Bullying Prevention in the Technology Age

Overview

As we embrace more and more new technology, troublesome new trends—such as cyber bullying—have emerged that may have more widespread effects than traditional bullying alone. Cyber bullying makes it difficult to track, respond to, and combat incidents of bullying. It is thus important to develop prevention programs that target specific issues of bias, ethnicity, culture, and equity. Certain policies, practices, programs, and legislative changes can begin to address the prevention of bullying and cyber bullying, and the many negative outcomes associated with both.

Definition: "Bullying is unwanted, aggressive behavior among school aged children that involves a real or perceived power imbalance. The behavior is repeated, or has the potential to be repeated, over time."[1]

"Cyberbullying is bullying that takes place using electronic technology."[2]

The person who bullies or cyber bullies purposely inflicts, or intends to inflict, harm on the bullying victim.

The Impact of Bullying

Data from the U.S. Department of Education's National Center for Education Statistics shows that overall bullying prevalence among students ages 12 to 18 declined between 2005, when data was first collected, and 2013, which is the most recent data available. In 2005, 28% of students reported being bullied, compared to 22% in 2013.[3] However, these statistics mask an increase in bullying of certain categories of students and bullying in schools where violence and drugs are prevalent.[4]

Every child is potentially susceptible to bullying, but some children are at greater risk. Those who are disproportionately bullied include LGBTQ youth, youth with disabilities, and youth perceived as immigrants or refugees. In addition, youth who are socially isolated, excluded, disconnected, and/or who lack friends are more susceptible to bullying. Understanding these risk factors can help policy makers and school leaders address equity issues and aid victims and perpetrators.

Children who are bullied feel unsafe and fearful. Victims of bullying are more likely to have higher rates of absenteeism and resulting academic underperformance, anxiety, and eating disorders.[5] Bullying also increases children's risk for negative psychological and social outcomes,[6] and children who are bullied are more likely to exhibit self-destructive behaviors, have suicidal thoughts, and develop mental health problems like anxiety disorders, panic disorders, and agoraphobia.[7] Although suicide among bullying victims is relatively rare, a number of recent high-profile incidents and suicide pacts have turned national attention on the issue.

In addition to the negative effects of bullying on victims, there are negative outcomes for children who bully. Children who bully are more likely to underachieve in school, experience substance abuse later in life,[7] and become parents of children who bully.[5] In addition, they are more likely to be convicted of a criminal offense and have psychiatric problems as adults.[8]

Bystanders who are involved in or witness a bullying incident can also experience negative outcomes from involvement in a bullying incident. Bystanders are more likely to use tobacco, alcohol, or other drugs; have mental health problems, including depression and anxiety; and miss days of school.[9, 10] In addition, they may experience a sense of re-victimization while observing a bullying incident and more guilt than the perpetrator or victim because they did not take action.[9]

Finally, bullying can have high economic and social costs. When children who are bullied stay home from school, they affect their individual learning trajectories as well as lifetime achievement and earnings. In addition, schools in states where funding allocations are based on average daily attendance rates can lose tens of millions of dollars due to bullying-related student absences.[11]

The Impact of Cyber Bullying

Cyber bullying is the use of technology to harass, insult, threaten, and/or intimidate another person.[12] It is increasingly in the spotlight as children and adolescents have easier access than ever to technology and online communications and engage with this technology on a daily basis. Victims of cyber bullying may experience higher levels of distress than victims of traditional bullying.[13] Cyber bullying has been linked to depression, social anxiety, reduced self-esteem, substance abuse, and poor academic performance.[13, 14]

Cyber bullying differs from traditional bullying in that perpetrators are physically removed from their victims and

from the direct impact of their actions. There may also be a greater power imbalance in cyber bullying—perpetrators can anonymously spread messages to large audiences very quickly, and cyber bullying can take place 24 hours a day, is unsupervised, and is not limited to school hours. As a result, cyber bullying may have more of an effect on a child's emotional health and well-being than traditional bullying alone.[12] With youth culture largely focused on social media and digital interactions, children may find it extremely difficult to disengage from technology even when it is the source of bullying.[15]

Policy Recommendations

Research and best practices show that the best way to address bullying and cyber bullying is through a combination of evidence- or research-based social-emotional learning and bullying prevention programs; policies, standards, and practices set by school districts and out-of-school programs; national and state laws; and training.[16, 17] The recommendations below should be implemented while engaging youth in identifying problems and solutions and combining their voices with those of bullying researchers and program and practice experts.

Laws

- In each state, pass legislation that clearly defines bullying, prohibited behaviors, and consequences; institutes prevention measures; and makes the connection between school climate standards/guidelines and bullying prevention programs.
- Under the federal Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) Title I, Title II (Part A), and Title IV (Parts A and B), fund social-emotional learning curricula, bullying prevention programs, and cultural awareness and harassment sensitivity training.
- Better enforce federal laws prohibiting discrimination against students and harassment of protected classes.

Reporting

- Develop standardized definitions for bullying and institute a national requirement for elementary and secondary schools to track bullying and bullying prevention efforts.
- Create a universal method for reporting incidents of cyber bullying and harassment to internet providers in order to have the perpetrator's content removed from the internet.

School Policies and Standards

- In school districts, schools, and classrooms, have clear policies and guidelines outlining expected behaviors and consequences for bullying, and monitor and address bullying in teachers and students. Make anti-bullying programs a part of school culture and foster a culture of respecting diversity.
- Eliminate zero-tolerance policies for bullying that call for exclusion from school.
- Have school districts utilize school climate inventories to measure, evaluate, and improve school practices.

Training and Technical Assistance

- Implement professional development for school faculty and staff that addresses school climate and bias-related bullying and harassment.
- Conduct adult skills training for educators, administrators, and community leaders so they know how to respond appropriately to bullying.
- Train adolescents and adults in appropriate use of technology. Teach adolescents and youth to protect their phone numbers and access to their computers.
- Have state education departments provide technical assistance to schools in the form of model policies or resources for curriculum implementation and professional development.

Programs

- Instruct the federal and state departments of education to clarify which SEL and bullying prevention programs are evidence-based. Encourage school districts to use these programs and practices.
- Implement evidence-based social-emotional learning and bullying prevention programs that help foster positive school climates. Specifically target transitioning students (from elementary to middle school and from middle school to high school) and middle schoolers about responsible internet use, civil discourse, and expected and prohibited behaviors and punishments.

WHO WE ARE

Committee for Children is a global nonprofit dedicated to fostering the safety and well-being of children through social-emotional learning and development. Committee for Children is the world's largest provider of research-based educational programs that promote social-emotional skills and prevent bullying and sexual abuse.

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