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Bullying and Middle School Students

Intimidation, threats, abuse, and bullying of students by peers have long been themes in school research, in the memories of students, and, recently, in the media. A single student who bullies can affect an entire school, creating a climate of fear and intimidation both among victims and fellow students. Dorothy L. Espelage, assistant professor of Educational Psychology, has been conducting research with colleagues Kris Bosworth of the University of Arizona and Thomas R. Simon of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention to investigate bullying behavior during early adolescence, conducting surveys in large Mid-western middle schools. The goal is to better understand the prevalence and types of bullying, individual and environmental characteristics associated with the tendency to bully others, and students' willingness to report bullying to teachers or parents. This research aims to recommend ways to promote a more peaceful school environment.

What this research shows:

As U.S. educators struggle to reduce violence, dealing with bullying behaviors comes to the forefront. Before effective programs can be developed, adults working with early adolescents must first be able to identify the students most at risk for engaging in bullying behavior and to describe associated behavioral and personal characteristics. Whereas previous research focused on the identification of "bullies" and "victims," Espelage has explored bullying as a continuum of mild-to-extreme behaviors. For study purposes, bullying behaviors included teasing, name-calling, ridiculing, threatening, and some physical aggression. During data collection, students were not asked to report bullying in general, but about the frequency with which they engaged in specific behaviors.

Among 558 middle school students surveyed in 1995, 80% reported engaging in bullying behavior during the previous 30 days. While more boys reported bullying behavior than girls, gender did not predict bullying behavior. Demographics of grade, race, family type, academic achievement, and eligibility for free/reduced lunch also were not significant: bullying behaviors appeared equally across middle school students and were not isolated to one particular group of students. General misconduct and anger were significantly related to bullying, as were lacking confidence in being able to use nonviolent strategies or having beliefs that support violence. Students expressing greater intentions to use nonviolent strategies said that they had engaged in less bullying behavior.

What this research means for educators:

Because bullying behaviors arouse a sense of fear and can lead to physical altercations that disrupt learning, educators are urged to actively address the impact of bullies on their school culture and on the academic success of their students. Recommendations for possible prevention and intervention strategies for middle school students include the following:

- ◆ Don't rely on staff observations to assess the problem, as most bullying happens out of sight.
- ◆ Avoid classifying students as either bullies or non-bullies; focus, instead, on behavior.
- ◆ Overlooking some bullying because it, and learning how to deal with it, is "just part of growing up" may create an environment that tolerates violence.
- ◆ To address bullying behavior, develop a comprehensive approach to school climate. Consider adopting principles of violence prevention programs, like anger management and promoting non-violent approaches to conflict.

To learn more about this research:

Espelage, D. L., Bosworth, K., & Simon, T. (in press – to appear Summer 2000). Examining the social environment of middle school students who bully. *Journal of Counseling & Development*.

Bosworth, K., Espelage, D., & Simon, T. (1999). Factors associated with bullying behavior in middle school students. *Journal of Early Adolescence*, 19 (3), 341-362.

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