



BULLYING AND DISABILITY HARASSMENT OF STUDENTS IN SCHOOL AND COMMUNITY

ISSUE

The National School Safety Center (NSSC) declared bullying the most overlooked and entrenched problem in U.S. schools.¹

- 60% of students with special needs or disabilities report being bullied, compared to 25% of the general school population;
- 40% of young people with autism and 60% of those with Asperger's syndrome are bullied on a regular basis;
- 85% of kids who witness this kind of bullying walk away and do not report it;
- An estimated 77% of students have been the victim of one type of bullying;
- About 30% of students have **reported** being involved in bullying as either a perpetrator or victim, showing the disparity between actual and reported incidents.²

BACKGROUND

Protection of all people with intellectual and/or developmental disabilities from mistreatment is a core belief of The Arc of Pennsylvania. Efforts to keep people safe from mistreatment should be balanced with the dignity of risk. Students with disabilities face many challenges as they are included into their neighborhood schools and community life.

Bullying is intentional aggressive behavior, often repeated over time, which involves an imbalance of real or perceived power or strength. Bullying can take many forms: hitting, kicking, or shoving (physical bullying); teasing or name-calling (verbal bullying); intimidation through gestures, including but not limited to passive, subtle intent to harass or acts of social exclusion (nonverbal bullying or emotional bullying); and sending insulting messages by text messaging or e-mail (cyber bullying).

Disability harassment, according to the U.S. Department of Education, Office of Civil Rights, is conduct that creates a hostile environment which limits people with disabilities from participating in or benefiting from school activities or services.³ Harassment can be

¹ Beale, 2001.

² Cook, Williams, Guerra and Kim 2012; Nansel, 2001; Swearer & Espelage, 2004.

physical or verbal abuse and intimidation. Bullying can be disability harassment if the bully targets victims on the basis of disability and/or targets people with disabilities. Unlike bullying, disability harassment may also include conduct that is not directed at a specific target, is not motivated by intent to cause harm, and involves isolated incidents. Disability harassment can be perpetrated by students and peers, and even by school employees, such as teachers and administrators.

Bullying is NOT done by a small number of students who are socially and emotionally isolated. Bullying is common across socio-economic status, gender, grade level, and class.⁴ Some students that bully have strong social connections and excel in school; others are more isolated and have little involvement in the school community. Due to high risk considerations, a child that exhibits repeated bullying behaviors should be carefully considered for immediate intervention.

How does bullying and disability harassment affect students?

Bullying can have disastrous consequences, both for children and youth who are bullied and the wider school community.

Children and youth who are bullied face an increased risk of the following:

- Experience depression, loneliness, or anxiety, which can lead to mental health issues and medication at an early age;
- Have low self-esteem;
- Experience headaches, stomachaches, fatigue, poor appetites;
- Have poor or impaired academic performance, which impedes access to learning;
- Victims of bullying are more likely to skip and/or drop out of school;⁵
- Adolescents who are bullied have an increased risk of suicidal ideas and behavior, particularly when other mental health issues are present;⁶
- Former victims tend to be more depressed and have poorer self-esteem than their non-bullied peers;
- Students tend to feel less safe and are less satisfied with school life in schools where bully/victim problems occur;
- The need for further, potentially costly, interventions for victims of bullying.

The devastating impact of bullying is exacerbated for students who are specifically victims of disability harassment. Ultimately, disability harassment can create a hostile

³ US Department of Education, Office of Civil Rights Dear Colleague Letter "Prohibited Disability Harassment", 2000.

⁴ Bradshaw et al., 2010.

⁵ Berthold and Hoover, 2000; Neary and Joseph, 1994.

⁶ Klomek and Gould, Suicide Prevention Research Center 2012.

environment that impedes the participation and education of students with disabilities.⁷

In schools where bullying and/or disability harassment issues are ineffectively addressed, students may begin to regard this behavior as acceptable. This may result in increased bullying behavior as well as other, possibly more severe, problems for the school environment including:

- Students with disabilities potentially become devalued in their school and community when bullying behavior becomes a norm;
- The need for interventions for students with disabilities can be costly to school districts.

How can bullying and disability harassment be effectively prevented and addressed?

Concerns about recent tragic bullying events across the country have raised priority initiatives for bullying and violence prevention. Researchers and practitioners alike recognize that simple solutions, such as stand-alone curriculums or targeting only a subset of students for interventions, are not effective. Schools need systemic approaches that noticeably change aspects of the school culture, while also teaching ALL students the skills to meet their social needs without bullying.⁸ Multiple levels of intervention and ongoing use of data to guide actions are also identified as critical in addressing issues of school violence such as bullying and disability harassment.⁹ Finally, an effective intervention must address not only the role of the bully and victim, but also the role of the bystander in stopping, escalating, or ignoring the bullying. Ignoring the role of the bystander (including students and adults who witness bullying) allows the perpetrator to continue to receive reinforcement for their inappropriate behavior.¹⁰ A particularly effective framework that meets all these criteria is Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (PBIS).

POSITIVE BEHAVIORAL INTERVENTIONS AND SUPPORTS

Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) is a school-wide framework for improving the effectiveness, efficiency, and relevance of practices which help prevent school violence and bullying behavior. PBIS begins with the premise that all students should have access to supports to prevent the development and occurrence of problem behavior, including bullying behavior. In Pennsylvania, PBIS is known as School-Wide Positive Behavior Supports (SWPBS).

Although many bullying prevention and anti-harassment programs exist, the implementation of School-Wide Positive Behavior Support (SWPBS) offers entire school

⁷ US Department of Education, Office of Civil Rights Dear Colleague Letter, 2000.

⁸ Olweus, 2003.

⁹ Mayer, 2008.

¹⁰ Ross and Horner, 2009.

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districts the tools necessary to address harassment in local schools and the community. It is the most comprehensive method that has the power to change a school/community culture. The ultimate goal of School-Wide Positive Behavior Support (SWPBS) is changing accepted culture to advance the elimination of harassment in our schools and communities.

PBIS takes a multi-tiered response to intervention approach to preventing bullying behavior,¹¹ which is derived directly from the three-tiered public health prevention logic.¹²

At Tier I, all students and staff are taught directly and formally about how to behave in safe, respectful and responsible ways across all school settings. The emphasis is on teaching and encouraging positive social skills and character traits. If implemented well, most students will benefit from this framework and be successful.¹³

At Tier II, students whose behaviors do not respond to Tier I supports are provided additional preventive strategies¹⁴ that involve (a) more targeted social skills instruction, (b) increased adult monitoring and positive attention, (c) specific and regular daily feedback on their behavioral progress, and (d) additional academic supports, if necessary.

At Tier III, students whose behaviors do not respond to Tier I and II supports are provided intensive preventive strategies¹⁵ that involve (a) highly individualized academic and/or behavior intervention planning; (b) more comprehensive, person-centered and function-based wraparound processes; and (c) school-family-community mental health supports.

POSITION OF THE ARC OF PENNSYLVANIA

The Arc of Pennsylvania recognizes that bullying and disability harassment are complex issues which occur not only within school buildings but also in the wider community of peers. While not uncommon, bullying and disability harassment have a profound and often lifelong impact on victims and are starkly incompatible with human and universal needs for safety and security, self-esteem and dignity, and community belonging.

The Arc of Pennsylvania recognizes that educators care deeply about the well-being of all their students and desire a healthy learning environment free from bullying and disability harassment. The Arc of Pennsylvania urges school administrators, teachers, caretakers, and community members to recognize bullying and disability harassment

¹¹ Bradley, Danielson, and Doolittle, 2007; Sugai and Horner, 2009.

¹² Walker et al., 1996.

¹³ Lewis and Sugai, 1999; Sugai et al., 1999; Taylor-Greene et al., 1997.

¹⁴ Crone, Hawken, and Horner, 2010; Fairbaks, Sugai, Guardino, and Lathrop, 2007.

¹⁵ Crone and Horner, 2003; Eber, Sugai, Smith, and Scott, 2002; Walker, Ramsey, and Gresham, 2004.

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where they exist, to intervene immediately and effectively, and to implement the Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) framework so that all students can learn in a safe and respectful environment, free from bullying and harassment.

The Arc of Pennsylvania supports implementation and expansion of School-Wide Positive Behavior Support (SWPBS), a school-wide evidence-based systemic

framework or process that effectively prevents and responds to bullying behavior, physical aggression, and disability harassment for all students, while ensuring that more intensive supports and interventions are provided to student victims and offenders who need them.

Approved by The Arc of Pennsylvania Board of Directors on June 22, 2012