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A SHIFT IN APPROACH: ADDRESSING BULLYING IN SCHOOLS

Introduction

Across the country the term “bullying” is making national headlines regarding brutal acts committed by children at school. Bullying has been defined as intentional, repeated actions and words designed to intimidate or hurt another person (Durso, 1999 - 2008). Since many bullying incidents occur through personal cell phones and computers, and often after school hours, many school professionals have had a slow response in addressing this behavior. Reluctant to assert an authority they are not sure they have, educators can appear indifferent to parents’ frantic worry and alarm by recent adolescent suicides linked to bullying. (Hoffman, 2010.)

Some believe that “being picked on” is a normal part of child development or a challenge for children to overcome on their own. However, bullying is not, and should not be, considered a normal part of growing up (Durso, 1999 - 2008). Instead, bullying differs from normal conflict in that it is repetitious, has the intent to harm, and invokes terror and an imbalance of power much like an abusive relationship (Dinwiddie & Rabon, 2010).

With the progression of technology, bullying often occurs online or through mobile phones. Due to this shift in communication, bullying no longer ends when the school day ends. It can continue through the night, on weekends and during summer breaks. Cyber bullying is

defined as children or teens bullying each other using the internet, mobile phones, or other cyber technology (Stop Bullying Now, 2010). Cyber bullying can include sending mean text, email, or instant messages; posting obscene pictures or messages about someone in blogs or websites; or using someone’s name to spread rumors or lies about someone else (Stop Bullying Now, 2010).

Ongoing bullying can lead to serious acts of violence in schools. Due to recent headlines and news coverage regarding extreme cases of violence, some may think this problem is new or is getting worse. However, violence committed by children in schools is not just a modern phenomenon; surprisingly, it has a history of more than 200 years in the United States (Mayer & Cornell, 2010). There have been various policies enacted in order to address violence in schools. New research has emerged regarding evidence-based practices that have been effective in reducing bullying and violence in schools.

Typical Approaches to Bullying Behaviors

School personnel often do not understand the complex dynamics of bullying and violence. This lack of understanding, coupled with the fear of something tragic happening, fuels the development of policies and procedures that are often ineffective in providing safety and security to students. Most school districts still tend to respond to students who commit violent

acts as “bad kids” likely coming from “bad families” who have chosen to defy the rules (NASW, 2009). Interventions with these students are often very limited and rigidly proscribed in the district school discipline code, with the emphasis on managing and eliminating the maladaptive behavior (usually by suspension or expulsion from school) versus teaching students prosocial, adaptive skills to replace the counterproductive behaviors (NASW, 2009).

Historically, bullying itself has not been directly addressed through discipline policies within the school system. When it has been addressed, there is often a blanket punitive approach labeled “zero tolerance” employed. “Zero tolerance” resulted from a 1994 federal law that required all states receiving federal money to require school districts to expel for at least one year any student found to have brought a weapon to school (Science Daily, 2010). Zero tolerance can sanction an automatic punishment for things such as bringing weapons, drugs or alcohol to school, violence, and bullying.

Often, zero tolerance policies result in students being suspended or expelled from school. Students, who engage in anti-social behaviors such as bullying and violence, typically feel a disengagement from school. The suspension or expulsion reinforces that feeling. When students are suspended, they may spend their daytime hours engaged with other children or young adults with antisocial behaviors, thereby reinforcing their negative behaviors. Students then return to school with the same behaviors or worse. Suspensions can also lead to students feeling so disengaged from school that they lose all interest and connection to school and eventually drop out.

In August, 2006, a Zero Tolerance Task Force convened to explore the effectiveness of these policies. The report concluded that the zero tolerance policies in schools, although intended to reduce school violence and behavior problems, can actually have the opposite effect. In addition, such policies not only fail to make schools safe or more effective in handling student behavior, but they can actually *increase* the instances of problem behavior and dropout rates (American Psychological Association, 2006).

What School Social Workers Can Do

Bullying has been typically addressed in two ways. One approach has been to minimize the behaviors as normal development processes, without the provision of adult-led consequences or guidance. The other has been to implement zero tolerance policies that employ punishment through mandatory suspension or expulsion. It has been proven that these approaches are ineffective in reducing maladaptive behaviors and creating school safety.

Though school social workers are required to work within existing school policies that may include zero tolerance, there are approaches they can apply to help shift to more effective methods.

Decline the use of labels. It has become somewhat standard to use labels such as “bully” and “victim” when describing the participants in a bullying episode. Children who are labeled by their behaviors can have a difficult time changing those behaviors. Labeling the behavior instead of labeling the child can prove to be beneficial. Providing training for school staff regarding this dynamic as well as leading by example can help to change the way others and the children view themselves.

Approach students individually. Bullying is often addressed in the same ways in which normal conflicts are managed—by sitting with both parties and discussing the situation. This approach is inappropriate because of the complex dynamics of bullying which are similar to the dynamics of an abusive relationship. It is important to protect the students being bullied by providing a safe and secure environment for them to discuss their feelings. Feelings of safety are compromised when the person causing harm is present. Working with each individual involved by offering support and redirection has been advocated by experts in bullying intervention.

Provide training on warning signs. Since teachers are in contact with the students on a regular basis, they are often the first people to detect changes in behavior or relational dynamics between students. Acts of violence and bullying are often accompanied by warning signs, such as, changes in academic performance, changes in school attendance, increased aggression, and diminished interest. School social workers can provide teachers with information

regarding the signs to look for in students and ways that they can address these signs.

Advocate for School Staff-Student Connectedness.

Research has shown that when students are more engaged in school and feel connected, rates of violence go down and school safety increases. Increasing the strength and the quality of classroom engagement by creating caring, supportive, culturally responsive learning environments is often effective in reducing acts of violence (Osher, Bear, Sprague, & Doyle, 2010). Social workers can inform administrators about the benefits of maintaining students' connectedness and accountability to school as opposed to providing punishment through exclusion. School social workers can advocate for policies that enhance these supportive qualities within schools during meetings and discussions regarding school discipline policies.

Conclusion

As attention on school safety and school climate increases, more research is being conducted in order to determine what approaches are most effective. Results have shown that zero tolerance methods are ineffective and may actually increase maladaptive behaviors. Research has also shown that creating connectedness between the school and students is beneficial. The way school personnel approach students who are engaging in bullying behaviors or who have been affected by bullying is an important area where social workers can intervene. School social workers are sure to play a vital role in redefining approaches to school violence and bullying.

Resources

HelpStartsHere.org

Social workers offer tips for parents, teachers and children regarding bullying and school violence. www.helpstartshere.org

National Center for Youth Issues

The center addresses social, emotional and psychological dimensions of child development and offers information regarding bullying and school violence on their website. www.ncyi.org

American Educational Research Association

The association has conducted research regarding the keeping schools safe and preventing youth violence. www.aera.net

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