



Bullying: From Words to Action

By Kathleen Vail

Anna Bucy was a small-town girl who wasn't afraid to speak her mind. For that, she paid a price. "I was bullied my whole life," she says.

Now a member of Ohio's Greenon Local School Board, Bucy doesn't want other children "to put up with what I endured." Unfortunately, she continues to see students bullied at her son's school.

"So few districts have a coordinated effort," says Bucy. "It's scary. You don't want to admit that it happens, and you don't want to face it."

If, like many of us, you were bullied as a child and grew up during the last century, you probably encountered adult apathy. The prevailing wisdom was that childhood bullying was normal, that kids had to work it out themselves, and that adults should stay out of it.

Then came the worst public school shooting in U.S. history.

Most press coverage in the wake of the Columbine High School shootings portrayed the two young gunmen as loners driven to lethal violence by a culture of bullying at their suburban high school. Several months after the tragedy, I wrote an article for ASBJ on the phenomenon of bullying and how schools were attempting to deal with it.

In May, I revisited the Columbine tragedy with a story on the 10th anniversary, and reread my original feature on bullying. Like Bucy, I wondered why kids were still being bullied. What, if anything, had changed in the past decade?

A lot, it turns out.

"You would not recognize what we do now, in terms of 10 years ago," says Chuck Saufler, a Maine counselor and bully prevention trainer who was the head of Maine Project Against Bullying when I interviewed him in 1999.

Columbine sparked what peer bullying prevention pioneer Dan Olweus calls an "explosion in research" on peer aggression. The research showed that most of what we believed about bullying for decades was wrong. Unchecked, it can and does lead to school violence. It lowers academic achievement.

And the notion that adults should let students handle bullying on their own is a recipe for disaster. In fact, schools and districts have become focal points for bullying prevention efforts.

"Children have a right to a safe environment," says Olweus, who lives in Norway. "It is the major responsibility of the school."

'People don't fight with their own data'

Trainers say they spend much less time these days convincing administrators and staff that bullying is a problem that merits the attention of all adults in the school. Denial can be hard when schools survey teachers and students to find out exactly what's happening in classrooms, hallways, cafeterias, restrooms, and on playgrounds.

"People don't fight with their own data," says Saufler, who works at three schools in Regional School Unit #1, in Bath, Maine. "Here's what kids and teachers are telling you about what's going on in your schools. Here's where your kids tell us the peer aggression is happening. It's not rocket science."

Bullying prevention has changed from focusing on individual students and problems with curriculum units and once-a-year student assemblies. Efforts now hone in on the entire school district, with the adults' responses to bullying being the key to change.

"School leaders must be aware of the messages they send," says author and school counselor Stan Davis.

All schools have an overt culture and a hidden one, says Davis, who works at the James A. Bean Elementary School in Sidney, Maine. "Kids are paying attention to the hidden one. They will see if we welcome new staff, and if we will listen to hate speech." Students tell him that their classmates say, "That test is so gay." When the adults don't address it, the curriculum and assemblies are wasted.

Adult responses to bullying and harassment, with consequences, show that teachers and staff are serious. The consequences don't have to be dire, like suspension or expulsion, but Davis says they must be consistent. Then students know the behavior is not acceptable, and the adults in the building are committed to stopping it.

Another change in prevention strategies is the emphasis on school connectedness, says Davis. This involves strong school-to-student and student-to-student connections. "Positive connections are a strong predictor of academic success," he says.

How students are treated by adults in the building can be a major predictor of who becomes a target, says Saufler. "Bullies can be well-liked by teachers and they often don't believe those children are aggressive. Kids see the inherent unfairness of this," he says.

Saufler talks to students about who has power and privilege in the school. He asks how they know who they can bully. "They say, 'We know who the teachers like and don't like.' They pick on those disliked kids because the teachers won't intervene."

'Critical conversations'

The attitude that schools shouldn't be dealing with peer aggression has mostly disappeared, but that doesn't mean all adults buy in to the idea with the same enthusiasm. This is particularly true when it means adults must examine their own attitudes toward bullying and how they treat their colleagues.

For systemic anti-bullying efforts to work, there must be what consultant Hilda Graham calls "critical conversations. How many staff members think it's a problem? How many understand how it affects their teaching? How effective are our safeguards and guardians? Everyone might not be invested in it."

Surveys also can be useful in changing bullying behavior by tapping the "power of social norming," as Davis calls it. More attention now is paid to bystanders -- the students who are neither aggressor nor the target, but provide an audience for the bully. Bystanders easily can turn into aggressors if they see bullies are gaining power and not being stopped.

Davis uses student surveys to show the power that bystanders have, especially in the middle grades, where peer attitudes are more important than other opinions. When he conducts these surveys, he often finds a majority of students want adults to intervene. Most want bullying to stop.

That sends a powerful message to would-be bullies that the behavior does not make them admirable in their peers' eyes.

Columbine changed the world

The mid- to late-1990s brought a spate of school shootings -- Columbine was the most deadly. A decade later, the theory that Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold were bullied by the athletes at the school turned out to be false. In fact, Harris appears to have been a bully, rather than a victim.

However, a 2001 study by the FBI and the U.S. Department of Justice gave credence to the link between bullying and school violence, saying it was a factor in nearly three-fourths of school shootings. And other research has shown that bullying affects academic achievement. It's been linked to depression, low self-esteem, and, in some extreme cases, suicide. In June, the American Academy of Pediatrics for the first time included a section on bullying in its new recommendations for pediatricians.

Columbine and the other school shootings that took place during that time pushed the issue of bullying into the public spotlight, and school leaders and politicians have taken note. In 1999, no states had anti-bullying policies or required districts to have them; today, 39 do. At press time, parents were testifying before Congress about the ravages of bullying in hopes that it would pass the Safe Schools Improvement Act, a bill sponsored by Rep. Linda Sanchez, D-Calif. The bill would help states use grant money to collect data on bullying and require districts to let parents know when their children are bullied at school.

In 2004, the federal government jumped into the fray, launching an anti-bullying campaign called Stop Bullying Now, with a website (www.stopbullyingnow.hrsa.gov) that serves as a clearinghouse of research and tips for parents and students. "Our four goals were raising awareness, prevention, intervention resources, and gathering partners for bullying prevention," says Stephanie Bryn of the Health Resources and Services Administration.

While research was proving the need for school-based anti-bullying programs and schools were becoming more convinced of the need for such programs, the world kept changing.

Cyberbullying

A decade ago, the term "cyberbullying" was not in our vocabulary. Student harassment by e-mail, social networking sites, and cell phones has become widespread over the past five years.

When cyberbullying first made its appearance, the focus of the schools was on the technology instead of on the behavior. Patti Agatston, co-author of the book, *Cyber Bullying: Bullying in the Digital Age*, and a counselor at the Prevention/Intervention Center in Georgia's Cobb County School District, says schools need to call it what it is -- bullying.

"When we talked to kids about cyberbullying, they weren't making the connection that it was a form of bullying," says Agatston. "Those of us in the field of bullying prevention need to incorporate digital technology in our training, because kids aren't getting the link."

Children said that adults were talking more to them about sexual predators and online safety, "but not about how we are treating one another."

Another twist, says Agatston, was that students were less likely to report cyberbullying because they were afraid to lose access. "When I did interviews with students who had been targeted, that's what they'd say -- 'My mom won't let me instant message anymore.'"

Cyberbullying tends to be more intense than regular bullying, because students can harass other students when they're away from school. It potentially has a wider audience, as rumors spread more quickly in cyberspace. Also, cyberbully is a disinhibitor, "meaning that people might be likely to be engaged in aggressive behavior because they can hide behind the screen."

If there's a silver lining, Agatston says it's that cyberbullying usually leaves evidence. "When you show parents the printed out copy with profanities," she says, "they will address it."

Mean girls

Bullying used to mean only punching, fighting, and other physical abuse. However, the past decade brought more attention and focus on relational aggression -- gossip, rumors, name-calling, and exclusion.

The first rush of media attention focused on girls, but trainers and counselors say that both boys and girls are bullying in this way.

Nancy Mullin, director of Bullying Prevention Inc., says research shows that relational aggression "starts in preschool and both girls and boys do it." The media attention brought by authors Rosalind Wiseman (*Queen Bees and Wannabes*) and Rachel Simmons (*Odd Girl Out*) was good, says Mullin, because it drew attention to name-calling and exclusion as hurtful forms of bullying.

The bad news was in the message that only girls do it. "It diminishes impact and conveys the wrong message," she says. "These behaviors affect the development of both boys and girls."

It's important that schools name relational aggression in their bullying policy, says Julia Taylor, counselor with North Carolina's Wake County Schools.

"When you hear the word 'bully,' you think of Nelson on 'The Simpsons,'" says Taylor, who runs girl groups in her middle school. "Girls don't think of this as bullying. Schools say, 'There's no blood and no bruises.' It's difficult to prove."

Taylor says her principal recently suspended a girl for spreading a rumor that resulted in a fight. "I felt victorious," she says.

'That's so gay'

In a survey by the Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network (GLSEN), gay and lesbian students said teachers are present 80 percent of the time when anti-gay remarks are made, but they do not intervene.

Students regularly use the word "gay" as a pejorative, and children who are perceived as gay or lesbian are called much worse. Eliza Byard, GLESN's executive director, says teachers often don't respond when they hear slurs about sexual orientation because it makes them uncomfortable.

"It's still a fuzzy area, where we don't understand the severity of the impact or we don't act," Byard says.

What's good for gay and lesbian kids is good for all kids -- and that's part of GLESN's message to schools.

"In the beginning," Byard says, "the battle was to get the schools to recognize the issues that played out in school, and know that gay, lesbian, and transgendered people were part of every school community."

Today, she says, schools recognize that bullying and harassment are serious issues. "Some have come to understand that language, bias, and behavior are part of the problem, whether or not the targets are gay or lesbian," she says.

Slurs about someone's real or perceived sexual orientation start with how children are taught sex roles. Saufler asks fifth-grade boys, "What does it mean to be a man at your school?" He draws a box and writes their answers: Tough, hard, six-pack abs, guns, and big toys.

He asks, "What's not in this box? What if I'm kind and caring, all these female-type traits, that goes outside the box? What happens to those boys? They are targeted and controlled by the boy culture -- told they are faggots, gay, and queer."

Saufler does the same exercise with girls, who list these qualities: Pretty, thin, nice clothes. "What happens when you don't fit in? If you want to survive at school, you have to hide those things. You are an outcast or you live in denial of who you are."

The end?

We know bullying hurts children, sometimes well into adulthood. We know it lowers academic achievement and can expose schools to liability if they don't deal with it.

So, with as much as we've learned about prevention and training over the last decade, why are children still being bullied?

Even researchers and counselors don't believe it's possible to eliminate bullying completely. Bullies get powerful reinforcement for their actions -- some studies show that the brain's pleasure center is stimulated when they bully -- if they're not stopped.

"With awareness-raising plus evidence-based prevention efforts, we can significantly reduce bullying, says Susan Limber, a faculty member at the Institute on Family and Neighborhood Life and a Clemson University psychology professor. "We probably can't eradicate it, but we can make it less likely students have to endure the horrors of day-to-day bullying."

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Moving away from the 'B word'

What is a bully? The need for a universal definition of the word is another change that has occurred over the past decade. In fact, Chuck Saufier says, many counselors and researchers have gotten away from the word "bully," because it's too general and could trivialize what actually goes on.

"You want to not label stuff so much, but you want to appropriately name the behavior," says Nancy Mullin. "By calling sexual harassment bullying, you are diminishing the seriousness of the problem -- like saying teasing instead of bullying."

A common definition of bullying is the best, so people know what kinds of behaviors it covers, Mullin says. Bullying research pioneer and author Dan Olweus defines bullying like this: "A person is bullied when he or she is exposed, repeatedly and over time, to negative actions on the part of one or more other persons, and he or she has difficulty defending himself or herself."

Bullying, he says, involves an imbalance of power or strength. It's that imbalance that made some of the ways schools used to deal with bullying outdated.

Mullin says schools once believed that focusing on the bully and victim was the correct approach, with the onus put on the victim or target as the person who was provoking the behavior.

Ten years ago, Mullin says, the standard response of schools was to get the bully and victim together and have them work it out. "The notion of conflict resolution and peer mediation as bullying prevention tools is fading out, and that's a good thing," she says.

Conflict resolution assumes that participation in the conflict is equal. The power imbalance means people aren't on equal footing, and the practice could traumatize the bullied student again. "It's the equivalent of making someone who has been sexually harassed work it out in a room with the aggressor," she says.

Five myths about bullying

1. Bullies are unpopular. Some bullies are not popular with their classmates, to be sure. But many are intelligent and socially adept -- they easily read others and can tell what will upset them. Other children want to stay on this person's good side. Teachers and other adults often mistake them as strong leaders and give them positions of authority, reinforcing their behavior.

2. Bullies have low self-esteem. The stereotype of bullies who terrorize other children because they are envious is prevalent in our culture. However, many bullies actually feel pretty good about themselves. Enhancing their self-esteem, says Nancy Mullin, could mean building better bullies. Some research suggests that bullies have low empathy, and enhancing that trait could be a more effective strategy.

3. Boys bully with violence and girls with words. Much media attention several years ago focused on so-called girl bullying: name-calling, rumors, gossip, and exclusion. Better to call it relational aggression, some researchers and educators say, and acknowledge that boys do it, too. And yes, girls do hit -- in fact, some research suggests that girl fighting and violence is on the rise.

4. Bullying victims make themselves targets. The onus of stopping bullying should not be on the victim, says Dan Olweus, but that's exactly how many schools seek to deal with the problem. Programs that show bullied kids how to be more assertive assume these children have few social skills and need to be "fixed."

5. Adults make bullying worse. The idea that adults should look the other way is pernicious and erroneous. Most bullying goes on in places where adults are not -- hallways, playgrounds, restrooms, cafeterias. Adult presence and monitoring of those areas can stop it, if they are willing to address it. Ignoring the behavior sends a message that it's acceptable and could encourage other students to start bullying, as well.

Five things you can do

1. Make systemic changes. That curriculum used by one teacher in one class or that once-a-year assembly on being a good friend? Don't waste your staff's time on these one-hit wonders. They don't work. New research shows that the entire school district must make changes, with everyone addressing bullying behaviors consistently.

2. Pay attention to how adults act. Stopping bullying is really about school climate. Children watch you all the time. Does a teacher bad-mouth her colleagues in class? Does a principal berate staff in front of others? Do board members treat one another with courtesy? Students absorb these implicit lessons deeply, regardless of what is stated about bullying behavior.

3. Ask students. Use surveys and polls to find out about bullying in your schools. Your students are excellent guides; they can tell you where it happens, who does it, and why. Taking action after you've accumulated this information gives students a feeling of power, and can encourage bystanders -- those who are neither the aggressor nor the target -- to do something when they see others being bullied.

4. Look at the research. Ten years ago, research on bullying prevention was scant. Not anymore. Today, research can guide you on the best route your district should take. Start with the International Bullying Prevention Association (www.stopbullyingworld.org) for a list of just some of the research available.

5. Get buy-in: If every adult is not on the same page, even the best anti-bullying efforts will fail. Not all teachers and administrators believe bullying is harmful or that adults should intervene. These behaviors bring back uncomfortable memories for many adults, and they ignore the behaviors rather than confront their own attitudes about bullying.

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