What Works—and Doesn't Work
in Bullying Prevention and Intervention*

Historically, bullying among school children has not been a topic of significant public concern. Indeed, many adults have viewed the experience of being bullied as a rite of passage for children and youth. In recent years however, attention to bullying among children has increased dramatically among school personnel, members of the general public, and policy makers. The attention is well deserved. Research indicates that bullying remains quite prevalent among American school children, directly involving approximately 30 percent of students within a school semester (17 percent as victims of bullying and 19 percent as perpetrators).[1]

Moreover, research confirms that bullying among children poses serious risks for victims and bullies[2] and may seriously affect the climate of schools.[3]

defining BULLYING behavior

While the semantics used in defining "bullying" often differ, it is a particular form of aggressive behavior.[4] According to Olweus, "a person is being bullied when he or she is exposed, repeatedly over time, to negative actions on the part of one or more other students. The student being bullied has difficulty in defending themselves."[5]

Olweus recognizes that bullying is a form of "peer abuse." Some common examples of bullying include:

w Physical bullying (e.g., hitting, kicking, shoving);

w Verbal bullying (e.g., taunting, malicious teasing, ridiculing with cruel jokes);

w Sending threatening communications in the form of nasty notes, or via text messaging, emails, or websites (cyberbullying);

w Non-verbal threatening facial gestures (e.g., "the look" or "mean muggin" or other signs); and

w Purposeful isolation or exclusion from group activities, or shunning.

To differentiate bullying from childhood fighting or conflicts, it may be helpful to look more closely at three aspects of bullying behavior. First, the negative actions used by a bully are intentional. Those individuals who bully others (and their followers) intentionally decide to harm a specific person. Bullying behaviors are not accidental. Second, bullying behavior typically is repeated over time. Third, an imbalance of power exists between the child who bullies others and the child who is being bullied. The individual who is being targeted does not have enough power (whether it be physical, emotional, or relational power) to be able to defend himself or herself from the bully's ongoing attacks.

Students are targeted or victimized by students who bully for any number of reasons. Simply being a newcomer to a school without friends or alliances might be enough to attract a bully's attention. A perceived slight, a manner of dress or behavior, or even success in school can be reason enough for one student to bully another. Student bullies search for vulnerabilities in their targets. Perceptions of social or physical ineptness, physical or psychological disability, sexual orientation, or a cultural or socio-economic inequity can be all a student who bullies needs

by Susan P. Limber and Marlene Snyder

to inappropriately exert their power over a peer and cause harm.

A common myth is that children bully because they lack self-esteem. In fact, most research has not shown that most children who bully have average or above-average self-esteem.[6] They may, in fact, think very highly of themselves and believe that they are entitled to exert control over others in their school environment. Some student bullies see social interaction in terms of establishing and maintaining a hierarchy. They deliberately employ coercion, manipulation, and deception to solidify their dominance in the social pecking order and reinforce their sense of status and self-esteem.

Other facts to keep in mind:

w Bullying behavior can occur anywhere in a school, even in the classroom.

w Those who bully others can operate alone or with accomplices (henchmen and supporters).

w Those students who bully others may select a single individual or a series of individuals to bully.

w Those who bully others often feel justified in their behavior.

w Bullying behavior is often organized and systematic.

w Individuals who bully others rely on bystanders or onlookers either to do nothing to stop the bullying or to actually support their bullying behavior.

w Bullying behavior towards an individual can occur over a short period of time or may go on indefinitely—even over a period of many years.

w Bullying behavior is seen in adults as well as children and youth.

Bullying can have serious consequences for children. Studies have shown that chronic bullying can lead to physical discomfort such as headaches or stomach aches; emotional problems such as depression, suicidal ideation,

misplaced aggression, and difficulty with interpersonal relationships; and academic difficulties.[7] Bullying behavior deprives students of their right to attain a free and appropriate education in a safe environment that supports learning.

In response to these concerns, school personnel have adopted a variety of strategies to address bullying, including: awareness-raising efforts (e.g., school assemblies, staff-inservices, PTA meetings); efforts to report and track bullying incidents at school; therapeutic interventions for children who bully and children who are bullied; peer mediation and conflict resolution to deal with bullying; curricula focused on bullying; and comprehensive bullying prevention programs.

What are common mistakes/misdirections in BULLYING prevention and intervention?

Unfortunately, a number of questionable intervention and prevention strategies have been developed to address bullying behaviors in schools in recent years. Some of these are discussed below.

Zero tolerance policies

Some schools and school districts have adopted zero tolerance or "three strikes and you're out" policies towards bullying, suspending or even expelling kids who bully. At first glance, and in the wake of several tragic school shootings, these approaches may appear to make sense—to keep our kids safe, we have to exclude bullies from our hallways. Such knee-jerk policies, however, cause concern for a number of reasons. First, they can cast an extremely wide net. Approximately 20 percent of students tell us that they have bullied other students with some regularity. Clearly, we can't exclude every fifth child from our schools.

Second, a goal of bullying prevention

initiatives should be to encourage students to report known or suspected bullying among their peers. Severe punishments for bullying, such as school exclusion, may have an unintended chilling effect on students' (or even adults') willingness to come forward with their concerns about their classmates.

Finally, children who bully their peers (particularly those who bully others frequently) are at risk for engaging in other antisocial behaviors (such as truancy, fighting, theft, and vandalism). If unchecked, these behaviors may escalate and continue into adulthood. In one study, boys who were frequent bullies in middle school were three times as likely as their non-bullying peers to have a criminal conviction by age 24.[8]

Children who bully are in desperate need of positive, pro-social role models, including peers and adults at their school. Clearly, in rare cases, public safety may demand that a child be excluded from a public school environment. However, zero tolerance policies and related practices are not recommended as a broadbased bullying prevention or intervention strategy.

Group treatment for children who bully

Other, less drastic measures call for children who bully to be grouped together for therapeutic reasons. Group therapy for bullies (focusing on such issues as anger management, self-esteem enhancement or empathy development) is not uncommon in many schools. Unfortunately, experience and research tell us that these groups are often ineffective, even with well-intentioned and skilled adult facilitators. Such groups also may make bullying worse, as group members may serve as excellent role models for each other and reinforce bullying behaviors. Children who bully need exposure to pro-social peers (not

other peers with behavior problems) who can model positive behavior and help send a message that bullying is not acceptable behavior.

Conflict resolution/peer mediation

Many schools use existing peer mediation and conflict resolution techniques to address bullying problems. Although such programs may be appropriate to resolve conflicts among children, they are not recommended to resolve bullying problems. Why?

First, it is important to recognize that bullying is a form of victimization, not conflict. (In fact, bullying is no more a form of conflict than is child maltreatment or domestic abuse.) Second, mediation may further victimize a child who has been bullied. It can be extremely upsetting for a child who has been bullied to face his or her tormentor in mediation. Finally, mediating a bullying incident may send an inappropriate message to the students who are involved (e.g., "You are both partly right and partly wrong, and we need to work out this conflict between you."). The appropriate message for the child who is bullied should be, "No one deserves to be bullied, and we are going to see that it stops." The message for children who bully should be, "Your behavior is wrong, it violates the school's rules, and it must stop immediately."

Simple, short-term solutions

As educators are increasingly recognizing the need to focus on bullying prevention, many of us—understandably—are searching for a quick, one-shot solution. Unfortunately, a single school assembly won't solve the problem. Nor will a monthly curriculum taught by the social studies or health teacher. Nor will a strategy that deals only with the most serious and obvious instances of bullying at a school. Although each of these efforts may represent important pieces of a comprehensive, long-term bullying prevention strategy, they likely will do little to significantly reduce bullying if implemented in a piece-meal way. As the saying goes, "For every complex problem, there's a simple solution...and it's almost always wrong."

Confusing civil rights issues with bullying issues

School districts need to be clear that policies and procedures against bullying are not a replacement for addressing serious behaviors that are already covered by other laws, such as sexual harassment, disability harassment, and racial harassment. School districts already have policies that prohibit harassment of students based on race, color, national origin, sex, and disability, because under federal law, school districts must develop such policies in order to receive federal funds.[9] The insertion of bullying into such existing policies may lead to confusion and incorrect assumptions about the nature of bullying. Adding specific bullying policies and consequences for bullying behavior should not weaken existing Title 9, Civil Rights, and Disability Laws.

Disregarding state laws and legal liability issues

Bullying behaviors that occur on school property or during school-related activities can give rise to a wide variety of legal claims. School districts and individual employees of those districts can be exposed to legal liability as a result of unaddressed bullying in school. Currently, 24 states have passed laws addressing bullying among school children and a dozen other state legislatures are considering such legislation. Most of these laws have been in effect since 2001 and likely were motivated, at least in part, by tragic shootings at several U.S. high schools in the late 1990s and subsequent reports[10] that many perpetrators of school shootings had felt persecuted, bullied, or threatened by their peers. The National Association of State Boards of Education website provides information about state anti-bullying laws (go to www.nasbe.org/healthyschools/States/Topics.asp?Category=C&Topic=3, or for a more thorough discussion of the importance of the wording of adequate state laws against bullying, see Limber and Small, 2003).[11]

Knowing the things that are not working is important, but more important is a good understanding of what does work in bullying prevention and intervention practice.

What works in BULLYING prevention?

In many respects, research on bullying prevention is still in its infancy. Although researchers have documented success of some comprehensive programs in reducing bullying (e.g., the Olweus Bullying Prevention Program[12]), we have much to learn about which elements of these programs are most critical. However, a careful review of existing bullying prevention programs and first-hand observations suggest 10 strategies that represent "best practice" in bullying prevention and intervention.

1. Focus on the school environment.

What is necessary to reduce bullying in schools is a change in the climate of the school and in the social norms. It must become "uncool" to bully, "cool" to help out kids who are bullied and normative for staff and students to notice when a child is left out or is on the margins. This requires the efforts of everyone in the school environment—teaching staff, administrators, non-teaching staff (such as bus drivers, cafeteria workers, school librarians), parents, and, of course, students. In order to successfully change the climate of a

school, anti-bullying programs should be instituted for all children in the building—not for a selected class level.

2. Assess bullying at your school.

Adults are not always very accurate in estimating the nature and prevalence of bullying at their school. Frequently, we are quite surprised by the amount of bullying that students experience, the type(s) of bullying that are most common, or the "hot spots" at the school where bullying is more likely to occur. As a result, it is useful to administer an anonymous questionnaire to students about bullying at the school. Findings from the questionnaire can help motivate adults to take action against bullying. These data also can help adults to tailor specific supervision plans as a bullying prevention strategy for the particular needs of the school. Finally, these data can serve as a baseline from which school administrators can measure progress in reducing bullying behaviors.

3. Garner staff and parent support for bullying prevention.

Bullying prevention should not be the sole responsibility of an administrator, counselor, teacher, or any single individual at a school. To be most effective, bullying prevention efforts require buy-in from the majority of the school's educators and staff and from parents. Successful bullying prevention programs also must have the full support of the building administrators. School boards can provide a great deal of support for those administrators to implement a program with enough resources for training and materials.

4. Form a group to coordinate the school's bullying prevention activities.

Bullying prevention efforts seem to work best if they are coordinated by a representative group from the school. This coordinating team (which might include an administrator, a teacher from each grade, a member of the non-teaching staff, a school counselor or other school-based mental health professional, and a parent) should meet regularly to digest data from the school's survey; craft schoolwide bullying prevention policies, rules, and activities; motivate staff, students, and parents; and ensure that the efforts continue over time. A student advisory group may be formed to focus on bullying prevention and provide suggestions and feedback to adults.

5. Train your staff in bullying prevention.

All administrators, faculty, and staff at your school should be trained in effective bullying prevention and intervention strategies. Inservice training can help staff to better understand the nature of bullying and its effects, how to respond if they observe bullying behaviors, and how to work with others at the school to help prevent bullying from occurring. Training opportunities should extend beyond the teaching staff. Administrators should make an effort to educate *all* adults in the school environment who interact with students (including media specialists, lunch room and recess aides, bus drivers, custodians, and cafeteria workers).

6. Establish and enforce school rules and policies related to bullying.

Although many school behavior codes implicitly forbid bullying, many do not use the term or make explicit the expectations for student behavior. It is important to make clear that the school not only expects students not to bully, but that it also expects them to be good citizens—not passive bystanders—if they are aware of bullying or students who appear troubled.

Developing simple, clear rules about bullying can help to ensure that students are aware of adults' expectations that they refrain from bullying and help students who are bullied. For example, the Olweus Bullying Prevention Program recommends that schools adopt four straightforward rules about bullying:

- w We will not bully others.
- w We will try to help students who are bullied.
- w We will make it a point to include students who are easily left out.
- w If we know someone is being bullied, we will tell an adult at school and an adult at home.

School rules and policies against bullying behavior should be posted and discussed with students and parents. Many schools are adopting policies and procedures district-wide so that they appear in their published school handbooks. Some schools include educator and staff behavior in their anti-bullying policies. Appropriate positive and negative consequences also should be developed for following/not following the school's rules.

State boards of education, local school boards and their designated school managers, the principals, all share the responsibility for ensuring that their schools are safe, welcoming places for all students to learn. Their task begins, not ends, with the creation of an anti-bullying policy. Once that policy is formulated, they need to ensure effective implementation of the bullying prevention program.

7. Increase adult supervision in "hot spots" for bullying.

Bullying tends to thrive in locations where adults are not present or are not vigilant. Once school personnel have identified "hot spots" for bullying from your student questionnaires, look for creative ways to increase adults' presence and effective supervision in these locations.

8. Intervene consistently and appropriately in bullying situations.

All staff should be able to intervene effectively on the spot to stop bullying

(e.g., in the one to two minutes that one frequently has to deal with bullying). Classroom teachers and/or designated staff should also hold sensitive follow-up meetings with children who are bullied and conduct separate meetings with children who bully. Staff should involve parents of affected students whenever possible. Pre-determined consequences for bullying behavior help educators and school administrators discipline children calmly and fairly.

9. Focus some class time on bullying prevention.

It is not accidental that most bullying prevention programs include a classroom component. Teachers (with the support of administrators) should set aside 20-30 minutes each week (or every other week) to discuss bullying and peer relations with students. These meetings help teachers to keep their fingers on the pulse of students' concerns, allow time for candid discussions about bullying and the harms that it can cause, and provide tools for students to address bullying problems. Anti-bullying themes and messages also can be incorporated throughout the school curriculum. Student surveys may indicate that a significant amount of bullying incidents are happening right in the classroom. Teachers need information and training to handle these situations effectively.

10. Continue these efforts over time.

There should be no "end date" for bullying prevention activities. Bullying prevention should be woven into the everyday fabric of the school's culture. Each year new staff and new educators to the system need to be trained as to what is expected of them, as positive adult role models, to prevent bullying.

When bullying behaviors are ignored and left unaddressed, students may increasingly become cynical and lose faith in the ability of adults in the school to maintain a safe school environment. Bullying strikes at the heart of effective learning and teaching. State and local boards of education can take a proactive, positive leadership role in providing support for bullying prevention programming. School boards, school administrators, teachers, parents, and students all have essential roles to play in the battle to eradicate the bullying behaviors that plague our schools.

Where to begin?

Policymakers, administrators, teachers, parents, and other adults who are interested in implementing a bullying prevention program may find it useful to visit www.stopbullyingnow.hrsa.org, the official website for the National Bullying Prevention Campaign, supported by the Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA). The campaign is targeted at tweens (children and youth age 9 through 13) and those who influence their lives. Educators, administrators, parents, and other adults will find helpful tip sheets and a vast database of resources (e.g., books, videos, and games for children and youth). They also may locate detailed information about tip sheets and fact sheets on the website at www.stopbullyingnow.hrsa.gov/indexAdult.asp?Area=preventiontips. ■

Susan P. Limber, PhD, is the Associate Director of the Institute on Family & Neighborhood Life at Clemson University and a professor in the Department of Psychology. She may be contacted at slimber@clemson.edu.

Marlene Snyder, PhD, is an Olweus Bullying Prevention Program Training Director of the Institute on Family & Neighborhood Life at Clemson University. She may be contacted at nobully@clemson.edu.

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[11] S. P. Limber and M. A. Small, "State Laws and Policies to Address Bullying in Schools," *School Psychology Review*, 32, 2003: 445-455.

[12] Information about this research-based prevention and intervention program can be found on its website at www.clemson.edu/olweus.