

background

Report # 56

Bullying — A Marker Of Dangerous Behavior

July 2004

Not a harmless rite of passage

Bullies and their victims much more likely to bring weapons to school

Evidence that bullying is a serious behavior with serious consequences continues to mount with the largest study of the problem reporting that bullies and the victims of bullies are more likely to be involved in a fight or to carry a gun into their schools.

The link between bullying and students toting weapons is especially chilling. A generation earlier, news that bullying is a widespread problem in America's schools might have been greeted with a shrug of indifference. But evidence that bullying was a factor in at least two horrific school shootings has helped to convince the nation that it is more than a harmless, if unpleasant, rite of passage.

The findings, reported in 2003, are the latest from a National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD) study of bullying among schoolchildren, which is based on a random national sample of more than 15,600 public and private school students in grades six through 10.

Earlier, NICHD researchers reported that bullying in U.S. schools is a widespread problem affecting 17% of the nation's schoolchildren.

A Warning Sign

Definitions of bullying vary. But there is growing awareness that it is not just physical intimidation. Bullying can also be threats, spreading rumors, and excluding or "freezing out" children.

Many researchers also consider repeated incidents of intimidation an important element of serious bullying.

Bullying is prevalent among all age groups and is found among both

boys and girls, although boys are much more likely to be involved in bullying and violent behaviors.

It now is seen as a marker for violent behavior. The latest NICHD findings report that:

- About 52% of boys who said they had bullied others at least once a week in school reported having carried a weapon in the past month. About 36% of the boys who said they had been the victims of bullies in school every week said they carried a weapon.
- About 43% of the self-described bullies said they brought a weapon to school, as did 29% of those who had been the victims of bullies.

Incidents of fighting followed similar patterns.

- About 39% of the bullies in school reported having been frequently

Bullies and Weapons

52% of the boys who often bully others said they had carried a weapon in the past month.

43% of these bullies bring their weapons to school.

involved in fighting and about 46% said they had been injured in a fight.

- Among the boys who were victims of bullies in school, nearly 23% said they had been involved in frequent fighting and nearly 32% said they had been injured in a fight.

These numbers are high compared to boys who had *never* been bullied in school or had *never* bullied others.

- Fewer than 8% of boys who had never bullied others in school said they had carried a weapon in school, only 8% were involved in frequent fighting, and 16% had been injured in a fight.
- Among the boys never bullied in school, 12% said they had carried a weapon in school, 12% were involved in frequent fighting, and 18% were injured in a fight.

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Worse Away From School

Away from school, bullying tended to be more severe, perhaps because there is less adult supervision, researchers said.

More than 70% of the boys who said they bullied others away from school reported having carried a weapon, and nearly 45% fought frequently.

By comparison, 14% of boys who had never bullied others away from school reported having carried a gun in the past month and fewer than 9% said they fought frequently.

Old Problem, New Concern

In 2001, the NICHD study reported several dynamics of bullying.

- Bullying happens most often in sixth through eighth grade and the degree to which it does varies little between urban, suburban, and rural schools. It is not someone else's problem.
- The most common type of bullying among boys is physical, such as being hit, slapped, or pushed. Girls are more often bullied verbally and psychologically, usually through sexual comments or rumors.

Bullying is nothing new. But reports that bullying contributed to the 1999 Columbine High School shootings in Littleton, CO, and the 2001 Santee High School shooting in Santee, CA, underscored the seriousness of the problem and raised public awareness.

"I have seen an increase in adults' awareness about problems associated with bullying over the last several years," said a leading expert on bullying, Sue Limber, Ph.D., of Clemson University.

"Although some administrators and parents undoubtedly do still view bullying as a rite of passage, I believe that such perspectives are less common."

Putting A Stop To Bullying

The best known and most thoroughly evaluated anti-bullying intervention is the Olweus Bullying Prevention Program developed in Norway in the mid-1980 and refined over the years. The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) and the U.S. Department of Justice consider it a model program.

The program involves school staff, students, and parents in a strategy to increase awareness of bullying, tighten teacher and parent supervision, set clear anti-bullying rules, and protect and support those bullied.

In school, students are more closely supervised during breaks and discuss bullying in schoolwide assemblies and in classrooms. Rules prohibiting bullying are enforced. Parents are asked to not tolerate bullying. And teachers and school officials intervene with bullies, victims, and their parents to ensure that the bullying stops.

Studies suggest the program is highly effective among students in elementary, middle, and junior high schools.

In Norway, for example, outcomes in schools include a 64% decrease in reports of bullying others among girls ages 11-12 years, a 45% reduction in reports of bullying others among boys, as well decreased fighting.

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references

This report is based on the following publications and sources.

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Olweus, D., and Limber, S. (1999). *Blueprints for Violence Prevention: Bullying Prevention Program (Book Nine)*. Boulder, CO: University of Colorado at Boulder, Institute of Behavioral Science, Center for the Study and Prevention of Violence.

For information on bullying and conflict resolution, visit these Web sites:

- Communities In Schools (www.cisnet.org)
- National Center for Conflict Resolution Education: www.nccre.org
- Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention: www.ojjdp.ncjrs.org

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