SCHOOL BULLYING AND VICTIMIZATION

NSSC RESOURCE PAPER

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The National School Safety Center is a partnership of
the U.S. Department of Justice, U.S. Department of Education and Pepperdine University.

Prepared under Grant #85-MU-CX-0003 from the Office of
Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, Office of Justice Programs,
U.S. Department of Justice.

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Fifth Printing — September 1990

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Few memories of childhood may be as powerful as that of the class bully and his hapless victims. The bully--big, strong and seemingly intrepid--always was on the lookout for opportunities to pick on vulnerable children, usually those smaller than himself.

Whatever happened to that bully? Did he ever outgrow his overly aggressive, antisocial behavior and become a mature, well-adjusted adult? Most psychologists who study these children say probably not.

A bully as young as 8 years old who is not taught how to behave and cope with frustration is very likely headed for a lifetime of failure, exacting a great toll from society. Research shows that a disproportionately high number of these children underachieve in school or drop out, perform below potential throughout their careers, land in prison for committing adult crimes, and become abusive spouses and parents. Worst of all, they frequently raise a new generation of bullies, perpetuating the cycle of violence.

Schoolyard bullying is a significant and pervasive problem. Based on extensive research conducted by Dr. Dan Olweus, professor of psychology at Bergen University in Norway and formerly a fellow at the Center for the Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences at Stanford University, 15 percent of schoolchildren are involved in bully-victim problems. One in 10 students is regularly harassed or attacked by bullies, Dr. Olweus found. These figures are based on surveys of more than 150,000 elementary and junior high school students in Norway and Sweden, but Dr. Olweus believes the statistics most likely are representative of the United States as well. Dr. Olweus is a leading international expert on bully-victim problems and has conducted research in this area for more than 20 years.

Dr. David Perry, a professor of psychology at Florida Atlantic University, currently is involved in a research program that would replicate Dr. Olweus' study in the United States. His findings most likely will reflect the results of the Scandinavian studies.

In a separate, 22-year study, Dr. Leonard Eron, Dr. Rowell Huesmann and other psychologists at the University of Illinois-Chicago, found that young bullies have about a one-in-four chance of having a criminal record by age 30. Other children have about a one-in-20 chance of becoming adult criminals.

The researchers began in 1960 by studying 870 third-grade children from Columbia County, New York, and then followed their progress by conducting subsequent interviews with more than 400 of their original subjects. Of the 427 children who were found at age 19, the ones who had been the most aggressive as children

were more likely to have dropped out of school and to have been in trouble with the law as teen-agers. And of the 409 who were found at age 30, those who had been childhood bullies tended to have children who were bullies. The men also were found to be abusive toward their wives, to punish there children severely, and to have more convictions for violent crimes. The women were found to be mothers of bullies who harshly punish their children.

Because this pattern of aggression, misdirected frustration and intimidation is so easily ingrained, researchers say, early intervention by caring and attentive adults is crucial. "It's harder and harder for kids to change once the pattern is set and time goes on," Dr. Eron maintains.

Dr. Robert Selman, a psychologist and associate professor at Harvard's Graduate School of Education and School of Medicine, agrees. "I don't think there are natural bullies," he says. "But if one has been bullied by adults, it becomes a style one picks up."

WHAT IS A BULLY?

While active and assertive play is a normal sign of childhood, especially in boys, bullies are distinct in their quickness to start a fight. Belligerence, use of force and intimidation are the means bullies use to get their way. They are overly aggressive, destructive and enjoy dominating other children. According to the book Social Development in Young Children:

> Attributing children's aggressive behavior to the fact that they are "aggressive" is a particularly destructive form of circular reasoning. Children learn to perform aggressive behaviors such as kicking, hitting and biting, and they learn to identify situations where these behaviors will have rewarding results.

Aside from the characteristics described above, bullies also may shout insults, make threats and call names.

"Bullies see the world with a paranoid's eye," says Vanderbilt University psychologist Kenneth Dodge. "They see threats where none exist, and they take these imagined threats as provocations to strike back." Dr. Dodge's research shows that by the age of 7 or 8, bullies already are in the habit of misinterpreting an innocent brush or bump as a blatant attack. As a result, the psychologist adds, "They feel justified in retaliating for what actually are imaginary harms."

Other research reveals that bullies don't realize how aggressive they are. Dr. John Lochman, a psychologist at Duke University Medical School, has found that bullies habitually perceive other children as being more aggressive than themselves. "Bullies see

their anger as justified," Dr. Lochman says. "They see the other kid as having started the trouble."

Dr. Selman contends that the anger and aggressive behavior bullies express are caused by immature thinking patterns. The psychologist suggests human thinking may be categorized into three levels, progressing from a primitive, commanding attitude to a heightened ability to collaborate and cooperate with others. These levels are:

* Unilateral--one-way commands and assertions of one's own needs, and/or conversely, simple and unchallenged accommodations to another's demands.
* Self-reflective/reciprocal--a focus on verbal persuasion, convincing others, making deals or using other methods that protect one's own interests in any negotiating process.
* Collaborative--a more sophisticated level when one understands that a relationship's continuity is more important than the particular issue at hand. Strategies include dialogue, process analysis and developing the shared goal of mutual understanding.

"Bullies certainly fall into the unilateral thinking level, or worse," Dr. Selman observes. The psychologist and his colleagues have developed a program geared for children at these varying levels of thinking. Dr. Selman believes that if teachers and others who work with children could recognize the nuances of each level, they could more effectively help raise the child to the next stage of thinking.

Research has shown that boy bullies are three to four times more likely to inflict physical assaults than girls. But girls tend to be more subtle and psychologically manipulative, shunning their victims or otherwise ostracizing them. Some researchers suggest that while girls aren't as likely to suffer the lifelong problems that await boy bullies, they are likely to become mothers of bullies. "The more aggressive little girls grow into mothers who punish their children harshly," Dr. Eron says. Punishing their children may be the only area in which a female can express aggression without fear of social censure or retaliation.

IS A BULLY BORN A BULLY?

As with alcoholism and other forms of abusive behavior, evidence strongly suggests that bullying tends to be an intergenerational problem. Many childhood bullies, in fact, often are abused at home by a parent and witness that parent abuse his spouse and the child's siblings. "A bully at school is a victim at home," says Dr. Nathanial Floyd, a longtime researcher and writer on bullying and a psychologist for the Board of Cooperative Educational Services of Southern Westchester, New York. Living with abusive

parents teaches children that aggression and violence are effective and appropriate means to attain a goal.

Young children also learn to dominate others through watching violent television programs. Studies indicate that after seeing aggression on television, children view such behavior as a successful form of social interaction and act more aggressively with their peers.

In Social Development in Young Children, the authors note:

> There is no evidence supporting the commonly held view that watching aggression enables children to release "pent-up hostility" that otherwise might result in aggressive behavior. On the contrary, viewing aggressive incidents increases children's knowledge of how to perform aggressive acts and reduces their inhibitions against behaving aggressively themselves.

Researchers also have found that parents of bullies tend to ignore their children and do not really know what is happening to them. "It's not just a lack of nurturance," Dr. Eron says. "These parents don't notice what's going on or know much about their child's bullying behavior." The parents also tend toward extremes in discipline. On one hand, they may punish their children harshly for certain infractions, while at other times the children may commit mayhem without a word of reprimand.

Inconsistent punishments teach children that they may be treated severely at any time. This kind of arbitrary treatment, coupled with the children's feeling that their parents aren't really involved or interested in their lives, reinforces the feeling of worthlessness already rooted in them.

Dr. Ronald Slaby, a Harvard psychologist who has studied bullies, says parents often exacerbate the school bullying problem by wrongly teaching their children to strike back at the least provocation.

"There are strategies of negotiating, ignoring and talking back in a non-provocative manner; seeking support from parents, peers and teachers; and facing down the provoker without retaliating through aggression," he says. "Perhaps our schools and our culture have been remiss in teaching how to be assertive without being aggressive, and by assertive I mean standing up for one's rights, holding one's ground, without being hostile," Dr. Slaby adds.

Dr. Floyd contends that many bullies cannot help their aggressive behavior. "They seem to need a victim and may work hard to create a victim, even if there isn't one," he says. "When these bullies see kids they perceive as vulnerable, they are threatened because it reminds them of the shame and humiliation of their own victimization. In the bully's constant teasing and aggression,

it is as if he is desperately trying to get the victim to say no, so that the bully himself will feel less threatened."

Bullying is considered a major problem in Japan and in Scandinavian countries, where violence, vandalism and general delinquency are increasing. This violence is one reason why the Japanese government called for major educational reform in their country. Some theorize that the pressure to conform in both Japan and Scandinavian countries is so profound that children who even slightly are different than their peers are easy targets for bullies.

"Bullies are receiving a lot of attention in Japan because they're not consistent with (the behavioral norm of) Japanese culture, which teaches treating each other with courtesy and kindness," observes Dr. Gerald Lesser, a Harvard professor of education who has spent several months in doing research on the problem in Japan.

Dr. Olweus and Dr. Eron agree that bullies usually are children who have "too little love and care and too much 'freedom'" at home. Through his research, Dr. Olweus is trying to dispel what he believes are several common myths about bullies. For example, he says, research does not suggest that bullying behavior stems from poor grades. Nor does Dr. Olweus believe that bullies are secretly anxious and insecure. Dr. Selman would disagree, indicating the anxiety and insecurity bullies feel are repressed and difficult to identify.

VICTIMS

Contrary to popular belief, bullying victims are not always that different from other kids. Wearing glasses, being overweight, having red hair or other relatively unusual characteristics do not invite victimization by a bully. Generally speaking, however, victims are physically weaker than other boys, while bullies are stronger and bigger than average.

Few adults would tolerate bullying by their peers. After all, adults would expect support from several sources, including the law or an employee's union. Most adults also would have the psychological stamina to face up to unreasonable, overly aggressive behavior.

Children, on the other hand, have no such recourse. As a result, they suffer in more ways than the obvious scrapes and bruises might suggest. A child who is prey for the school bully may be stigmatized by other children as well, further eroding an already battered confidence. As a result, he may assume an attitude of self-reproach.

Dr. Floyd believes children react this way because they need to find reasons for events and justice in the world around them.

This easily leads victims to feel that they must have deserved the taunting, teasing or other harassment. Victims may withdraw and be less willing to take social or intellectual risks at just the time when they most need encouragement from friends and satisfaction from completing new ventures.

Victims often are overprotected by parents who encourage dependent behavior, Dr. Floyd adds. Others may be, like their attackers, victims of abuse at home.

Merciless and unrelenting bullying has caused several victims to take their own lives. Conversely, some victims have killed their tormentors.

Nathan Faris, a seventh-grade student at DeKalb High School in DeKalb, Missouri, decided that four years of taunting by other children, who called him names such as "chubby" and "walking dictionary," was more than enough. On March 2, 1987, Faris brought a gun to school and fatally shot another student before killing himself in class. Classmates said that nobody really had anything against Nathan--"he was just someone to pick on."

In Japan, parents filed a 22 million yen damage suit against the Tokyo Metropolitan Government and parents of two alleged bullies, claiming their 13-year-old son's suicide was caused by Ijime (bullying). The parents also claimed the school principal and several teachers not only failed to intervene in the harassment, but also assisted the bullies in their activities. The boy hanged himself in a railway restroom and left a note naming two classmates responsible for his anguish. The boy had been forced to serve as messenger for the other two and repeatedly was buried by them in mock funerals.

According to The (London) Times Educational Supplement, Ijime caused at least nine student suicides in 1985, as well as several other cases in which victims murdered their tormentors. In Tokyo, a special "bullybuster" force of 30 officers arrested more than 900 youngsters for bullying during the first half of 1985.

Domestically, schools face a significant liability exposure for bullying. The parents of a 10-year-old San Francisco boy sued five bullies and the San Francisco School District for $351,000 for failing to enforce the child's right to attend a safe, secure and peaceful school. The victim alleged that the bullies punched and intimidated him every day during the elementary school's fall 1985 term.

Bullying affects school attendance and the overall campus climate and safety. Victims understandably fear school itself and the abuse they know awaits them there. A 1984 study by the National Association of Secondary School Principals found that even in the best-administered schools, 25 percent of students surveyed reported one of their most serious concerns was fear of bullies.

"Victimization is a major problem," Dr. Floyd says, "because it can be such a major distraction from the whole educational process. And we're hearing from the local districts that the problem is growing."

In the landmark Violent Schools--Safe Schools study, a survey of students' reports of neighborhood and school crime clearly linked fear of assault with avoiding school. Eighteen percent of students who had been attacked in their neighborhoods also were afraid most of the time while on campus, compared with only 2 percent of the other students. Overall, 56 percent of assault victims reported being afraid at school at least sometimes. Fifteen percent of the attack victims reported staying home at times for fear of being bothered or hurt at school. When they do come to school, these children avoid certain places, especially restrooms.

Victims also are far more likely than other students to bring a weapon to school to protect themselves. Twenty-nine percent of victims said they occasionally brought weapons to school; only 9 percent of other students did so.

The report also discovered a strong correlation between victimization and limited social contact. Nineteen percent of those victimized at school said they either had no friends at school or only one or two friends, while 12 percent of the other students said they had so few friends. As a result, victims, who need support most, have fewer places to turn for help.

Even more alarming victimization statistics were reported in the National Adolescent Student Health Survey conducted during the fall of 1987. Approximately 11,000 students in the eighth and tenth grades from a nationally representative sample of more than 200 public and private schools in 20 states participated in the study. The study's findings included:

* Almost half of the boys (49 percent) and about one-fourth of the girls (28 percent) reported having been in at least one fight during the past year. (A fight was defined as when two people hit each other or attack each other with weapons.)
* More than one-third of the students (34 percent) reported that someone threatened to hurt them, 14 percent reported having been robbed, and 13 percent reported having been attacked at school or on a school bus during the past year.
* Nearly one in five girls (18 percent) reported that during the past year, while outside of school, someone tried to force them to have sex when they did not want to.

INTERVENTION

In his book Aggression in Schools: Bullies and Whipping Boys, Dr. Olweus notes that with few exceptions, traditional treatment methods for bullies--psychoanalysis, group therapy, psychodrama,

and some forms of psychotherapy--have been of little value. This finding is not surprising, Dr. Olweus writes, because the requirements for successful treatment are missing. The patient must realize his behavior is problematic and sincerely want to change. However, Dr. Olweus says, "The younger the boy when remedial measures are initiated, the greater the chances for enduring improvement."

In Norway, Dr. Olweus established an experimental intervention program in 42 schools at the request of the government. Results indicate that bullying incidents were cut by more than half in the program's first two years. Dr. Olweus hopes that through the program, parents and teachers will become more aware of the problem and will assume greater responsibility for helping control children's activities at home and at school.

Dr. Olweus recommends that adults closely supervise recess and enforce "strict and straightforward" rules of behavior. He also advises that teachers mete out consistent, non-physical punishment to misbehaving children. Equally important, however, is for teachers to generously praise good behavior. If class rules are adhered to, Dr. Olweus says, bullying victims will enjoy the support of "neutral" and well-adjusted classmates. When a child is bullied, teachers should use their creativity to help him assert himself and make him valuable in the eyes of the class. At the same time, parents are encouraged to teach their children to develop and maintain new friendships.

Both parents and teachers must encourage better communication with children who may be at risk for bullying. "Victims are afraid to tell their parents for fear of being bullied more," he said.

Basic to any anti-bullying program, Dr. Olweus maintains, is "a clear repudiation of repeated physical and mental maltreatment." In Aggression in the Schools: Bullies and Whipping Boys, he writes:

> Naturally, this repudiation should be directed primarily against the phenomenon, not the particular bully; but it seems inevitable that it will also affect the bully to some degree. Such an emphasis ought to come from many different sources: from the school authorities--admonitions that physical and mental abuse will not be tolerated in the school; from the teachers--clear statements and, in addition, active intervention in situations where mobbing (bullying) occurs or can be suspected to occur; from the classmates--active intervention, too, with the aim of protecting the whipping boy; from the parents of bullies--through serious discussion, but not physical punishment. Even though the peer group very likely can play an important role, I believe that the adults, at least at first, must assume the main responsibility for stressing such a repudiation. This requires a certain amount of courage on the part of the adults, especially since all

suggestions of even a slightly controlling character have come to seem so unfashionable. However, to fail to stop these activities implies a tacit confirmation--an attitude that seems very inhumane.

International authorities on schoolyard bullies and victims gathered in May 1987 at Harvard University for a "Schoolyard Bully Practicum," sponsored by the National School Safety Center, to develop a five-point prevention program for the United States. The Practicum was the first such meeting of prominent researchers, psychologists, and school, law enforcement and public relations practitioners.

Practicum participants included Drs. Olweus, Eron, Floyd, Lesser, Perry, Selman and Slaby, as well as Peter Blauvelt, director of security, Prince George County Public Schools, Upper Marlboro, Maryland; Robert Maher, principal, Cornwall Central High School, Cornwall-Hudson, New York; and public relations counselor Edward L. Bernays, considered the "father of modern public relations."

NSSC introduced various components of the experts' program suggestions during the 1987-88 school year. According to Practicum participants, five central ideas must be acknowledged by the public and school administrators in trying to solve the phenomenon of bullying and victimization. These ideas are:

1) School bullying is a significant problem.

2) Fear and suffering are becoming part of the everyday lives of victims of bullying, making them avoid certain areas at school, stay home from school altogether, run away and, in isolated cases, commit suicide.

3) Young bullies are more likely when they reach adulthood to become criminals and to suffer from family and professional problems. Practicum participants strongly believe early prevention or intervention programs can not only stop school bullying, but also can save victims, the bully and society from years of potentially tragic problems.

4) The prevailing attitude that kids fighting each other is a manifestation of normal youthful aggressive behavior must be discarded. "There appears to be a pervasive ethic of aggressive behavior that seriously detracts from the school curriculum," Dr. Floyd said.

5) The United States should follow the lead of Scandinavia and Japan, whose governments have addressed bullying problems with national intervention and prevention programs. Their efforts have been successful in reducing bullying incidents and can work in the United States as well, the participants said.

Practicum participants identified a wide range of strategies to help educators and others control or prevent bullying. First,

assess the scope of the problem through a questionnaire answered by teachers and students. Communicate clear and consistently enforced behavior standards, closely monitor playground activity, and be visible on campus. Also, watch for symptoms of bullying victims such as withdrawal; decline in study habits or grades; anxiety; and cuts, bruises or torn clothing. The key, though, is for everyone--educators, law enforcers, parents and students---to better understand schoolyard bully-victim problems and work together to prevent this emotional and physical suffering among youth.

Intervention programs that deal with school bullying already are in place in several school districts. For example, at English High School in Boston, bullies are warned or suspended, then they are counseled by doctoral candidates in psychology from Harvard, who closely monitor their progress. Serious cases are referred to school system psychologists.

In Southern Westchester County, New York, where Dr. Floyd implemented an anti-bullying program, chronic bullies are counseled in groups and individually. They are given incentives to cooperate with peers and are encouraged to gain control over the need to bully, partly by reassessing how they view children they see as vulnerable.

The most effective strategy for victims when confronting bullies, Dr. Floyd says, is to "make a stand and leave the field with dignity," not necessarily to fight. In his program, victims are taught assertiveness through group discussions, role playing and counseling.

Dr. Floyd has prepared checklists for teachers to help them identify potential victims and bullies and steer them toward help. The psychologist believes current trends in today's society to sue, criticize and blame are partially responsible for the bullying phenomenon. "Kids are influenced by the culture, which endorses belittling and teasing, especially at athletic competitions. In truth, we have become a blaming society," he says.

In its ongoing efforts to combat schoolyard bullying, NSSC in 1988 produced an 18-minute educational documentary titled "Set Straight on Bullies." It has won an Emmy and several other awards as well as being broadcast on public television stations throughout the country. A 90-page book, also titled Set Straight on Bullies, was published by NSSC in 1989 and provides a comprehensive examination of the school bully-victim problem.

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Report to Parents

What to Do About Bullying

Few memories of childhood may be as powerful as that of the class bully lurking, teasing, shoving--never missing a chance to harass a victim. The bully--big, strong, seemingly intrepid--was always on the lookout for opportunities to pick on vulnerable children, usually smaller or younger.

Whatever happened to that bully? Did this belligerent child ever outgrow his aggressive antisocial behavior and become a mature, well-adjusted adult? Probably not. Research shows that a high number of these children do poorly in school or drop out, perform below their potential throughout their careers, land in prison for committing adult crimes, and become abusive adults when they marry.

Not kids' stuff anymore. Bullying, too often perceived as simply a "kids will be kids" problem, is dead serious. It's just as troublesome and prevalent now as it was in your childhood. Studies show that one in 10 students is regularly harassed or attacked by bullies; 15 percent of all schoolchildren are involved in bully/victim problems. Equally strong in the inner cities and rural communities, bullies have become the topic of considerable research among American educators, researchers, and law enforcement officers.

How do victims become the targets? Contrary to popular belief, bullying victims don't always differ much from other kids. Children who wear glasses, are chubby, have red hair, speak with a foreign accent, or wear unstylish clothes do not automatically invite bully attacks. Generally, however, victims are physically weaker, often younger. They may be lonely children with few friends. Somehow victims become accessible to attack by the route they walk to and from school, by the bus stop they frequent, by the street they live on, because of an older or younger sibling, and so on. Bullies are stronger, bigger than average, and more often boys than girls.

What can be done about bullying? First, recognize that this is a <u>real</u> problem for children, which can cause great distress and suffering all the way into adulthood. It's not merely curious childish behavior. Researchers discovered that very often children's fears about being bullied are not taken seriously. So if your child complains--believe it.

Next, whether incidents take place at school, en route, or elsewhere, <u>immediately inform your child's school</u> of your concerns. Alerted teachers can carefully monitor your child's (and the suspected bully's) actions. They may opt to make "behavior" the subject of a class discussion. If problems continue the teacher and principal may call for a meeting with the parents of the bully and the victim. In any case, the school's message will be clear: bullying is <u>not</u> acceptable. Knowing help and reinforcement are available at school and at home is critical to a victim and may cause bullies to alter their ways.

Watch for symptoms. Victims may be withdrawn; experience a drop in grades; be hesitant to go to school; come home with torn clothes and unexplained bruises. Be suspicious if a child needs extra supplies or often needs extra lunch money--a bully may be extorting money or supplies. Find out why a child takes toys or other possessions to school and regularly "loses" them.

Talk, but listen too. Openly communicate--without prying. Encourage children to share information about school, social events, the walk or ride to and from school. Listen to their conversations with other children also. This could be your first clue to whether the child is a victim--<u>or</u> a bully. Keep track of incidences of bullying. This way you can show school officials that a pattern may be developing.

Don't bully your child yourself. Take a look at your family's discipline measures. Try to teach children to obey rules by nonphysical, consistently enforced means.

Teach your child to be independent. Don't just tell your child to "fight back," or "just ignore them and they'll go away." Teach children to stand up for themselves verbally. Inquire about programs that will boost self-esteem. Encourage them to recruit friends. A confident, resourceful child, who has friends, is less likely to be bullied.

The National School Safety Center has published a variety of materials to help educators and parents prevent bullying. For ordering information, write National School Safety Center, 16830 Ventura Blvd., Suite 200, Encino, CA 91436.

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