Youth Perspectives on Bullying in Adolescence


Much of what we know about the causes and prevention of school bullying is based on research with elementary school-aged children. Early studies pointed to a dominant male bully repeatedly targeting a weaker victim or “whipping boy” (Oliveux, 1978). Subsequent research looked beyond the bully-victim dyad, emphasizing the potential role of bystanders (Salmivalli, 1999; Tewniok et al., 2004). On the one hand, bystanders had the ability to escalate bullying by watching passively or even actively cheering on the bully. On the other hand, bystanders could prevent bullying by coming to the aid of the victim, typically by seeking help from adults. Building on this research, school-based preventive interventions were developed that focused on creating a positive school climate, promoting anti-bullying norms, implementing clear sanctions for bullying, and encouraging other students to help prevent bullying by actively intervening on the victim’s behalf (Orpinas & Horne, 2010). Comprehensive programs that were carefully implemented were found to have modest preventive benefits, at least in elementary schools (Merrell et al., 2008; Oliveux & Limber, 1999; Salmivalli et al., 2011).

However, programs designed for younger children were not easily adapted to adolescents and generally have not proven effective for this age group (e.g., Bauer et al., 2007). Indeed, by the early teens, the social landscape of bullying changes significantly. Dominance hierarchies established in childhood give way to cliques and crowds, and same-sex playgroups take a back seat to puberty and the beginning of romantic relationships. In recent years, studies have been published by students in technology that have extended the impact of bullying from the schoolyard into cyberspace (Patchin & Hinduja, 2006; Raskauskas & Stoltz, 2007). No longer is it necessary for bullies or bystanders to be physically present or even know their victims. As highly publicized teenage suicides have shown, cyberbullying can instantly create a permanent record of harm that is not easily undone.

Given the harmful and potentially devastating effects of bullying for teens, the need for effective bullying prevention programs in middle school and high school has never been greater. Anti-bullying policies have been implemented in several states and school districts across the U.S. (Stuart-Cassel et al., 2011). In many cases, these policies specify consequences for bullying and provide examples of “model” or evidence-based programs, but do little in the way of mandating specific prevention programs, activities, or practices. In part, the dearth of programs for teens is related to a lack of studies on the correlates and causes of adolescent bullying, how it changes from childhood, and what can work to prevent it; although there are several studies looking at prevalence rates (e.g., Nansel et al., 2001; Wang et al., 2009). Even fewer studies have captured adolescents’ own views about bullying in school and in cyberspace. A more nuanced understanding of the dynamics of teenage bullying, including what teenagers think could be done to prevent it, is an essential next step for prevention.

This article highlights findings from a mixed methods study of school bullying that included 14 focus groups with 115 elementary, middle, and high school students. This research was part of a larger, statewide bullying prevention initiative conducted from 2004–2008 in 59 K–12 schools in the state of Colorado funded by The Colorado Trust, a private grant-making foundation (Guerra et al., 2011).

RESEARCH CONTEXT AND METHODS

Findings discussed in this article were drawn primarily from 8 focus groups conducted with middle school (4 groups) and high school (4 groups) students in 2007–2008. A total of 163 students participated in these focus groups. The sample was approximately evenly divided between males and females, with a higher representation (45%) of Latino students and smaller percentages of non-Latino White (39%) and African American (16%) students. School counselors were asked to select a diverse group of youth with varied bullying and victimization experiences, although youth who had extremely high rates of bullying or victimization were excluded. The students were seen as “experts” reporting on bullying in schools rather than focusing on their own experiences.

The focus groups were conducted using semi-structured interviews with a set of questions designed to elicit open-ended discussions about the dynamics of bullying, including aspects not captured by existing research studies. In other words, it was important to allow students to provide their own perspectives rather than simply answer specific questions. For example, students were asked to describe a “typical bully” and a “typical victim” and to discuss why students were bullies or victims, whether this differed for girls and boys, and how bullying changed from childhood to adolescence. Focus groups lasted approximately 1 hour and were conducted during lunchtime or after school. Comments were tape recorded and transcribed verbatim. All responses were analyzed using NVIVO Version 7.0 (QSR International, 2008).

THE YOUTH PERSPECTIVE

We identified six key themes related to correlates of bullying and four key themes related to victimization (see Table 4.1). Although these themes were reasonably consistent across age groups, there were some notable changes between childhood and adolescence. Bullies’ emotional problems, wanting attention, or having problems at school were mentioned more frequently by elementary school children and rarely mentioned by older youth. Focusing on normative youth culture, a primary change during middle school and high school was a shift towards “groups bullying groups” rather than...
individual bullies targeting single victims. In some sense, bullying became a vehicle for identity development by establishing clearer in-group/out-group distinctions. This was accomplished, in part, by causing physical or psychological harm to groups who were not part of the in-group.

Although all age groups considered bullying to be fun and entertaining, adolescents emphasized bullying, particularly cyberbullying, as a response to boredom and having “nothing to do.” There also was a clear change during adolescence towards emphasizing the dramatic value of bullying, evident in examples ranging from simply watching fights to cyberbullying. One high school student described being a bystander as having dramatic appeal, stating, “...it is interesting to watch a fight, you hear kids talking before the fight, so you want to see the action, who actually lives up to their word.” Other students described sitting around with nothing to do, getting online, and starting to make fun of someone for no particular reason other than entertainment and passing time.

Another interesting difference between children and adolescents was a shift from describing a typical bully as a big kid (usually a boy) who “wrecks your things and kicks you” in elementary school to a more nuanced understanding that anyone can be a bully, and that bullying has multiple forms and outcomes during adolescence. As one teenager said, “there’s a little bit of bully in everyone.” Indeed, when asked to describe a typical bully, teenagers were somewhat hesitant to provide a universal description. A frequent response to the question was “it depends.” They noted that some kids bully because they are popular and can bully without consequences and to maintain status, while other kids bully because they want to be popular (“wannabes”), and still other kids bully because they are unpopular and want to improve their social status.

Perhaps the most notable shift between childhood and adolescence was an increased focus on jealousy as a correlate of bullying among teenagers. In addition to targeting weak or awkward victims, bullying frequently was directed toward “perfect” students. Clear sexual overtones also emerged in bullying behavior. In this vein, attractive girls were seen as most likely to be bullied by both boys and girls in middle school and in high school, but not in elementary school. Boys bullied girls by demeaning them, notably by spreading rumors about their sexual experiences in a type of immature dating ritual designed to make girls more accessible. As one middle school girl explained, “Usually...when boys like a girl they just pick on her.” On the other hand, girls bullied girls they saw as competition for boys. Girls identified a typical exchange pattern in which more popular girls became the object of bullying, starting with “I hate her she’s so perfect,” to “I bet she’s done all this stuff” and escalating to “she did what?”—which then circulated through rumors or cyberspace. Ironically, several girls talked about their boyfriends cheating on them with other girls, leading the girls to spread rumors and lies about the other girls, but then not taking any type of action against their boyfriends.

Youth also noted a distinction between physical and indirect forms of bullying, and agreed that although some girls engage in physical forms of bullying such as “smashing each other against the lockers,” the more pervasive bullying among females involved gossiping and spreading rumors. One female explained that girls will “say bad things about you and try and get other people to do the same.” Further illustrating the sexual undertones of adolescent bullying, one girl was quoted as saying, “If you see someone with Juicy (clothing brand) and their boobs are all hanging out, it’s like look at that slut.”

Younger children in the study often viewed teachers as a source of support when faced with bullying behavior. Elementary school youth frequently reported that teachers had the power to intervene to stop bullying, and that students should report bullying to teachers. In contrast, a number of high school students felt that teachers (and parents) were among the biggest bullies, and were reluctant to report anything. Students talked about parents bullying other parents, particularly if their child lost a game at a sporting event, which was greatest for students living in small towns where parents all knew each other. There was also a general perception in middle school and high school that parents and teachers were unaware of the bullying that takes place. This was particularly important to older youth, who reported that bullying occurred more strategically and was less apparent to adults, typically taking place after school or electronically.

**IMPLICATIONS FOR PREVENTION**

In addition to asking youth about correlates and causes of bullying and victimization, we asked them what could be done to prevent bullying. There was unanimous agreement among youth that one-time presentations about bullying and its consequences were not very effective. One high school student commented, “Seminars and lectures in the auditorium, just sitting there, is not effective.” Instead, this type of presentation was seen as “depressing” and basically irrelevant to the specific experiences of individual youth. At the end of the day, most youth felt that the stories they heard did not apply to them. Although they seemed more aware of what does not work than what would work, their suggestions to prevention-focused researchers were clear: make it fun, make it informative, and make it real. One adolescent succinctly stated, “We need to learn how to get along with people we dislike or who are disliked.” Another student echoed this sentiment, adding that it would be important to “help kids with their problems and their anger.” A number of students also shared the belief that group discussions, like the focus groups we conducted, would help get students to open up about their experiences and feelings.

Taking teenagers’ recommendations for bullying prevention together with their perspectives on the correlates and causes of

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**Table 4.1**

**Key Themes Related to Bullying and Victimization As Identified by Focus Group Participants**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Themes Related to Bullying</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bullies have emotional problems, including low self-esteem and prior victimization</td>
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<tr>
<td>Bullying is just a part of growing up—everyone bullies a little bit</td>
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<tr>
<td>Bullying is fun and entertaining</td>
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<tr>
<td>Bullies have more want power</td>
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<tr>
<td>Bullies are jealous of other kids</td>
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<tr>
<td>Bullies can be popular or not; they may try to bully in order to be popular or cool</td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Themes Related to Victimization</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Victims are weak or vulnerable, with low self-esteem and prior victimization</td>
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<tr>
<td>Victims are annoying and lack respect for you</td>
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<tr>
<td>Victims are different or stand out from others, even in a good way</td>
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<tr>
<td>Girls get bullied more than boys, particularly pretty girls</td>
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for adolescents could integrate lessons from existing sexual harassment or dating violence interventions. Indeed, in many cases bullying behaviors cross the line into sexual harassment, especially during adolescence, when sexual harassment increases (McMaster et al., 2002; Pepler et al., 2006), and should be treated accordingly. It also is important that adolescents understand the difference between teasing, bullying, and legal definitions of harassment and hate crimes.

**CONCLUSION**

Understanding youth perspectives on bullying and victimization in adolescence is a critical, yet underutilized, aspect of prevention programming. Findings from the current study suggest that bullying and victimization are part of the social landscape of today’s youth, facilitated by technological advances, and increasingly operating under the radar of parents, teachers, and school personnel. Comments from youth also depict bullying as a behavior with several social functions including facilitating identity development, providing entertainment, and reducing competition for romantic partners. Participants rarely mentioned the negative consequences of bullying for the victims, suggesting that preventive interventions for teenagers need to create an ongoing dialogue about bullying that highlights the seriousness of this behavior and its harm to others.

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**References**


