

Bullying – What can we do?

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Explanations that are given to account for bullying in a school are important because they help to determine what school authorities do about it. In this article (1) I will examine some of the more common explanations that have been suggested, consider the evidence for each of them and discuss the implications for anti-bullying programmes and practices.

1. Bullying is natural behaviour among children and as they develop they tend to grow out of it.

There is some truth in this. Research evidence indicates that between the ages of 7 and 17 years there is a general trend towards fewer young people reporting being bullied by their peers. (2) In part, this may be because with increasing age young people are more reluctant to admit, even to themselves, that they are being bullied. The trend is most evident for physical bullying suggesting that physical self-control increases with age. However, more sophisticated, indirect forms of aggression, such as social manipulation may actually increase.

The most obvious limitation to this explanation is that the tendency for bullying to reduce with age is temporarily reversed when children enter secondary school, in Year 7 in some Australian states, such as NSW, and in Year 8 in others, such as S.A. (3). Clearly the social environment may be such as to override any maturation effects that are due to age.

To the extent that it is believed that 'natural' development cannot be altered, this explanation is an undesirable one, as it may lead schools to ignore the problem. However, recognising developmental changes may also lead schools to examine ways in which the social maturity of children can be advanced. It may also lead to a recognition that there are age-related ways of bullying among children and age-appropriate methods of dealing with cases of bullying.

2. Bullying is due to individual differences between school children

A good deal of research has been conducted to identify correlates of bullying behaviour and being victimised at school. Generally, the findings are unsurprising: children identified as bullies tend to be stronger than average, more aggressive and lower in empathy; victims tend to be relatively weak

physically, introverted and socially unskilled. (3) These differences have been attributed to both genetic factors and to their social upbringing at home.

It should always be remembered that these are generalisations and there are many exceptions. In some schools bullying occurs much less often than others, despite a similar variation in the attributes of individual children. Further, we know that bullying is quite often conducted by **groups** of children, motivated by feelings of hostility or prejudice towards those they target.

Despite these limitations, it is reasonable for schools to identify children who are prone to become involved in bully/victim problems, either as bullies or victims or bully/victims and to seek to help them by understanding them as individuals and treating them accordingly.

3. Bullying can be explained by socio-cultural influences

It is here assumed that bullying behaviour can be explained by reference to the social or cultural group to which one belongs. These include gender, race or ethnicity and social class. Through a process of acculturation, group members may develop attitudes that incline them to bully those towards they feel socially superior. (4)

It is claimed that boys commonly 'construct' a highly masculinised identity that inclines them to act in an aggressive manner towards girls and also towards those who do not conform to the masculine ideal and are accordingly labelled as 'gay.' There is consistent evidence that boys bully girls much more commonly than vice-versa and that a good deal of bullying targets boys who appear to be effeminate or homosexual. There is evidence of racist bullying, eg. of Australian Aboriginal children, in some schools. (3) However, racist bullying is not ubiquitous and evidence of bullying relating to social class differences is sparse (3).

Although explanations of bullying along these lines can be applied in cases of bullying in which some children are targeted because of their socio-cultural group membership, this explanation does not apply to cases of bullying within such social groups or bullying that is perpetrated by children who can be defined according to socio-cultural criteria.

The main value of this of this explanation lies in sensitising schools to different forms of social prejudice, especially those related to gender and race, and motivating schools to promote greater tolerance and more inclusive educational policy and practice.

4. Bullying can be explained by the way peer-groups influence children

It is proposed that children in schools are most powerfully influenced by the social context in which they interact with others. This context can be described as operating at different levels. There is (i) the general school ethos in so far as it promotes or discourages bullying behaviour (ii) the specific group or groups to which children belong (with whom they habitually interact in their play) and (iii) the group of bystanders who are present when a bullying incident occurs. Typically bystanders are present (5).

Research indicates that the school ethos may vary greatly between schools, as reflected for instance by the degree to which students hold sympathetic attitudes towards victims.(3). This factor is related to the extent of bullying behaviour in a school. We also know that much bullying is undertaken by students actively or passively under the influence of their close peer group, sometimes because it seems like fun, sometimes because individuals feel pressured by their group to go along. Finally, we know that bullying typically stops if bystanders act to discourage it. (5)

This explanation for bullying tends to neglect factors that predispose individual children to become involved in bullying and also to discount socio-cultural factors. But it is helpful in drawing attention to the group context of much bullying and the peer pressures that may motivate, sustain or terminate acts of bullying. Some powerful techniques that are consistent with this explanation include the No Blame Approach (6) The Method of Shared Concern (7) and the training of Student Bystanders to discourage bullying when they see it happening.

5. Bullying is due to inappropriate handling of shame: a Restorative Justice Perspective

Bullying is seen as a shameful act, yet one that the bully does not acknowledge as shameful.(8). It is proposed that if perpetrators could see it that way, the bullying would cease. The process of changing the bully's perception requires the cooperation of significant others who are ready and able to convey the shamefulness of the act and, at the same time, sincerely accept the individual who has recognised its shamefulness.

This approach combines a recognition of the individual psychology of the bully, who has lost an appropriate sense of shame, and the use of the potential restorative power of the wider community acting together to bring about the necessary change. Translating this theory into practice, typically requires the use of a procedure known as Community Conferencing (9) at which the victim of the bullying is encouraged to speak out in the presence of the bully and other concerned people, graphically describing the harm that has been done. Restorative action is then required of the bully who must acknowledge the wrongdoing. Normally, this procedure is applied in cases of

extreme bullying when a skilled facilitator is available, and when amenable, relevant community members can take part.

Although it is unlikely that this approach can be applied to **all** cases of bullying, depending as it does on the cooperation of those involved in addressing the problem, it has much appeal, especially to those who see bullying as essentially a moral matter in which the culpability of aggressors needs to be acknowledged as a step towards their meaningful integration in the school community.

Suggestions for addressing bullying in schools

Here are my suggestions for what schools can do in addressing bullying (10).

1. Adopt or **devise a definition of bullying that is acceptable to the school staff**. I suggest that a distinction is made between **non-malign bullying**, as when a child unintentionally hurts another child by what is said or done **and malign bullying** which is intentionally hurtful. Interest will focus mainly on the latter. A number of elements may be included in the definition, including (i) a desire to hurt (ii) the repeated hurting of another child or children through physical, verbal and/or indirect means (eg., through exclusion) (iii) the targeted person(s) being unable to defend themselves adequately – due to there being an imbalance of power (iv) a sense of being oppressed on the part of the victim and (v) enjoyment by the bully. Note that individuals or groups may be involved as bullies or as victims. It is important that a definition be agreed upon
2. The school staff should be informed or reminded that (i) bullying is harmful to the mental and physical health of victims, short and long term (11) (ii) children who repeatedly engage in bullying are likely, if unchecked, to act in delinquent ways when they leave school (iii) there are Departmental policies relating to countering bullying (iv) there is a serious the risk involved through litigation initiated by parents if reasonable steps are not taken to counter bullying and (v) research has shown that anti-bullying programs and practices can significantly reduce bullying significantly, especially when undertaken collaboratively and fully by the school community (12)
3. The school should undertake **to discover the nature, extent and effects of bullying among its students** (13, 14). This can best be done using anonymous questionnaires, answered by students, school staff and parents. The task of reading and collating the responses from students and teachers should be shared among school staff, paying particular attention to written comments.
4. A committee of school staff should **be appointed with clear terms of reference**. I suggest these include (i) Examining results from the survey and then planning a related presentation and discussion of their implications (ii) Suggesting what actions the school should take to improve its response to school bullying (iii) Providing a draft of a school anti-bullying policy for discussion and eventual adoption.
5. In the course of its deliberations I suggest that the committee consider (a) what the school can do to **prevent** bullying from occurring and (b) how the school may **deal with** actual cases of bullying.

6. Prevention should take into account what teachers can do in classroom meetings with students (i) to inform them about bullying and related school policy (ii) to advise them on how they might best respond to bullying. This may include developing and employing appropriate social skills; getting help from the school when needed; and helping others, for example, as bystanders or as trained mediators
7. Prevention may also be promoted by other means, for example, by staff modelling pro-social behaviour; appropriate mentoring, supervision and surveillance of student behaviour when needed; providing or encouraging student activities that are cooperative and/or interesting (bullying often results from boredom).
8. Action to deal with bullying incidents. In considering the means of responding to cases of bullying, the committee should become familiar with a range of proposed methods and evaluate their **likely effectiveness and support from staff** as applied in one's school. In doing so, consider whether different methods may be applicable to some problems but not others and to some age groups but not to others. In particular, examine the pros and cons of these: (i) the use of rules and consequences – and what consequences can follow (ii) problem-solving approaches, including Mediation by staff and/or trained students, the No-Blame Approach, the Method of Shared Concern and Community Conferencing.
9. Consider how the school can work most effectively with parents and the wider community in both preventing bullying and in addressing actual cases should they arise.
10. Produce a well-coordinated plan that is well understood and supported by the school community.

Notes

- (1) A fuller version of part of this paper is: Rigby, K. (2003) Addressing bullying in schools: Theory and Practice, Trends and Issues, Australian Institute of Criminology, 1 – 6. Download <http://www.aic.gov.au/publications/tandi2/tandi259.html>
- (2) See Olweus, D. (1993). Bullying at school. Cambridge:Blackwell
- (3) Rigby, K. (2002) New perspectives on bullying. London: Jessica Kingsley. In Australia: Distributor: Footprints, phone 02 9997 3973 or email sales@footprint.com.au
- (4) This view is given in the Australian national website dealing principally with socio-cultural aspects of bullying. <http://www.bullyingnoway.com.au/>

- (5) Pepler, D. J. and Craig, W. M. (1995). A peek behind the fence: naturalistic observations of aggressive children with remote audiovisual recording. Developmental Psychology, 31, 4, 548-553.
- (6) Maines, B. and Robinson, G. (1992) The no blame approach. (The video) Bristol: Lame Duck Publishing
- (7) Pikas, A. (2001) New developments of Shared Concern Method. School Psychology International 23, 3, 307-326.
- (8) Morrison, Brenda (2002) Bullying and victimisation in schools: a restorative justice approach., Trends and Issues, No 219, Canberra, Australian Institute of Criminology. Down load: <http://www.aic.gov.au/publications/tandi/ti219.pdf>
- (9) Moore, David School Bullying and Community Conferencing: Download from <http://www.education.unisa.edu.au/bullying/moore.html>
- (10) A much fuller version is given in: Rigby, K. (2003) Stop the bullying: a handbook for schools (Revised edition) Melbourne: ACER. Ph. 03 98577447 or (free call, interstate: 1800 338402.
- (11) Rigby, K (2003) Consequences of bullying in schools. Canadian Journal of Psychiatry, 48, p 583-591. Internet: <http://www.cpaapc.org/Publications/Archives/CJP/2003/october/rigby.asp>
- (12) Rigby, K 2002, A meta-evaluation of methods and approaches to reducing bullying in pre-schools and in early primary school in Australia, Commonwealth Attorney-General's Department, Canberra. **Phone 1800 708 777 for free copies**. Overseas: 02 62550998. Access: <http://www.ncp.gov.au/ncp/publicationentry.asp?PUBID=47&XMENU=3>. Also see commentary in <http://www.education.unisa.edu.au/bullying/> which **also** has a link to downloadable copy
- (13) Questionnaires on bullying are described in the site described above. They include widely used paper questionnaires (The PRQ and the PRAQ. For further information: <http://www.education.unisa.edu.au/bullying/> Also contact Dr Barrington Thomas, P.O Box 104, Point Lonsdale, Victoria, Australia. 3225, ph. 03 52582340 or fax 08 52583878. Email: profread@pipeline.com.au
- (14) Rigby, K and Thomas, E.B (2003) How schools counter bullying: policies and procedures in selected Australian schools. School Principal's Handbook Series. The Professional Reading Guide: Point Lonsdale, Victoria, Australia. Ph 03 52582340, email profread@pipeline.com.au

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