Misdirections in Bullying Prevention and Intervention

In recent years, increasing numbers of educators, health professionals, family members and other adults who interact with children and youth have begun to realize the seriousness of bullying. A number of proven and promising prevention and intervention strategies have been developed. Unfortunately, a number of misdirected prevention and intervention strategies have also emerged.

Zero Tolerance Policies

A number of schools have adopted “zero tolerance” or “three strikes and you’re out” policies toward bullying, in which students who bully others are suspended or expelled from school. These policies (also called “student exclusion policies”) raise the following concerns:

- If consistently enforced, they have the potential to affect a significant number of students. Recent surveys of K-8 students indicate that approximately one in five students admit to bullying their peers periodically (Melton et al., 1998). Even if policies are limited to physical bullying, the numbers of affected students are still significant.

- Threats of severe punishment, such as suspension or expulsion, may actually discourage students and adults from reporting incidents of bullying they observe.

- Bullying can be an early marker of other problem behaviors. Children who frequently bully their peers are at risk of engaging in other problem
behaviors, such as truancy, fighting, theft and vandalism. Students who bully are in need of positive, pro-social role models, including adults and other students at their schools.

- Although suspension and expulsion of students may be necessary in a very small number of cases to maintain a safe learning environment, these practices are not recommended as a broad-based bullying prevention/intervention strategy.

**Conflict Resolution/Peer Mediation**

Conflict resolution and peer mediation are common strategies to deal with conflicts among students. Many schools also use peer mediation and conflict resolution to address bullying problems, but this is not recommended, because:

- Bullying is a form of victimization not conflict. It is no more a “conflict” than are child abuse or domestic violence.

- Mediating an incident of bullying may send inappropriate messages to the students who are involved (such as “You are both partly right and partly wrong,” or “We need to work out this conflict between you.”). The appropriate message to the student who is the target of bullying should be, “No one deserves to be bullied and we are going to do everything we can to stop it.” The message for students engaging in bullying should be, “Your behavior is inappropriate and must be stopped.”

- Mediation is unfair for students who have been the targets of bullying as it causes them further discomfort in having to face in mediation those who have been bullying them.

- There is no evidence to indicate that conflict resolution and peer mediation are effective in stopping bullying.

**Group Treatment for Students Who Bully**
Another strategy that some schools use to address bullying behavior involves group therapeutic treatment for students who bully others, including anger management, skill-building, empathy-building or other strategies to build the self-esteem of students who engage in bullying. Although well intentioned, these strategies are often counter-productive. Students’ behavior may further deteriorate, as group members tend to serve as role models who reinforce one another’s anti-social and bullying behaviors.

**Simple, Short-Term Solutions**

Often, school administrators and their staff adopt a short-term, piece-meal approach to bullying prevention. Although professional development is an important component of a bullying prevention program, a staff in-service training alone will do little to prevent bullying. Although a school-wide assembly, PTA meeting or lessons taught by individual teachers may represent important initial steps in the adoption of a comprehensive bullying prevention strategy, they will have a negligible impact on the problem if implemented in a piecemeal way. The change in the climate of the school that is required to reduce the prevalence of bullying requires a comprehensive school-wide commitment and approach.

**References**


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