

# RESEARCH *Brief*

December 2011  
Vol III Issue 1

## Bullying

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According to a recent study, at least 50% of adolescent suicides are related to bullying (Dickinson, 2010). Bullying includes any verbal, physical, or psychological attack intended to cause fear, anxiety, or harm to another individual (Farrington & Tofti, 2009). Three forms of bullying have been identified (Melton, 2011): **physical bullying**—pushing, spitting, and hitting; **verbal bullying**—which includes name calling and teasing; and **relational bullying**—the intentional manipulation of relationships with the purpose of damaging, disrupting, or preventing relationships. Cyberbullying, a form of relational bullying, occurs via social web sites and cell phones (Keith & Martin, 2005).

Victims of bullying suffer from insecurity, loneliness, difficulty with relationships, and decreased self-concept (Black, 2007). Those students exposed to chronic bullying experience poor school performance, depression, and suicide (Black, 2007; Williams & Peguero, 2011). One study author suggests victims of bullying are between two and nine times more likely to consider suicide (Srabstein, et. al., 2008). Observers of bullying experience distress and feelings of helplessness. Those who bully are at higher risk for fighting, shoplifting, vandalism, substance abuse, and school dropout (Black, 2007).

A number of reasons have been identified as to why bullying occurs (Rodkin, 2011). Those who bully may use threats or physical aggression to obtain resources (money or food).



They may feel socially isolated and may use bullying to confront feeling marginalized. Socially isolated bullies may lack impulse control or sufficient social skills. Those who are socially connected may bully for recognition or to control others for the purpose of creating or maintaining power. These more adept students may explain why teachers may see only four percent of bullying incidents (Goodwin, 2011).

Bullying most often occurs in early adolescence. Bullies tend to select victims with whom they have an existing negative relationship. Socially connected bullies tend to select victims of the same gender. They begin bullying when the social hierarchy is in flux, such as transitions between schools. Socially connected bullies will target students who do not belong to a peer group or

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**CCSD**   
CLARK COUNTY  
SCHOOL DISTRICT

*“Research Brief” is  
published by the  
Clark County School District  
Research Department  
Assessment, Accountability,  
Research, and School  
Improvement Division*

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to a peer group who will not defend that student (Dinkes, 2007). The peer group does not have to have close, personal connection. The potential victim only needs a peer defender to prevent bullying from occurring. For example, a ninth grade student was targeted by a bully at Brockton High School (Nova Scotia) for wearing a pink shirt (Barnes, Sep. 8, 2011). Two twelfth grade boys responded by purchasing 50 pink shirts at a discount shop and promoted a Day of Pink. Through conversations and emails hundreds of students appeared the next day in pink shirts. On the other hand, bystanders who observe bullying and do not intervene increase bullying for victims.

### **Developed Curricula**

While many bullying programs exist, only a small number of studies have shown success at reducing bullying incidents (Goodwin, 2011). Farrington and Tofti (2009) identified 53 different programs from 16 countries with adequate evidence supporting their effectiveness. The United States had the highest number (10) of evidence-based programs. Several programs have crossed national boundaries. For example, the Norwegian Intervention has been evaluated among German students. The Olweus Bullying Prevention Program was developed in Norway and has been implemented internationally, including the United States (Black, 2007). Of these programs, only 15 have been classified as effective in reducing bullying (Farrington & Tofti, 2009).

The most common elements of developed programs include training or information

for teachers, small and large group curriculum materials, support in developing classroom rules and classroom management, information for parents, and individual support for victims and bullies (Farrington & Tofti, 2009). The most effective elements include parent meetings, improved supervision, formal school discipline policy, classroom management, teacher training, school conference, and cooperative group work. The more elements involved in the program was associated with fewer incidents of bullying. Additionally, programs based on the Olweus Bullying Prevention Program yielded high success rates. When evaluating efforts at your school, an effective program will

reduce the incidence of bullying between 10% and 50% with the average decrease in bullying approximating 22%.

The use of zero tolerance policies has not yielded positive results. More than ten years of research suggests that zero tolerance may encourage bullying (Farberman, 2006). Zero tolerance is characterized as predetermined consequences that are punitive and are applied regardless of the degree of offense or mitigating circumstances (APA Zero Tolerance Task Force, 2008). The American Psychological Association strongly recommends that zero tolerance policies be revised. Three levels of interventions are promoted, first preventative strategies for all students; second, strategies that target students at risk for bullying; and third, strategies for those who have engaged in bullying (Faberman, 2006).

### **School-Wide Efforts**

Effective efforts at reducing the number of bullying incidents require a few key strategies. Bullying often occurs in locations that are difficult to monitor and at times that are conducive to bullying,

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*“The most effective elements include parent meetings, improved supervision, formal school discipline policy, classroom management, teacher training, school conference, and cooperative group work.”*

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such as standing in line or waiting for buses (Farrington & Tofti, 2009). Increased supervision at these places and times are the most effective deterrent. Community-wide support is also required. Administrators, teachers, and parents who are involved provide better support than relying solely on peer mediator programs. Some have suggested from research that peer mediators need to be popular and pro-social to prevent bullying from increasing (Rodkin, 2011).

**“Administrators, teachers, and parents who are involved provide better support than relying solely on peer mediator programs.”**

School or classroom culture plays a significant factor in the extent of bullying that occurs in the school. Rodkin (2011) argues that autocratic schools or classrooms with a strong hierarchal structure have higher incidence of bullying than those that are more democratic. Democratic schools and classrooms have a clear leader but are more cooperative in decision-making. These schools promote open communication and active participation of all members. Democratic classrooms and schools tend to be more cohesive. Beaudoin (2011) argues that autocratic schools produce teachers and administrators who bully other teachers. In this case models of bullying are provided for students and promote acceptance of bullying for students. School culture needs to foster respect and support at all levels.

### What to Do Now?

- Recognize that most bullying occurs by those who can disguise or hide bullying from adults.
- Be present at locations and times where bullying will mostly likely occur.
- Promote open and democratic classrooms.
- Recognize that new school anti-bullying programs may show small results.



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