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Bully for Them

Efforts to Stop Children's Intimidation of Other Children Appear to Pay Off . . . Outside the U.S.

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To many adults, teasing and taunting among children and teenagers is a natural and inevitable part of growing up. But as a new school year begins, experts say such behavior is anything but normal and should be taken seriously by parents, teachers and school administrators.

"Bullying is a public health problem [tied to] the larger issue of youth violence in this country," said Joseph Wright, medical director of advocacy and community affairs at Children's National Medical Center. Allowing it to go unstopped, he said, fosters crime and mental health problems that can last into adulthood.

Wright and other child health experts urged parents, teachers and community leaders to give the problem greater attention following the publication this month of a study done in rural Germany that used six months of family therapy sessions to treat 22 adolescent boys who had bullying behavior. The report, which appears in the journal Pediatrics, is a reminder that the United States lags behind other countries in dealing with bullying, Wright said.

"We are really just at the recognition phase [in the United States] . . . We have defined the problem and are recognizing the problem and trying to adapt," Wright said. "This [study] just points out how far behind we are in even accepting bullying as something that's not a normative behavior."

At least 22 states have passed anti-bullying laws since 1999, some motivated by a 2002 U.S. Secret Service report that found that bullying had played a major role in several school shootings, according to the National Conference of State Legislatures (NCSL). Maryland and Virginia passed similar legislation this year.

The intent of such laws is to prohibit intimidation, bullying and harassment in schools, reports the NCSL. Defining these unacceptable behaviors has been challenging, but guidelines generally consider the length of time threatening behavior has persisted and whether a perceived imbalance of power lets a student or group of students victimize others.

The Pediatrics study described measurable reductions in anger and improvement in quality of life and interpersonal relationships after family therapy. But several U.S. child health experts said because the study included only families who lived in rural areas, the findings are not likely to be applicable to large, urban school systems in this country.

They also doubted that family therapy by itself could offer a solution and disagreed with the measures used in the study to identify bullies.

U.S. researchers who have studied bullying say part of the problem is that such behavior is often accepted, even encouraged by adults. "There's a real value system around [bullying] that basically teaches kids that it's not just okay -- it's more than okay," said Howard Spivak, a professor of pediatrics and community health at Tufts University in Massachusetts. "Social acceptability of bullying is a consequence of many complex things," including adults' approval and the influence of television, video games and movies that "teach them that being mean is not only acceptable, but good," he said.

More than 16 percent of U.S. schoolchildren report having been bullied, according to a 2001 survey of nearly 16,000 students in grades 6 through 10 funded by the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD). An estimated quarter to a third of U.S. students are involved in bullying, either as a victim or perpetrator, according to Spivak.

Research has linked bullying with violent and criminal behavior later in life, as well as emotional, psychological and social problems. A federally funded study published in the Archives of Pediatrics & Adolescent Medicine reported in 2004 that bullies and their victims had more health problems and poorer emotional and social adjustment than their peers.

But that relationship is often poorly understood by parents and school officials. Parents often "have some concern if their kids have been victimized," said Bennett L. Leventhal, a child and adolescent psychiatrist and professor of psychiatry at the University of Illinois at Chicago College of Medicine. "But there are a lot of people who believe that bullying builds character, [that] if you get through it, you're better off." He called that thinking dangerous.

According to the Department of Justice, bullying encompasses a variety of acts repeated over time that involve "a real or perceived imbalance of power, with the more powerful child or group attacking those who are less powerful." Bullying can take any of three forms: physical (spitting, pushing, stealing, hitting and kicking), verbal (name-calling, teasing, taunting and making threats) and psychological (social exclusion, extortion, intimidation, spreading rumors and manipulating social relationships).

The NICHD survey found that bullying was especially common in sixth, seventh and eighth grades. Principal players include the bully, the victim and a third type who alternates between the two roles.

Research shows bullying can make students reluctant to leave home or attend classes. About 5.4 percent of ninth- through 12th-graders reported feeling "unsafe at school or on [the] way to or from school" on at least one day in the month before they were surveyed in 2003 by the Department of Health and Human Services.

Betsy Pursell, executive director of the Empower Program, a D.C.-based nonprofit that teaches strategies for dealing with bullying and aggression, called that a logical reaction. "Students can't focus on their academics if they're worried about walking through the hallways," Pursell said.

Bullying's link to violence has been repeatedly documented. For example, the 1999 Columbine High School shootings in Littleton, Colo., by two students who had been bullied, resulted in the deaths of 12 classmates, a teacher and the shooters themselves, and the wounding of 23 others.

The Secret Service initiated its investigation after the Columbine attacks, and released its Safe Schools Initiative report in 2002. The agency, joined by the Department of Education, studied the causes of 37 cases of "targeted violence" -- in which a school was "deliberately selected as the location for the attack and was not simply a random site of opportunity" -- that took place between 1974 and 2000, according to the report.

"In some of these cases the experience of being bullied seemed to have a significant impact on the attacker and appeared to have been a factor in his decision to mount an attack at the school," the Secret Service report states. "In one case, most of the attacker's schoolmates described the attacker as 'the kid everyone teased.' . . . . Schoolmates alleged that nearly every child in the school had at some point thrown the attacker against a locker, tripped him in the hall, held his head under water in the pool or thrown things at him."

A variety of programs aim to reduce violence and bullying in schools. A New York-based organization called Operation Respect provides training for teachers, school administrators, students and parents, helping them adopt behaviors and rules conducive to a peaceful school environment.

One well regarded approach, developed by Norwegian researcher Dan Olweus, has been the model for many U.S. programs. His method -- which involves schoolwide, classroom, and individual interventions -- has been thoroughly researched and is frequently cited in bullying research. The program includes parental, school and student involvement and calls for school rules against bullying and anonymous student questionnaires to assess the prevalence of the problem.

Effective anti-bullying programs need to involve all of the "stakeholders: kids, teachers, administrators [and] parents . . . so that bullying is not a behavior that's rewarded" and is instead seen as an act with consequences, said Spivak.

Identifying bullies requires creating a comfortable environment for students to open up to adults, agree experts. "The best way to find out whether someone is a bully is to ask kids," Leventhal said. ·

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www.stopbullyingnow.hrsa.gov
Project on Teasing and Bullying
The Project on Teasing and Bullying seeks to examine and counteract the effects of the culture of bullying on children and youth.
www.wcwonline.org
National PTA Resources to Stop Bullying
Find out about how to prevent bullying in elementary and secondary schools. Resources from National PTA, 108 year old child advocacy non-profit with six million members.
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