

### **The Need for Bullying Intervention Plans**

Bullying has become a major epidemic in American schools. Not only is face-to-face bullying still dominant in schools, but with the growing use of social media bullying has never been easier for students. Studies have been done to show the negative outcomes of bullying and are summarized in the article “Bullying in Middle Schools: Prevention and Intervention” by Milsom and Gallo (2006). These outcomes include risk of alcohol or drug abuse, dropping out of school, depression, academic problems, interpersonal problems, loneliness and loss of friends. Recent studies have also found a correlation between bullying and rising teen suicide rates (Winsper et al, 2012, p. 271-282). I unfortunately witnessed this first hand at a school I taught at when a 14 year-old girl committed suicide after being bullied by an ex-boyfriend and his friends. Despite the well documented consequences of bullying it is still easy for adults to say that it is just kids playing around, or the old “boys will be boys” saying. However, it is important to not take this attitude and work towards getting rid of bullying in our schools.

With so many negative effects on students, schools are beginning to develop anti-bullying and bullying-prevention programs. However, not all of these programs are created equally. Many of the “prepackaged” programs lack the necessary flexibility to be adapted to a school’s unique environment and there for do not have the needed support of teachers and staff. In order for a program to be truly successful, a school needs to develop its own program that can be used in the school and that directly supports the policies on bullying and the resources

available. Developing a plan unique to the school will also help with teacher and student buy-in and assist in making the program more successful.

### ***Defining Bullying***

One vital step for any school to be successful in an anti-bullying or bullying prevention program is to make sure that all stakeholders have a common vocabulary concerning bullying. Shore (2009) defines bullying as “intentional, it takes place more than once, and there is an imbalance of power between the bully and the victim” (p. 39). It is also important for stakeholders to understand that bullying can take many forms; Mislom and Gallo (2006) state that there are 4 different types of bullies including: physical bullies, verbal bullies, relational bullies, and reactive bullies (p. 12). By creating a common vocabulary to be used it will make teaching students about bullying easier and will make bullying policy within the school more affective.

### ***Programs in Action***

Several different programs have proven successful in helping students, teachers, administration, and parents understand the effects of bullying in a school. Milsom and Gallo (2006) discuss two such programs in their article “Bullying in Middle Schools: Prevention and Intervention” (p. 14-15). The first of these was *Bullybusters*, a play that showed students, faculty and parents what bullying was and correct ways to handle bullying. This program was further supported by teachers and parents staying involved in helping students understand bullying and reporting bullying when it happened. The second program was developed by an elementary school by a committee made up of several different community stakeholders. In this plan

teachers focused on creating a “positive environment” for students and went through training to learn how to better handle bullying in their classrooms.

Many schools have also found success in bringing in guest speakers. Having someone from outside the students’ normal lives speaks to them about the importance of not bullying or helping to prevent bullying can be very powerful. This could be someone who was once bullied or even a former bully talking about his or her own experience. An even bigger impact would be having a family member of someone that was bullied who committed suicide to discuss how bullying affected the family. These speakers can help make the consequences of bullying real for students; it can make it much more real than a teacher reading off statistics ever could.

### ***Characteristics of Successful Programs***

These programs shared several key characteristics that help them succeed. The first vital part of any program to fight bullying is to have all of the stakeholders be involved in the creation and implementation of the program. This may include teachers, administration, students, parents, and other community members. It is important that teachers “buy in” to the program in order to make sure the program is extended into the classroom and implemented into daily classroom procedures. This helps to ensure that students will continue to think about and be shown how to handle situations involving bullies. These constant reminders help students, and to some extent staff, remember what needs to be done in these situations and deters them from participating in the bullying and increases the likelihood of students defending others against bullying. Also, by having all stakeholders involved in developing the program, the team will have a better understanding of the needs and resources at its disposal. It also will help in developing a plan that all members are excited about and ready to see through to the end; this is especially true for

teachers and students who will be the most involved in the program once implemented. If the program is developed by administration and then just passed down, schools will have less “buy-in” from teachers and students and the program will fight an uphill battle.

Another of these key points was that each program needs to be tailored to the needs and environment of the school. The use of focus groups and collecting data from staff and students before creating a program can help ensure that the program is created with the school’s own unique needs in mind. No two schools are exactly alike and therefore will need specialized plans that play to their schools strengths and focus on fixing their weaknesses. Creating a specific plan for a school will make the plan easier to implement because all schools will have different values they wish to protect and different resources at their disposal.

Schools also need to stay consistent with their policies and the program. The program cannot be expected to accomplish all the desired outcomes in one day if it is to be successful. Teachers, administrators, and parents will need to continue to work on building up the program and reiterating the material throughout the year and in a variety of settings so that students will know what is expected of them. This will also help victims of bullying be more likely to stand up for themselves and can be used to help bullies understand what they are doing and correct the behavior. Consistency on school policy will also help the students and teachers understand the importance of this program and that bullying will not be tolerated. Making sure that those that bully others are punished in an appropriate way can help to curb the bullying. Also rewarding those that stand up for others to stop bullying can also help to stop bullying in a school.

An overarching part of any plan should be to build up the students’ critical thinking skills on the subject of bullying. Teachers, administration, and parents cannot always be around students; therefore, they must be taught to handle these situations on their own to some extent.

This includes bystanders and helping them know how and when to properly intervene when they see someone being bullied. By helping students know how to deal with bullying and how to stand up for themselves and others, they will be better suited to handle whatever life may throw at them. This can also help them to build up their own self-esteem and understanding about the world around them.

The most common types of bullying are physical and verbal. Physical is most often the type of bullying that people feel they should do something about. This is a good thing, but it often makes us ignore other forms of bullying because it is harder to see the negative effects it is having on the bullied student. We have seen a dramatic increase in verbal bullying with the rise of social media. It is now easier than ever to bully someone using Facebook or Twitter; it also gives the bully a large audience to witness how they are bullying the other kid or kids. This all can happen in a format that makes it difficult for teachers, administrators and parents to even be aware of. However, knowing that this form of bullying exists can help the stakeholders be able to spot potential problems. It can also help students understand the importance of letting someone know about the social media bullying.

The last thing that schools should do with any program is to re-evaluate the program at the end, or beginning, of each school year. This will allow them to see what worked and what needs to be altered to get better results. By constantly updating their program they can make sure that they are having the best possible influence on their students and community and reaching those that need help. Building a program that is flexible will help make sure that the needs of students, teachers, administration, and parents are met. From year to year the needs of the school may change; therefore, the program will need to change with it.

## ***Conclusions***

Bullying has existed for decades and will probably never be fully eradicated. However, something must be done to stop the growth of bullying in schools and try to help students understand the impact of bullying and what they can do to help stop it. With the proper preparation and follow through a school can design a program that can help students, staff, administration, and parents better grasp the importance of stopping bullying. With a program that is built to suit the school and community, the chance of successfully curbing and then diminishing the bullying that takes place at school will greatly improve. School officials and the communities need to commit themselves to these programs and understand that this is not something that can be accomplished over night, but will take time, dedication, and hard work in order to be truly effective.

## ***References***

- Milsom, Amy & Gallo, Laura (2006). Bullying in Middle Schools: Prevention and Intervention [Electronic version]. *Middle School Journal*, 37 (3), 12-19.
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