



Beyond the “Bully”

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There are all kinds of bullying and harassment prevention programs. Some programs attempt to prevent bullying by teaching students skills so that they can stand up for themselves when they are confronted by a “bully” or to encourage them to go get help from an adult. Some work with teachers, staff, and administrators at schools to identify “bullies”, and then work to get “bullies” professional help for their behavior. Some programs train peer mediators to bring the “bully” and the victim together so that they can try to mediate a solution to the issue. Other programs train students to act as student hall monitors, playground monitors, or lunch monitors so that they can bring “bullies” to the attention of adults. What do all of these programs have in common? They all focus on identifying and interrupting the behavior of so-called “bullies”. So what is a “bully”? The PVPI operationally defines a **bully** as:



Bully: *An individual identified as having a pattern of using violent, aggressive, or intimidating behavior to gain control over others.*

Most students can identify the handful of students at their school that fit this description. Stereotypically, these are large—or in some way physically or verbally intimidating—students, roaming the halls terrorizing their victims. Research has shown that students who are identified as “bullies” are often victims of abuse themselves, do not have close connections with family, friends, or teachers. They are generally physically aggressive, with pro-violence attitudes, and are typically hot-tempered, easily angered, and impulsive, with a low tolerance for frustration. Bullies have a strong need to dominate others and usually have little empathy for their targets (Olweus, 1998, pp 34-43).

In fact, the behavior of students fitting this definition is very similar to those who demonstrate a pattern of domestic or relational violence. Domestic abusers display a pattern of controlling and coercive conduct that serves to deprive victims of safety and autonomy. They often believe they are entitled to power and control over their partners, and will use violence to maintain this power differential (ACADV, <http://www.acadv.org/abusers.html>). If they feel that they are losing control they are likely to lash out in an attempt to reassert their authority.

Bullies display very similar behaviors. They seek to control their victims through violence, and will impose arbitrary rules on their targets. It is not uncommon for bullies to ban their targets from certain parts of the school, or to make their target give them money or perform some kind of service for them in exchange for not getting beaten up. If a bully feels that he is losing control over his target, he will likely escalate the violence against the target, or shift his attacks to other victims.

While teachers and administrators need to intervene in these students' behavior, it may be difficult for this intervention to prevent future violent behavior—in fact, in many cases this behavior requires professional psychological and behavioral intervention. Many school districts have policies and procedures in place to identify these students, and refer them to mental health professionals where they can be properly evaluated and treated.

While the stereotypical “bully” does exist, and does cause problems at every school, in our work with countless high school and middle school students we have learned that this is not the main problem. We’ve found that most students are able to identify the “bullies” and avoid them, thereby avoiding victimization. Only a small percentage of students are actually victimized by the defined “bully” on a regular basis, and while it is very important that adults at school are able to recognize and intervene in this type of violence, there is another type of violence that is far more prevalent, that the vast majority of students experience, practically on a daily basis. The PVPI has defined this type of violence as *Bullying and Harassment Behavior*.

Bullying and Harassment Behavior

The PVPI operationally defines *bullying and harassment behavior* as:

Bullying and Harassment Behavior: *Any type of violent behavior (emotional, physical, sexual) that is used to gain approval from one's peers, gain control over one's peers, or that creates and unsafe or unwelcome environment.*

While this definition may seem very similar to the definition of a “bully”, there are some important differences. One of the most important is that most people engage in bullying and harassment behavior, while very few are identified to have a pattern of violent behavior. The goal of bullying and harassment behavior is often to gain approval from peers. Bullying and harassment behavior may occur without provocation, however, in some cases the perpetrator may feel that they are justified in their behavior based on some sort of interaction that the perpetrator has had with the victim in the past. Those who engage in bullying and harassment behavior are usually more popular with their peers than students who are simply mean or aggressive.

There are many actions that constitute bullying and harassment behavior and some of the most common forms are not physically violent. These behaviors include spreading rumors, putting people down, shunning, telling inappropriate or offensive jokes, or using words that may be offensive to individuals or groups of people. Bullying and harassment behavior can be committed whether the victim or target is present or not. These behaviors are so prevalent that they create an atmosphere that makes it easier for acts of violence to escalate. In many cases fighting or other forms of physical violence can be traced back to acts of violence that may seem much less severe.

While the damage caused by “bullies” can't be understated, a greater focus should be put on bullying and harassment behavior. By focusing on bullying and harassment behavior a violence prevention program will be able to address a problem that affects everyone. Whether as a victim, perpetrator, or bystander at one time or another everyone experiences bullying and harassment behavior, so prevention efforts will be able to approach this topic in a

guilt-free manner. Rather than trying to convince people that they shouldn't be bullies, these programs will allow everyone to work together to develop solutions to a problem that everyone experiences.