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# Studies Probe 'Ecology' of Bullying

**By Debra Viadero**

In the mid-1990s, a pair of Canadian researchers videotaping children on playgrounds made a simple observation that helped shift experts' views about bullying: When children bullied other children, they rarely did it alone.

"People began to realize that bullying wasn't just a problem between two kids," said Susan M. Swearer, an associate professor of school psychology at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. "It moved a lot of people's thinking toward the complexity of bullying."

Research now suggests that bullies, their victims, bystanders, parents, teachers, and other adults in the building are all part of an ecology in schools that can either sustain or suppress bullying behaviors. And finding a solution to the problem requires a similarly broad, multilevel response, an interdisciplinary group of researchers **argued earlier this year in a special issue of *Educational Researcher***.

Understanding the full measure of bullying is especially important now as districts, states, and federal education officials step up their efforts to combat the scourge in schools.

Most recently, Massachusetts became the 42nd state to enact an anti-bullying law. (**"Efforts to End Bullying, A Challenge to Leaders, Gain New Momentum,"** May 11, 2010.)

Momentum for the bill in that state grew after the death of Phoebe Prince, a 15-year-old who committed suicide in January after experiencing months of alleged bullying by classmates at the South Hadley, Mass., high school that she entered in the fall. Similar tragedies are spurring educators elsewhere to take action as well.

Among its requirements, the new anti-bullying law in the Bay State calls on schools to develop and teach a curriculum aimed at preventing the kind of harassment that Ms. Prince was said to have endured, whether it takes place in a school hallway, on a cellphone, or on the Internet.

**Mixed Record**

Finding a program that's been shown to work in every school context, however, won't be easy. Studies of schoolwide anti-bullying programs in the United States have yielded only mixed success in reducing bullying behaviors.

Arguably the most widely used program, the Olweus Bullying Prevention Program, has consistently been proved to be successful in studies conducted in Scandinavian countries, but North American trials of the program have produced only sporadic success, Ms. Swearer and her colleagues wrote in one of the *Educational Researcher* articles.

"Indeed, there isn't a single, large-scale clinical trial of a schoolwide bullying-prevention program, a fact that highlights the need to conduct rigorous randomized trials in this area," the article in the journal's February issue went on to say. "Bullying will be reduced and/or stopped when prevention and intervention programs target the complexity of individual, peer, school, family, and community contexts in which bullying unfolds."

Ms. Swearer, for one, recommends a multipronged approach for schools. In addition to schoolwide programs aimed at preventing bullying or promoting positive social behaviors in students, she and other researchers said, direct efforts to target bullies and their victims may also be in order.

"What we find is that when counselors are able to work with the victims, they can reduce the level of bullying going on, and then that has a ripple effect," said Dewey G. Cornell, an education professor at the University of Virginia, in Charlottesville, and the director of the Virginia Youth Violence Project, which works with 330 schools across the state. "It communicates to other kids that, hey, they take bullying seriously."

Ms. Swearer suggests that instead of suspending bullies, schools can require them to undergo three hours of positive-behavior training on a Saturday.

The Canadian playground studies also showed that bystanders were involved in 85 percent of bullying incidents. Researchers Deba Pepler of Toronto's York University and Wendy Craig of Queen's University in Kingston, Ontario, also found that people standing around watching or laughing at the bullying tended to prolong it.

Other studies also suggest that aggressive youths seek out and befriend other aggressive youths, which helps explain why bullying often breaks out on sports teams, cliques, and fraternities.

"That is normalizing or reinforcing bullying," said Sabina M. Low, an assistant professor of clinical psychology at Wichita State University, in Kansas. "I think there's evidence, especially for males, that they're less likely to act in isolation."

**Setting an Example**

Ms. Swearer said such findings have led over the years to the creation of programs aimed specifically at bystanders. And some, such as Steps to Respect, developed by the Seattle-based Committee for Children, have been shown to reduce the kinds of bystander behaviors that encourage bullying.

But researchers said adults, too, help normalize bullying when they ignore it or model bullying behavior themselves—the teacher, for instance, who humiliates a student for the entertainment of the class.

A new study of 7th and 8th grade students and teachers at nine middle schools also suggests that students dislike school more, and are more likely to feel sorry for bullying victims, when they perceive that their teachers do too little to address bullying.

"We also found that teachers could be empathetic, but only under certain circumstances," said Rebecca A. Robles-Piña, a professor of statistics and research and psychology of learning at Sam Houston State University in Huntsville, Texas. She said teachers got lower ratings for empathy when they had a heavier workload and felt less supported by administrators.

Study after study, in fact, suggests there are big disconnects between students' perceptions of bullying and those of their teachers. In a study of 33 elementary schools that was presented at the American Educational Research Association conference in Denver last month, Ms. Low and her colleagues found that 93 percent of teachers—but only 59 percent of 3rd through 5th graders—agreed that "students in this school generally get along with each other."

Likewise, 58 percent of the upper-elementary students identified students who push, shove, or trip weaker students as a problem in their schools, compared with 25 percent of their teachers. And teasing, spreading rumors and lies, or saying mean things to classmates were perceived to be a problem at the school by 25 percent of teachers and 58 percent of students.

While such statistics suggest teachers may be underestimating the extent of the problem, they can also be somewhat unreliable because they are based on self-reports rather than actual incidents, some other researchers said. Students, for instance, may exaggerate the problem or fail to understand what constitutes bullying.

For that reason, Mr. Cornell said, when he administers school climate surveys in the schools he works with, he gets more-accurate numbers by asking students to identify victims. When a name comes up three or more times, that student is referred to the school counselor.

"When we started out doing this, there was some reluctance among counselors and some concern that students might not like it," said Mr. Cornell. "Now counselors are saying, 'Can't you get this information to us sooner?' "

**No Set Profiles**

At the same time, Mr. Cornell said, schools have to update their climate surveys each year to keep an accurate picture of the extent of the problem in their own buildings.

"It's like crab grass in your lawn," he said. "It comes back, and each year there's a new group of students, so it really requires continuous monitoring,"

Research is unclear, though, on who the bullies and victims are. While statistics show that students who are obese, gay, or have disabilities may be more likely overall to be bullied than peers who might blend in more easily at school, all other bets are off. Some studies suggest bullies are popular; others say they're not. Plus, victims and bullies can overlap, with many victims reporting that they themselves have bullied others.

"In some schools, the smart kids are the most victimized. There are others where the smart kids are doing the bullying," Ms. Swearer said. "It goes back to the nature of the school community."

That's why she advocates tailoring bullying-prevention efforts to the needs of individual school communities. "If the culture is one where athletes are doing the bullying," she said as an example, "there can be an intervention around coaches and athletic teams."

That's what led Ms. Robles-Piña to develop and test a bilingual bullying-prevention program aimed at 4th graders in a predominantly Hispanic community in Texas. One thing the researchers learned, from interviewing parents and educators in that unnamed city, was that latchkey children were often hounded by bullies who would follow them home after school and ask them to open the doors to their houses or apartments."That was something I'd never heard of before," Ms. Robles-Piña said. After the six-month intervention, which school counselors provided in once-a-week lessons, students were better able to articulate possible solutions to that scenario.

"There's such diversity across schools and across the country, that it's really hard to say what works in one school is likely to work in another," Ms. Swearer concluded. "It's the people who are going to create the climate that's going to allow bullying to take place or not."

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