



## **Bullying Prevention Programs: Too little too late**

*By Elizabeth Hyde*

Bullying; we have all been one, known one or been subjected to one. Prior to the early 1980's when the first significant anti bullying programs emerged, bullying was considered to be part of a normal childhood and not something that needed attention from adults. If incidents were reported, victimized children were told by teachers and parents alike that it was part of growing up and that "kids will be kids".

As the serious consequences of bullying emerged in the media and academic research, programs designed from an intervention perspective were developed on an international scale. Yet after years of efforts to curtail bullying and its effects, programs designed to reduce bullying and victimization have met with varying success. Bullying programs, while focused primarily on prevention, are in fact interventional. The primary focus of these efforts has been the delivery of single component programs separate from the general curriculum. In addition, most programs are not introduced at the optimal period of a child's cognitive development.

To prevent bullying and related behaviour, conflict resolution education, which includes social emotional learning skills, needs to be introduced to children at a much earlier age. While traditional theories of child development have dictated otherwise; children at a preschool and kindergarten level have the capacity to develop social and emotional learning skills including empathy. In addition, programs need to be integrated in to the whole school curriculum if a sustained learning experience is to be achieved. As the development of moral emotions necessarily involves adults, both parents and teachers need to be trained, as many lack the skills they are being asked to teach. If these skills are taught early, taught often, integrated in to the school curriculum at every opportunity with appropriate teacher training, the need for future intervention programs will likely decrease.

Bullying is a form of abuse where one uses power and aggression to cause distress to another. There are two key elements of bullying that set it apart from other types of aggression. First, it is a form of aggressive behaviour imposed from a position of power. It can take the form of physical, verbal or psychological attacks or intimidation that are intended to cause fear, distress or harm to the victim. While the term bullying is usually associated with power in a physical sense, power for the child that bullies can also result from being part of a dominant social role, (e.g. teacher compared to a student), higher social status in a peer group (e.g. popular versus rejected student), strength in numbers (e.g. group of children bullying a solitary child) or through systemic power (e.g. racial or cultural groups, sexual minorities, economic disadvantage, disability). Power can also be achieved by knowing another's weaknesses (e.g. obesity, stuttering, learning problem, sexual orientation, family background) and using that knowledge to cause distress. The power imbalance that results from these relationships is not always apparent to or acted upon by adults leaving the victimized child few avenues for help.

In addition to power, bullying results not from a single incident but repetitious

behaviour over time. With each incident, power becomes consolidated for the bully with a corresponding loss of power for the victim. Bullying can be direct (overt, face to face) or indirect (being rejected or ostracized from your peer group, having belongings taken away or teasing covert, spreading rumours ) both of which cause damage to the victim in terms of their self esteem and their relationships with others. School yard dynamics often see those who witness a bullying incident side with the bullying child rather than the victimized child. This further reduces the power of the victimized child. In terms of location, bullying can happen both on and off the school yard, during school hours or during after school activities. Areas and times where there is a lack of adult supervision become prime opportunities for children who bully. In the past, misconceptions about the nature and consequences of bullying led adults to conclude that bullying was just part of the fabric of childhood and children were often encouraged to solve the problem on their own thereby increasing the stressors on an already stressful situation.

With the explosion of the Internet, cyber bullying has become a more common form of bullying. Children of all ages have access to the Internet at all times during the day and night, often without adult supervision. Cyber bullying includes use by peers of email, cell phones, text messages, and Internet sites to threaten, harass, embarrass, socially exclude, or damage reputations and friendships. Cyber stalking, as an extension of the physical form of stalking, is where an individual utilizes electronic mediums such as email, cell phones, text messages, and Internet sites to pursue, harass or contact another in an unsolicited fashion. Cyber bullying presents a unique set of difficulties. There are no witnesses to this type of bullying as it will be conducted exclusively on line and often the identity of the bullying child is unknown to the child who is being bullied. The effects on both the bullying child and the victimized child will match those of other types of bullying behaviour.

Bullying at its core is a destructive relationship problem where children who bully learn to use power and aggression to control and distress others while victims become increasingly powerless to defend themselves. In Canada the rates of bullying and victimization are sufficiently high to cause concern for parents and educators. In a World Health Organization survey of 2005/2006, Canada ranked 26th and 27th of 35 countries on measures of bullying and victimization. Among 13 year olds, 17.8 percent of boys and 15.1 percent of girls reported frequent victimization. The results are likely higher as children often do not report and adults are unaware of the incidents.

The physical and mental impact to both children who bully and those who are victimized is significant. Children who are chronically victimized evidence physical symptoms including headaches, stomach aches, sleeping disturbances, bedwetting, depression and anxiety. Victimized children are also at higher risk for disliking or avoiding school which may result in decreased academic success. Children who bully are also at risk for similar symptoms, in addition to alcohol and substance abuse, and in extreme cases suicidal thoughts or suicide. Bullying has also been linked to high levels of depression and anxiety in adults. Often those children that have experienced bullying as children may repeat the behaviour as adults. Lessons of power and aggression learned in childhood can lead to sexual harassment, dating aggression and may later extend to workplace harassment and marital, child and elder abuse.

The costs to society as a whole are evidenced in increased use of the health care system due to health problems; rising educational costs due to low school attainment and increased costs for police and the justice system due to increased criminality. There continues to be significant negative effects of bullying on the population at large despite prevention programs being in place for approximately thirty years. Prevention program designers and educators need to critically examine studies on the efficacies of past programs, in addition to expanding the parameters of existing programs.

There can be no dispute as to the devastation that bullying reeks on individuals and society as a whole. While adults have often developed the tools to deal with conflict in their lives, children and adolescents often struggle with the appropriate response to aggression and conflict. The literature on bullying is extensive as are the studies evaluating the various programs. In addition, public awareness is at a level never seen before as reports of the tragic consequences of victimized children remain a media priority. Programs to prevent bullying have been in existence for approximately thirty years and a review of the countless resources devoted to this subject indicates there is no shortage of information available. Despite this, the development of a comprehensive approach to bullying in schools has yet to emerge. Documented barriers to success include programs not being conceptualized clearly or being a central focus of the school; program goals are not linked to issues for which teachers and other school personnel are held accountable; and staff and administrators have not been involved in the design and development of these programs. Although there is a critical need for educators to be trained, existing demands on their time results in an overburdened and overwhelmed teacher population. As current programs are implemented on a single component basis, it is difficult to engage the leadership and ensure support from school and district administrators.

Although there remains disagreement as to the appropriate age at which to introduce the development of moral emotions and social emotional learning skills, the trend in the research suggests that early intervention is key to the development of these skills. Despite evidence pointing to early intervention and integration in to the school system at all levels, the fact is there are remarkably few schools and or school boards that are taking a broad view of the issues. Individual schools are still left to choose their own intervention strategies from a myriad of programs with limited knowledge as to their efficacy and design goals.

The field of emotional intelligence and its relevance to the success of adults has become a national obsession. Bookshelves in the offices of today's leaders are lined with titles reflecting the importance being placed on this relatively new domain. The passion for the development of these skills is not reflected in our schools where the impact will be most felt. Had we as adults been exposed to these skills at a time when they could become part of our moral fabric, we would not now face the uphill battle of developing these skills at a later stage in life. The goal for school systems must be the teaching of social emotional learning skills and in particular, affective empathy prior to the development of aggression. In this way bullying behaviour will be targeted in its infancy with the hope that we can radically reduce its prevalence.

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