

New ways to stop bullying

Psychologists are driving efforts to get effective, research-based bullying-prevention and intervention programs into schools.

BY NICOLE CRAWFORD
Monitor staff

As an expert on bullying, Dorothy Espelage, PhD, hates to see her research collecting dust on library shelves. She wants it in the hands of educators where it can make a difference. So, the counseling psychologist/researcher heads to Wisconsin almost weekly to update teachers on the latest facts about bullying.

"We're doing good peer-reviewed research on bullying, and the only way to get the message out there is to go into the schools," says Espelage, who with colleagues has surveyed 20,000 Wisconsin second- through 12th-graders about the subject. Her "research talks" to teachers and administrators dispel common myths about bullying, such as that bullies are always unpopular.

Espelage is one of a growing number of American psychologists helping schools establish effective bullying prevention and intervention programs, which are being mandated by many school systems across the country in the wake of Columbine and other school shootings.

"A lot of work has been done internationally on this topic," says developmental psychologist Susan Limber, PhD, who is associate director of the Institute on Family and Neighborhood Life at Clemson University in Clemson, S.C. "U.S. researchers are just beginning to catch up."

New research from the Secret Service and the U.S. Department of Education on 37 school shootings, including Columbine, found that almost three-quarters of student shooters felt bullied, threatened, attacked or injured by others. In fact, several shooters reported experiencing long-term and severe bullying and harassment from their peers.

Indeed says Limber, "Bullying is a very common experience for kids in school" and more widespread than previously thought.

Other findings from the report on school shootings:

- * Attackers were rarely impulsive; they planned their actions.
- * In more than 80 percent of the cases, at least one person knew the attacker was planning something; two or more people knew in almost 60 percent of the cases.
- * School shooters don't fit an accurate "profile." The attackers studied were all boys, but they varied in age, race, family situations, academic achievement, popularity and disciplinary history.

* Most attackers did not threaten their targets beforehand.

* Before the shootings, most attackers exhibited behaviors that caused others concern, such as trying to obtain a gun or writing troubling poems and essays.

Bullying experts say that, while it's important to understand the connection between bullying and school shootings, more studies are needed on the full range of bullying behavior and on the socio-ecological conditions that allow it to flourish in some schools. Only studying "the extreme end is neglecting the fact that there's a peer group supporting [bullying] behavior and that we have kids playing various roles," says Espelage, who teaches psychology at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.

New and innovative research

A nationally representative study of 15,686 students in grades six through 10, published last year in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* (Vol. 285, No. 16) is among the most recent to document the scope of bullying in U.S. schools.

In the study, psychologist Tonja R. Nansel, PhD, and colleagues found that 17 percent of students reported having been bullied "sometimes" or more frequently during the school term. About 19 percent reported bullying others "sometimes" or more often. And six percent reported both bullying and having been bullied.

Nansel and colleagues also found that:

* Bullying occurs most frequently from sixth to eighth grade, with little variation between urban, suburban, town and rural areas.

* Males are more likely to be bullies and victims of bullying than females. Males are more likely to be physically bullied, while females are more likely to be verbally or psychologically bullied.

* Bullies and victims of bullying have difficulty adjusting to their environments, both socially and psychologically. Victims of bullying have greater difficulty making friends and are lonelier.

* Bullies are more likely to smoke and drink alcohol, and to be poorer students.

* Bully-victims--students who are both bullies and recipients of bullying--tend to experience social isolation, to do poorly in school and to engage in problem behaviors such as smoking and drinking.

Susan M. Swearer, PhD, lead investigator for the Nebraska Bullying Prevention and Intervention Project, is among the researchers taking a closer look at bully-victims. "In the past, bullying behavior was dichotomized--students were classified as either bullies or victims," she says. "But, kids [often] report that they're both."

In one of Swearer's studies, bully-victims experience higher levels of depression and anxiety than the bully-only group or the victim-only group. "The bully-victim subgroup is really more impaired in terms of internalizing problems," says the University of Nebraska-Lincoln school psychology professor.

In another line of her research, Swearer found that teachers aren't always able to identify bullies. Limber concurs. "Unfortunately, adults within the school environment dramatically overestimate their effectiveness in identifying and intervening in bullying situations," she says.

This can have serious implications, Swearer believes. For instance, to cut costs, some schools conduct intervention programs in group settings. "If bully-victims are in the group, they may cause problems for kids who are victims." It's better for bully-victims to be treated separately, she says.

According to Limber, mediation programs for bullies and victims are also problematic. Peer mediation may be appropriate in resolving conflict between students with equal power, but "bullying is a form of victimization," she says. "It's no more of a 'conflict' than child abuse or domestic violence."

The University of Illinois's Espelage is also doing research on bullying that she says is a radical departure from how previous studies have defined bullying. "Although folks have studied aggression and bullying, the focus in the United States has been on physical aggression. [Bullying has also been] seen as the behavior of only a small percentage of students," she explains. "We see bullying as a continuum in which many students engage in these behaviors at various levels."

For example, some studies focused on extreme cases of bullying by excluding students reporting low and moderate levels of bullying behavior or by collapsing participants into extreme categories on a bullying scale, continues Espelage. That approach "reduces the precision in measurement of bullying behavior and fails to consider an important aspect of the ecological framework--the school."

However, Espelage's research shows that adolescents don't fit neatly into strict categories of bullying or nonbullying. Instead, her findings indicate that bullying behavior is common, with most students reporting some involvement in bullying others. In fact, some of these students are unwilling participants in low-level bullying--teasing, name-calling, threatening and social ridiculing of peers--but are afraid to go against their peer group.

"The sixth-grader who wants to fit in will go along with harassing other kids," explains Espelage. "You can see the empathy in them. They're engaging in behavior that doesn't feel good to them. I feel for these kids the most."

Creating programs that work

Many psychologists agree that to design effective bullying-prevention and intervention programs, they need to understand that a child's tendency toward bullying is influenced by individual, familial and environmental factors. To this end, Espelage and colleagues at K12 Associates in Madison, Wis., have surveyed and continue to study 20,000 public school students--as well as teachers, parents and administrators--on issues including the prevalence and incidence of bullying, teasing, locations of bullying, school climate and respect for diversity. After survey data are entered and analyzed, reports are given to individual schools so that they can design prevention and intervention programs based on their own data.

Like Espelage, Limber is also helping schools develop programs. The most effective strategies to stop bullying involve "the entire school as a community to change the climate of the school and the norms of behavior," she says. This is why her institute promotes the Olweus Bullying Prevention Program, developed by Norwegian psychologist Dan Olweus, PhD--considered by many to be the "father" of bullying research. In this intervention, school staff introduce and implement the program, which seeks to improve peer relations and make the school a safe and pleasant environment.

Limber is also a consultant on The National Bullying Prevention Campaign, a multiyear public awareness and prevention effort by the Health Resources and Services Administration in the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. The research-based campaign, set to launch next September, will include input from educators, parents, students, health and mental health professionals and the community, says Limber.

The campaign's goals are to raise public awareness about bullying, prevent and reduce bullying behaviors, identify and provide appropriate interventions for "tweens"--9- to 13-year-olds--and other targeted audiences, and foster links between public health and other partners.

To avoid "reinventing the wheel," the campaign plans to disseminate information about successful programs such as Olweus's, which was named a "blueprint" program by the University of Colorado's Center for the Study and Prevention of Violence.

"I really am committed to getting the word out on bullying and prevention measures," says Limber who also has consulted with the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration to develop a bullying-prevention and intervention campaign. "I see these efforts as terrific opportunities to help translate what researchers know about bullying into effective prevention strategies."