Perpetrators of Bullying and Disability: Strategies for Parents

Charles Hallmark, PhD, Licensed Psychologist & Licensed Specialist in School Psychology
Grace Psychological Services
Agenda

- Social World of Youth
- Definition of bullying
- Prevalence
- Interventions
  - Including Parental Modeling and teaching of Social Skills
- Cyberbullying
- Educational Accommodations
- References
Youth learn how to navigate the social world through relationships

- Parent-child
- Teacher-student
- Sibling
- Peers (classmates, friends, cliques, crowds, romantic partners)

These relationships can provide positive support (intimacy, opportunities to learn social-emotional skills) but can also contribute to problems and negativity.
Peer Relationships: Infancy through Preschool

Infancy (first year)
- Short, reciprocal interaction

Older infancy and toddlerhood
- Focus on objects, imitation
- Development of language, play, and early friendship

Preschool
- More time with peers in spontaneous and pretend play
- Conflict (struggle over objects, protection of interactive space)
- Can lead children to resist letting others play
- Boys – larger groups, competition, hero/rescue, rough and tumble
- Girls – smaller groups, conversation, cooperation

Normative aggression (temper tantrums, fighting over toys)
How Parents can Help in Infancy and Preschool

- Provide warmth, love, respond to basic needs
- Be proactive in anticipating problems
- Provide consistent, structured routine for sleep, eating, playing
- Set firm limits on behavior; balance with warmth and support
Peer Relationships: Elementary School-Age (Middle to Late Childhood)

- Size, shape, and variability of peer interactions widen
- Contributes to hierarchies of power and popularity
- May hold negative views about people in “other” categories

- Play is more organized (sports, board games, tag)
- Aggressive behavior decreases substantially with language development and self-regulation skills
- Moves from more physical to indirect/relational (harming others through exclusion)
How Parents can Help in Middle and Later Childhood

- Talk with child every day about school, friends, interests
- Closely monitor school and social adjustment; supervise activities
- Support involvement in interests (scouts, sports, arts, music, other)
- Offer guidance in negotiating peer conflict & hurt feelings
  - Listen
  - Empathize with feelings (“You are sad about being left out”)
  - Set expectations and help teach problem-solving
- Get to know friends and their parents
Peer Relationships: Preadolescence

- Number of close friends decreases
- Loyalty, trust, and self-disclosure become more important
- Cliques (~3-10 members) emerge
  - Helps with identity development
  - Group leaders have power to include or exclude
  - Intergroup biases
  - Concern about social position and acceptance
  - Concerns with physical appearance
  - Jealousy, enemies, guarding against rejection
  - Bullying increases
How Parents Can Help in Preadolescence

- **Read, watch, and talk about it**
  - Share your experiences
  - Find books and other media

- **Help put it in perspective**
  - Remind them of times of anger and hurt feelings, and how they got through

- **Foster interests and other social groups**

- **Recognize bullying and take it seriously**
Peer Relationships in Adolescence

Continue to spend more time with peers
- Fewer friends, but more intimacy, self-disclosure, and discussion of personal problems

Cliques more mixed-sex
- Emergence of peer subculture/crowds (reputation-based collective of similarly stereotyped individuals – athletes, nerds)

Romantic relationships (25% at age 12; 75% at age 18)

Alcohol, drug use, delinquent behavior, and early/unsafe sex
How Parents can Help in Adolescence

- Model healthy relationships (in person and online)
- Maintain a warm, caring, open relationship but set boundaries and high expectations
- Encourage positive peer friendships (at your home – have food!, school activities, youth programs, religious groups)
- Know teen’s friends and their parents
- Express concerns, ask questions, and pay attention to warning signs
  - Don’t judge based on appearance alone; listen to what teen has to say; don’t overreact; get help when needed
What is Bullying?

- Unwanted aggressive behavior(s)
- Observed or perceived power imbalance
- Repeated multiple times (or is highly likely to be repeated)

Bullying may inflict harm or distress on the targeted youth including physical, psychological, social, or educational harm

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2014)
Types of Bullying

- Physical bullying: punching, shoving, acts that hurt people
- Verbal bullying: name calling, making offensive remarks
- Indirect/relational bullying: spreading rumors, excluding, ganging up
- Cyber bullying: sending insulting messages, pictures or threats by e-mail, text messaging, chat rooms

Hinduja & Patchin (2009)
What is Harassment?

- Creation of a hostile environment by conduct or by verbal threats, intimidation or abuse that has or would have the effect of unreasonably and substantially interfering with a student’s
  - educational performance, opportunities or benefits
  - mental, emotional or physical well-being
  - fear for his or her safety
Not Everything is Bullying!

**Fun Teasing:**
Fun, good-natured, “give & take” between friends to get both parties to laugh; mean teasing is one-sided and negative

**Fun Teasing:**
Fun, good-natured, “give & take” between friends to get both parties to laugh; mean teasing is one-sided and negative

**Conflict:** Struggle, dispute, misunderstanding

**Being rude:**
Inadvertently saying or doing something that hurts someone else

**Drama:**
Social Interaction with overreaction, excessive emotions, involvement of others, inflated relevance
Hwang, Kim, Koh, and Leventhal (2017) found:

Increased prevalence of children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) of bullying (both as victims and perpetrators) compared to general community children (ages 7-12)

Although initially children with ASD were found to be significantly more likely to bully this relationship no longer existed when co-occurring psychopathology (including hyperactivity, aggression, conduct problems, and atypicality) were controlled for
Bullying Experience and its Relation to Disability

- Being a bullying perpetrator is difficult for children with ASD because:
  - Requires intention to cause mental and/or physical suffering and determination of what will cause the greatest amount of pain to victims
  - This level of social analysis and ability to carry out plans is often absent among children with ASD
  - Nonetheless, others might interpret children with ASD’s behavior as intentional for different reasons:
    - Children with ASD may have limited insight and be “brutally frank”
    - Increased levels of aggression > increased likelihood of being labeled as a bully
Youths vulnerable to harassment (due to weight status, sexual orientation, or disability status) may have their roles as perpetrators overlooked (Eisenberg, Gower, McMorris, & Bucchianeri, 2015)

2013 Minnesota Student Survey (MSS), (n= 122,180 ) 5th, 8th, 9th, and 11th grade students found:

1 out of 4 typically developing adolescents reported bullying behavior in the past 30 days; girls more likely to engage in relational, boys physical

1 out of 5 female students without a disability reported bullying behavior

~ 33% of female students with a mental health or behavioral-emotional problem or both a physical disability and a mental health or behavioral problem reported bullying
Prevalence and Correlates of Being a Perpetrator

- Bullying involvement for adolescents with an Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD)
  - ~46% victimization
  - ~15% perpetration
  - ~9 victimization/perpetration
  - within past school year

- Correlates of perpetration
  - Being white
  - Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD)
  - Getting together with friends at least once a week

- Correlates of Victimization/Perpetration
  - Being white non-Hispanic
  - ADHD
  - Getting together with friends at least once a week
Children and adolescents may not realize that their unwanted behavior is perceived as bullying by other children.

Children and adolescents can be adversely affected by negative attitudes to disability and perceptions of difference.
Why Is Bullying a Problem?

- It is common
  - 1 in 3 have been involved in bullying at some point
  - It is hurtful
  - Low self-esteem, avoidance of school or social situations, depression, suicidal thoughts and attempts
  - School problems, relationship problems, rule-breaking behavior
Possible Signs of Bullying Others

- Refer to others negatively (wimp, loser)
- Lack empathy
- Strong need to get own way
- Hostile/defiant attitude
- Anger easily
- Deny involvement or blame others when behavior is addressed
**Role of Parents in Bullying**

*Parents are the experts on their children’s behavior and their physical and mental wellbeing.*

*Play a key role to play in supporting their children if they bully others or experience bullying themselves.*

*Can offer advice to school staff on extra support their child might need or any creative solutions that may help to resolve conflict.*

*Parents have a wealth of knowledge schools will want to call upon when developing or reviewing their anti-bullying policy.*

*It is important that schools listen to and respond to parents concerns and keep good communication going between them when dealing with bullying incidents relating to their children*
‘I told my teachers at school and they said that I had special needs so I should get used to it as I would be bullied all my life. They also told me to stop playing out at break times then I would not get bullied.’ (Mencap 2007) A whole-school policy will directly address a culture of discrimination.

Research has found that children who believe that the bullying they experience is due to some internal unchangeable fact about themselves have been found to be the most vulnerable.

‘They used to blame my child for it. My child has now got a reputation so that sometimes he has been blamed for things when he wasn’t even present.’ (Parent of child with ASD)

Informal or inadvertent exclusions
Difficulties with assertion and self-control (Rose & Espelage, 2012) among a middle-school population

Lack of age-appropriate social skills (may be a bit of an overgeneralization; differences between ASD and Learning Disabilities and/or Emotional and Behavioral Disabilities)

Misinterpretation of social cues resulting in reactive aggression

Other Potential Antecedents
Students with EBD in one study reported higher rates of *proactive aggression* (e.g., bullying) compared to other groups of students with disabilities.

- This finding accounted for by co-occurring difficulties including victimization, anger, and delinquency.
- Students with disabilities might engage in higher rates of bullying to avoid victimization.
- Bully-victims- students with poor interpersonal relationship skills that are proactively aggressive to avoid long-term victimization.
Other Potential Antecedents

- Anger
- Supportive attitudes for bullying
- Lower levels of empathy
- Overall, higher rates of bullying behaviors among students with EBD may be a manifestation of their disability and more accurately defined as reactive aggression (Rose & Espelage, 2012)
Tips for Parents: Preventing Cyberbullying

- **Watch your behavior (what do you text & post on Facebook, Instagram?)**

- **Supervise and limit activities (no 24/7)**
  - Have computers in common areas (not in bedroom)
  - Know child’s password
  - Be friend on Facebook
  - Bring cell phones, computers to parents’ room to charge overnight
If Your Child is Bullying Others

- Try to figure out why (To be popular or powerful? Going along with the crowd? Being bullied and lashing out?)
- Send clear, firm, and supportive message that the behavior is not OK and that it needs to change (meaningful consequences)
- Involve child in developing alternate behaviors or ideas to gain leadership and “social status” that don’t involve bullying others
- Work with school or community professional to plan for change
Policies on Bullying and Children With Disabilities

- Safe to Learn says: ‘The Department [DCSF] advises that sanctions are applied fairly, proportionately, consistently and reasonably, taking account of any special educational needs (SEN) or disabilities that pupils may have and taking into consideration the needs of vulnerable children.

- Bullying by children with disabilities or SEN is no more acceptable than bullying by other children and it should be made clear that their actions are wrong and appropriate sanctions imposed.

- However, for a sanction to be reasonable and lawful, schools must take account of the nature of the child’s disability or SEN and the extent to which the child understands and is in control of what he/she is doing.’ (Para 4.16)
Policies on Bullying and Children With Disabilities

- ‘I was called in to school as a result of my child misbehaving, but actually it was other children telling her to do things. She hasn’t got the ability to tell them this. They will ask her – did you do this? And she will say yes, but not that she was told to do this.’ (Parent of child with Down’s syndrome)

- The teacher also agreed with Zafirah’s parents to set an Individual Education Plan target concerning better understanding of boundaries.
Policies on Bullying

- Health care providers should ask both child/adolescent’s role both as a victim and as a perpetrator
- Bullying prevention programs should take into account particular needs of vulnerable populations, including children with disabilities
Educational Accommodations for Children Who are Bullying and Have a Disability

Zafirah is 10 years old and attends a mainstream primary school. She has Down’s syndrome. She experienced bullying when a group of four girls in her class alternated phases of friendliness with making fun of her. The girls invited her to play at breaks then pretended not to know what Zafirah was talking about when she tried to join in. Zafirah was keen to make friends with the group and her impairment meant she found it difficult to make sense of their behavior. The girls eventually persuaded Zafirah to steal a CD from another learner’s bag during the lunch break. Zafirah was seen by another girl who told a teacher. The teacher confronted Zafirah who became upset. The teacher took Zafirah away from the others and gave her plenty of time to calm down and explain what she thought had happened. The teacher knew about Zafirah’s impairment and made sure she was very clear with her what would happen next. The teacher acted straight away as she understood it was important for Zafirah to remember that what was happening was a consequence of her recent actions. Zafirah was asked to immediately give the CD back and apologize. The teacher explained that she would also lose her merits for that week and a note would be made on her report book. The other girls were given a detention. Zafirah and the girls took part in peer mediation [see page xx for more details] to resolve the issues. Zafirah was offered her own peer mentor to support her. Parents were informed of the school’s actions and asked to support them. The class teacher did some work on friendship in SEAL and PSHE lessons. The teacher also agreed with Zafirah’s parents to set an Individual Education Plan target concerning better understanding of boundaries.
Possible Accommodations

- Create a Behavior Intervention Plan and Functional Behavior Analysis that identifies what is triggering the behavior and offers socially appropriate alternative behaviors that the child can engage in that meet the same function (e.g., if the reason why the child or adolescent is bullying is to get access to more peer recognition, providing rewards in the school that can allow him or her to do this in a more appropriate manner.

- Social Skill Curriculum
- Peer Mediation
- IEP Goals
- Understanding Student Code of Conduct and which consequences apply to all others

- In some instances, a Manifestation Determination Review will be conducted, if the incident is sufficiently severe or there have been several incidents. At this time the IEP Committee, if the child is identified as having a disability, will need to determine whether the behavior the child engaged in, in this instance, bullying was directly and substantially related to his or her disability.

- when using sanctions, whether an apparent behavior difficulty is in fact a manifestation of unidentified learning difficulties or other type of SEN.
Interventions

Activities to promote social skills such as empathy, anger management and social problem solving can be conducted in small group work sessions with targeted individuals or with the whole class during circle time activities. These may be particularly helpful for learners with social impairments such as autism.

For many learners this work presents opportunities to explore and agree both what constitutes the boundaries of acceptable behavior and the importance of working within these boundaries if good outcomes are to be achieved in adult life.
Interventions

- Strengths-based approaches
- Solution-Focused Therapy
  - Restorative Approaches
  - brings together all children involved in the bullying with those who experienced bullying behavior to look at their actions in a safe and supported environment. A meeting is conducted which involves all parties and a support group made up of ‘people who respect and care most about these two’.
  - May include a stay away contract
  - Punishment is only effective to the extent it teaches new behaviors and builds empathy and perspective-taking skills
A useful way of asking questions is to use Circle Time and to ask learners to complete the following sentences: ‘I don’t like it when...’ ‘I wish I could help friends when...’ Bullying is a topic that inevitably comes up when these questions are raised. ‘My child had severe eczema and the other kids were teasing her about it going “Uurrrgh don’t touch her ‘cos you’ll catch it!” They used circle time to discuss what eczema is and how you can’t catch it and explored how teasing made people feel. This helped a lot.’

- Parents can use the bullying as an opportunity to educate their children on issues related to matters of diversity and inclusion
How Youth Can Help Themselves

- Treat others with respect
  - Use kind words
  - Think before you speak (or type or text)

- Recognize when you are feeling frustrated, angry, or wanting to be mean to someone
  - Find another way to handle it
  - Focus on something else
  - Talk to a friend or adult
  - Write down how you feel (not on social media)

- If you have hurt someone else, take responsibility and try to make up for it (apologize, offer to help)
How Youth can Help Others

- Don’t join in... speak up if it is safe to do so
- Band together as a group against bullies
- Tell an adult about the bullying
  - Tattling/ratting = telling an adult to get someone in trouble
  - Telling/reporting = telling an adult because someone’s behavior is unsafe or hurtful to another
- Reach out to isolated peers, offer support!
Helping youth navigate their social worlds can be challenging, but it is critically important.

Parents make a huge difference – hang in there!

Bullying and harassment need to be addressed with the perpetrator, the target, and the bystanders.

It takes all of us (students, parents, school, community, society) to make a difference, but it is possible.

Final Messages

Department for Children, Schools and Families. (2008). Bullying involving children with special educational needs and disabilities.


THANK YOU & QUESTIONS