

Stop Propagating the Bullying Myths

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Abstract: Bullying is a pernicious problem in schools all over the world. However, some bullying myths are widely believed, such as "Bullying is a natural behavior for children, and there is nothing you can do to stop it". This argument receives very little support from the objective literature. Nearly all research reports prove that dissatisfaction with bullying is a natural behavior. This article first introduces the definition and current situation of bullying, and then the origins of bullying. Next it talks about the effectiveness of the anti-bullying program, and the suggestions to clarify this misconception. Finally, the recommendations are provided for teachers, parents, and policymakers to reduce school bullying effectively and help more kids feel safe, accepted, and have a sense of belonging in their schools.

Key words: myths; bullying; prevention

1. Introduction

Bullying in schools is widespread throughout the world, with variable occurrence rates. UNESCO Institute of Statistics reported that one-third of the globe's youth are bullied, ranging from 7% in Tajikistan to 74% in Samoa (UNESCO, 2018). Notably, bullying myths negatively impact the process of bullying interventions. The myth is usually an allegory based on erroneous or unsubstantiated assumptions, but it is widely believed (Mosco, 2005). Belief in the truth of a myth can have dire implications since it can act as a powerful accelerator to mislead peoples' behavior. For example, the sentence, "Bullying is a natural behavior for children, and there is nothing you can do to stop it" is believed by many individuals (Mercer, 2013). While the statement may serve as an explanation for bullying behavior, and many individuals have used the same expression to justify their bystander behaviors toward bullying.

This paper reports the origins of bullying and the effectiveness of school-based bullying intervention to clarify this misconception, aiming to deliver an evidence-informed plea to educators, parents, and communities to stop propagating the bullying myth.

2. Origins of Bullying

2.1 Definition and current situation of bullying

Bullying, also known as peer victimization, refers to an ongoing interaction, in which a child repeatedly attempts to inflict harm on another child, including physical (e.g. hair-pulling), verbal (e.g. name-calling and cyberbullying), and social harm (e.g. ridiculing and causing embarrassment). Due to its detrimental effects on children and adolescents, school bullying has gained global attention over the last three decades (Dake et al., 2003). According to a meta-analysis, adolescents victimized by peers are 2.2 times more likely to have suicidal ideation and 2.6 times more likely to attempt suicide than students who are not victimized. Being bullied has also been reported to be significantly connected with

self-esteem (27%), social interactions (19%), schoolwork (19%), and physical health (14%) (Seldin et al., 2019).

2.2 Origins of bullying

To mitigate the negative impacts of bullying on students' growth, it is vital to clarify whether bullying is a natural behavior of children by exploring the origins of bullying. The essence is the nature-nurture debates in psychology. One of the most noticeable aspects of the nature-nurture debate is the debate about the proportional contributions of genes and the environment of human nature. When it comes to the origins of bullying, several theories have been used to explain this phenomenon from an environmental aspect, such as the social learning theory. As a mainstream school of psychological thought, social learning theory asserts that children learn behaviors from their environment. Thus, proponents of social learning argue that children learn to be violent primarily by imitating violent role models. For instance, children who have higher verbal aggressiveness at home (being sworn at or insulted) have higher delinquency rates and interpersonal aggression.

Moreover, even adults may become more aggressive due to witnessing another person behaving violently. Supported by tons of research data, parents who use corporal punishment or verbal abuse to "control" their children unintentionally act as role models of bullying behavior (Powell & Ladd 2010). However, some scientists advocate the idea of a nonsocial influence on bullying. Hans Eysenck found that identical twins (77%) were more consistent in criminal behavior than fraternal twins (12%). This finding, together with additional research to corroborate it, prompted Eysenck to conclude that heredity played a crucial role (Fox, 2017). Cognitive neuroscience presents a deeper biological explanation for the origins of bullying due to advancements in brain imaging technologies. For example, violent offenders have higher deficits in the prefrontal, orbitofrontal, and superior frontal cortex than normal controls (Fox, 2017). Nevertheless, it is too easy and compelling to blame bullies for their natural-born behaviors. Modern approaches have demonstrated overwhelming evidence, which viewing nature and nurture as separate, clear-cut forces is now fundamentally at odds with the intricacies of developmental research (Keller, 2010). Moreover, this statement minimizes the suffering of bullies and obstructs the diversity of resources available to assist bullies in dealing with bullying.

3. The Effectiveness of Anti-bullying Programs

In recent years, people's awareness of this issue has increased, so that anti bullying initiatives have been established and the effectiveness has also been studied. A cursory research of the Education Bureau's website in Hong Kong (EDB, 2021) revealed that they used a multi-pronged approach to implement its policy on school bullying prevention and management, including the "Understanding Adolescent Project (Primary)", the "Wise Net School Recognition Scheme", and the "Harmonious School: Anti-bullying Campaign". These anti-bullying programs all show the effectiveness of assisting schools in preventing and handling school bullying.

Besides, there are four widely used anti-bullying programs in western countries. The first one is "Responding in Peaceful and Positive Ways (RIPP)", which teaches children aged 10-14 effective conflict resolution strategies and techniques. In six and twelve-month follow-up questionnaires, it was found that the intervention had a significant positive effect.

The second one is the "KiVa Anti-bullying Program", which equips schools with targeted, easy-to-use tools for bullying prevention. A cross-lagged panel model revealed that the KiVa program significantly reduced students' internalization difficulties and enhanced their peer group cognition.

The third one is the "Olweus Bullying Prevention Program (OBPP)", which focuses on long-term improvement through fostering a healthy school climate. Bullying questionnaires were distributed to around 21,000 students before and

after an eight-month intervention of the "Olweus Bullying Prevention Program". The results indicated a significant decrease in bullying difficulties (32-49%) (Olweus, 2005).

The final one is the "Bullying Free Program", which is the most comprehensive anti-bullying program used in schools and districts around the United States (Beane et al., 2008). After examining the significance of t-statistical test, it was determined that 50 out of 59 behavioral items assessed by the survey improved. Within 175 days of implementation, the program helped reduce bullying by 24.6 percent and increase the percentage of students who reported bullying and correctly addressed the issue by 54 percent. In aggregate, a meta-analysis of randomized clinical studies found that anti-bullying therapies effectively reduced bullying and improved mental health problems during the study's conclusion.

4. Suggestions

4.1 Teachers' intervention in bullying problems

Teachers' direct attempts to solve the issue may effectively address peer victimization in school environment. Three recommendations are put forward to help instructors deal with issues. First, once a month, the instructors can conduct appropriate advice courses, such as communication skills, anti-bullying law, or emotional regulation, using various classroom settings, such as drama, multimedia lecture, or teacher-led group discussion. Second, the instructors can set office hours, during which they can contact their students. Third, constructive discussions or essential training, such as assisting students in developing social and coping skills, should be provided to kids with bullying characteristics, such as being bullied, bullying others, or witnessing bullying. It is worth noticing that teachers should evaluate students through observation, investigation and other non-subjective methods. Additionally, teachers are encouraged to communicate with parents. For instance, teachers can provide appropriate guidance to parents, which will help them communicate effectively with their children.

4.2 Parents' intervention in bullying problems

Family's involvement in bullying intervention is becoming a more commonly recognized method to promote children's good behavior (Axford et al., 2015). For instance, an online study (N=300 child-father-mother triads) discovered that the "gap" between children's experience and their parents' comprehension of bullying was a significant risk factor for children's long-term life satisfaction (Matsunaga, 2009). Thus, parents are urged to give protective effects of family support, close the "knowledge gap" with their children, regularly interact with teachers about bullying, and participate in school-based activities. Additionally, parents should refrain from physical damaging or legal abusive punishment according to the social learning theory.

4.3 Policymakers' intervention in bullying problems

At a macro level, school regulations and policies can be amended or expanded to address bullying in schools effectively. Bullying policies play crucial roles in guiding schools to develop curricula and diversified learning activities for students. To further cultivate students' positive values, policymakers need to create policies based on regional bullying prevalence assessment. Education policymakers should also implement evidence-based preventative programme to prevent and handle school bullying. Finally, the implementation of the policy is inseparable from strong leadership support. They need to adjust the original designs during the programs to ensure the policy commitment and systematically reduce bullying in the long-term implementation (Srabstein & Leventhal, 2010). However, more and more studies emphasize the preventive responsibility of educational policymakers rather than the public health sector. Public health policymakers could create advisory groups to develop guidelines for a whole-community strategy to prevent bullying-related public health risks.

5. Conclusion

By clarifying the myths of bullying, this paper discusses the origins of bullying and the effectiveness of anti-bullying programs. At the same time, suggestions are provided from three aspects, the teachers, the parents, and the education policymakers, which are relevant to helping students involved in bullying. Therefore, we should stop propagating the bullying myth and then more victims or bullies will prefer to notify an adult about the incident rather than deal with terrible situations alone.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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