

Bullying at school

Victims, bullies, and an effective intervention program

Dan Olweus has developed the successful Olweus Bullying Prevention Program¹ which has shown remarkably positive results to curb bullying in schools. The Olweus Bullying Prevention Program is designed to restructure the existing school environment to reduce opportunities and rewards for bullying. School staff efforts are directed toward improving peer relations and making the school a safe and positive place for students to learn and develop.²

Bullying is a public health issue

As a leading authority on bullying in schools, he has no doubt that bullying is a public health issue, and a school responsibility. "It has been documented very clearly that victims of bullying suffer from high levels of depressed mood, poor self-esteem and anxiety. Rates of suicidal ideation among victims of bullying are five times higher than among students who are not involved. The impact is not just at the time bullying occurs but is likely to lead to mental health problems later in life," says Olweus. It's not only the victims who have problems, however. Bullies, says Olweus, are much more likely to be involved in "anti-social behaviour" such as vandalism, drinking too much, smoking more and are much more likely to be involved in criminal behaviour later in life.

Bullying has powerful consequences for the victim and their family. Olweus has seen many instances where families have been forced to move or children forced to change schools to escape bullying. "As long as we have conditions in society that create aggressive children and we have adults who permit this kind of behaviour, bullying is likely to occur. Such problems are not solved once and for all. Schools must have a constant readiness to respond to these problems, and mechanisms must be built into the school system so that the problems can be detected and acted upon before they take on serious proportions."

Positive results

In Norway, the Olweus Bullying Prevention Program is being implemented on a large-scale basis as part of a five-year government initiative, enabling continuous evaluation of the effects and data to be collected from more than 30,000 students, typically in grades four through nine (students aged 10 through to 15). Overall, the results have been very positive. In addition to the first successful evaluation in the 1980's, four large-scale evaluations have recently been conducted. In the elementary grades, there was a consistent reduction, of between 30-70 per cent, in the level of bullying. The lives of thousands of children

had markedly improved. At the junior high school level, the results have been more variable. A major reason seems to be that teachers at that level are much more subject-oriented and care less about the social relationships among the students. In addition, by puberty children have become generally more oppositional and anti-social and, therefore, are more resistant to change. "It is critical to install prevention programs at a relatively early age," Olweus says.

The importance of good implementation

To Olweus it is also critical that the implementation model is adequate and spot-on. Olweus says evidence shows that "guesswork" in anti-bullying programs, however well-intended, can have negative effects causing more, rather than less, bullying.

Adequate implementation requires teachers to be committed and involved. In the Olweus program, a well-designed questionnaire³ is used to estimate the prevalence of bullying and a number of other aspects. Such information is critical for gaining buy-in and for planning interventions. "If you leave it for the teachers to discuss you get such diverging views of the situation. It's not conducive to developing a joint vision".

Olweus argues legislation should make it clear it's the school's responsibility to address the problem. "It is a fundamental human right for a child to be spared the degradation and intentional humiliation that is implied in systematic bullying, and it is no doubt the school's main responsibility to see to it that it does not occur. That doesn't mean of course that the parents can't do an important job, or that students themselves can't contribute to positive change. But schools taking leadership is paramount. All too often we still see that schools seem to regard bullying as 'a natural part of growing up'."

Dan Olweus

*For 30 years, Dan Olweus has been involved in research and intervention work in the area of bully/victim problems among school children and youth. Olweus is generally recognised as a pioneer and founding father of research on bully/victim problems and as a world leading expert in this area. His book *Bullying at school: What we know and what we can do* (Olweus, 1993) has been published in 15 different languages. Dan Olweus is Research Professor at the Research Center for Health Promotion, University of Bergen, Norway.*

CAUSES OF BULLYING

There are several common assumptions about the causes of bullying that have received no or little support when confronted with empirical data. They include the hypotheses that bullying is a consequence of (a) large class or school sizes; (b) competition for grades and failure in school; (c) poor self-esteem and insecurity in the bullies under a tough surface; and (d) external deviants; more specifically, it is believed that students who are fat, are red-haired, use glasses, have a different ethnic origin, or speak with an unusual dialect are particularly likely to become victims of bullying.

All of these hypotheses have thus failed to receive clear support from empirical data. Accordingly, one must look for other factors to find the key origins of these problems. The accumulated research evidence indicates that personality characteristics/typical reaction patterns, in combination with physical strength or weakness in the case of boys, are important in the development of these problems in individual students. At the same time, environmental factors such as the attitudes, behaviour, and routines of relevant adults, in particular teachers and principals, play a crucial role in determining the extent to which the problems will manifest themselves in a larger unit such as a classroom or a school. Analyses of the main causes of bully/victim problems must thus be pursued on several different levels.

At the individual level, Olweus has identified three factors that seem to underlie bullying behaviour. (a) The bullies have strong needs to dominate and subdue others, (b) a hostile and negative attitude towards the environment which makes them derive satisfaction from inflicting injury and suffering upon others, and (c) there is a "benefit component", implying that bullies often get rewarded for their behaviour in the form of both material gains and prestige, at least in certain groups.

1. Olweus, D. (1993). *Bullying at school: What we know and what we can do*. Oxford, UK, and Cambridge, MA, USA: Blackwell Publishers.
Olweus, D., & Limber, S. (1999). *Blueprints for violence prevention: Bullying Prevention Program*. Institute of Behavioral Science, University of Colorado, Boulder, USA (see www.colorado.edu/cspw/blueprints). More information about the program and details of ordering can be found at Olweus@online.no.

2. Olweus Bullying Prevention Program Brochure, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, Centre for Substance Abuse.

3. Olweus, D. (1996). *The Revised Olweus Bully/Victim Questionnaire*. Mimeo, Research Center for Health Promotion (HEMIL senteret), University of Bergen, N-5015 Bergen, Norway. Solberg, M. & Olweus, D. (2003). Prevalence estimation of school bullying with the Olweus Bully/Victim Questionnaire. *Aggressive Behavior*, 29, 239-268.