullying to drugs, alcohol, violence, crime, sexual harassment and so forth. What is needed, therefore, is a social vaccine. We need to inoculate our children against bullying and being bullied. This requires a much more complex approach to the problem.

Effective Strategies for Bullying Inoculation

It is beyond the scope of this short column to delineate all components of an effective bullying prevention strategy. However, some of the most important factors identified to date are the following:

1. Focusing on the role of the Bystanders. Bullies can only do what the bystanders will allow. Or, in the words of Edmund Burke, "*All that is necessary for the triumph of evil is that good men do nothing*". In our homes and classrooms, we need to assist our children in honoring those who step forward when they see a wrong being done and intervene on behalf of the victim. To not get involved sends a clear message to the victim and the bully that one personally condones such behavior. A parent once stated that her child was being bullied on the school bus by an older student. This statement was incorrect! In actual fact, there were 40 students on that bus and a driver. Therefore, while there was only one victim, there were no less than 40 bullies who actively or passively engaged in continuing the harassment.
2. Infusing social-emotional learning into the school and family "curriculum". This is the key element in any long-term solution. As Dr. John Phillips so aptly put it in 1781 when starting the first schools in New England, "*Above all the attention of the instructors to the disposition of the minds and morals of the youth...will exceed every other care... though goodness without knowledge is weak and feeble, yet knowledge without goodness is dangerous...both united form the noblest character.*" Comprehensive social-emotional learning programs infused into the academic curriculum not only significantly decrease bullying and other behavior problems in schools but increase academic achievement by as much as 18%!
3. Addressing the 500 pound gorilla in the middle of the room. Parents, teachers, and all those working with youth need to be trained in non-punitive, non-bullying strategies for working with children. While research has consistently indicated such parent and teacher discipline styles result in superior child social and academic outcomes, neither are typically provided any training in these behavior management skills. Instead we resort to the failed strategies of our own parents and teachers with criticism, threats, rewards and punishments. In other words, adults often model bullying relationships.
4. Addressing systemic factors that contribute to bullying. Many systemic issues further contribute to increased bullying behaviors and these must be openly discussed and addressed directly if we are to create an effective social vaccine. For example, a competitive emphasis on high academic and athletic achievement is found to correlate with increased bullying behaviors. Bullying increases in high performing schools. Diversity in school populations including ethnic, racial and socio-economic also result in increased bullying. So too, prejudice of all sorts and types (sexual, racial, ethnic, SES, etc.) fuel bullying behaviors. These issues must too be directly addressed, discussed and resolved with students, faculty and parents for an effective anti-bullying vaccine to be successful.

