

## **Strategies To Eradicate Bullying In Secondary Schools**

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**Abstract:** Bullying is a serious problem that can dramatically affect the ability of students to progress academically and socially. A comprehensive intervention and prevention plan that involves students, parents, and school staff is required to ensure that all students can learn in a safe and fear-free environment. The article offers to the schools and education authorities the various strategies to be adopted in halting the menace of bullying in secondary schools. The article also highlights those facts that bullying is more than just teasing and anyone can be a bully and a victim. As bullying affects everyone, therefore students, parents and school teachers can work together to find solutions with the best results.

### **Introduction and Background**

On March 28 2004, the nation was shocked by the death of a form four student resulting from alleged beating by his seniors in a religious secondary school toilet. The reason of his beating was solely because he was a top rank student, a good orator and loved by his teachers. Three days before his fate, he has entered in his diary of his death coming being inevitable. Eight of his seniors are now charged with murder while another six were expelled from the religious secondary school for being followers or bystanders in the incident. This incident could have been avoided had adults or teachers help was sought and the victim was sent to hospital immediately instead of five hours later. Secondary schools are considered a safe place for students and not where they are unhappy or

desperate, more so in a religious secondary school in the midst of prayers. In the apparent safety of his school, the death of this 16-year-old student caused by his seniors manifest that bullying activities is still occurring in secondary schools.

In the wake of this unfortunate and tragic incident, some newspapers reported a number of true confessions about bullying activities in secondary schools. One of these is a recollection of a former student of a secondary school as follows: “The senior students used to bully the juniors all the time. Extortion, making juniors do errands and washing dirty clothes, pushing weaker students around were common and would usually happen after the lights go out and the wardens are asleep. Bullying used to happen more or less a few days in a week, if not everyday, depending on the seniors. Although all students knew about these late night bullying sessions, everyone including the victims accepted the activities as part of the culture. We never reported it to the wardens or teachers, as we wanted it to remain a matter between students. There was no need to involve the school authorities. Even though the school conducted late night spot checks at least once a week on the dormitories, the activities would go undetected as the seniors somehow either knew when the spot checks take place or start their activities later. Once in a while, the wardens would detect some thing amiss and take action. But they were usually unaware of bullying activities.”

Yet another story quoted how a father transferred his daughter out of a residential school just three weeks after she enrolled. His fourth form daughter soon became terribly unhappy, as she was constantly ragged as a junior. The school let the senior students act as they pleased, with the school warden closing one eye. His daughter was tormented everyday from the time she woke up till the time she went to sleep. When his daughter came home after her first week in school, he took her to see a doctor as she had lost weight, appeared pale and felt exhausted. The worst thing was that his daughter was ordered to slide down a staircase on her bottom. When he told the school principal about what had been going on, the principal himself was shocked and in disbelief. When his daughter sought advice from the school counselor, she was told to tolerate things and if

she could not, then to leave the school. The school's senior assistant of student affairs told him not to worry, as it would only be a matter of time before his daughter settled in. He said that things have certainly gone out of control in these residential schools.

Unfortunately, bullying have become quite common themes in every secondary schools across the country. Bullying has been around for a very long time and it will take time to change the long-standing societal attitudes that normalize, minimize, and deny it. A national tabloid reported that according to its record, there had been more than 35 cases of school crime and violence involving student injuries and deaths in the past five years since 1999. This figure can only be on the low or conservative side. The rise in bullying, crime and violence in secondary schools reflects a serious breakdown of discipline in secondary schools and decay of social and moral values among secondary students as well as the shocking failure of the national secondary education system.

Bullying in schools is a worldwide problem that can have negative consequences for the general school climate and for the right of students to learn in a safe environment without fear. For example, recent statistics in US show that 8% of students miss a day of class per month for fear of bullies and 80% of the time an argument with a bully will end up in a physical fight.

The following sections of this article discuss on the characteristics of bullies and victims, and the strategies that secondary schools can take to eliminate or minimized the menace of bullying phenomenon.

### **The Characteristics of Bullies**

Bullying is almost a common worldwide phenomenon. It is form of abuse. It comprised of direct behaviors such as name-calling, teasing, taunting, threatening, intimidation, physical abuse or hitting, and stealing that are initiated by one or more students against a victim In addition to direct attacks, bullying may also be more indirect by causing a student to be socially isolated. While bully boys typically engage in direct bullying

methods, bully girls are more apt to use more subtle indirect strategies such as spreading rumors and enforcing social isolation (Ahmad & Smith, 1994; Smith & Sharp, 1994). Whether the bullying is direct or indirect, the key component of bullying is that the physical or psychological intimidation occurs repeatedly over time to create an ongoing pattern of harassment and abuse (Batsche & Knoff, 1994; Olweus, 1993).

A person becomes a bully because he is angry of something, someone might have bullied him in the past, he has a low self-esteem, he thinks controlling the victim will help him feel better about himself, and he might have been exposed to a lot of violence in the media. His parents or guardian might have lacked in supervision like being too busy to teach him how wrong it is to hurt others. Or maybe they spoiled him; making him thinks he can do anything he wants. Bully may have picked behavior from being directly bullied, applied it to others or copying bullying behavior from peers or circles. They want to display or show off that that they possess certain power in schools and make others follow what they say. Bullies are people who may feel inferior and need to prove something. They get a feeling of power by scaring or bossing other kids around. Secondary school students who engage in bullying behaviors seem to have a need to feel powerful and in control. They appear to derive satisfaction from inflicting injury and suffering on others, seem to have little empathy for their victims and often defend their actions by saying that their victims provoked them in some way. Studies indicate that bullies often come from homes where physical punishment is used, where the children are taught to strike back physically as a way to handle problems and where parental involvement and warmth are frequently lacking. Students who regularly display bullying behaviors are generally defiant or oppositional toward adults, antisocial, and apt to break secondary school rules. A bully even told a news reporter that he does it for 'kicks' and he picks on younger victims for they are physically weak. He bullies them by getting or doing things for him. Further more, he likes to hang around with problematic students and get involve in secondary schools fights.

### **The Characteristics of Victims**

Everyone has been bullied to some degree, whether mentally or physically. Although anyone can be a target of bullying behavior, the victim is often singled out because of their psychological traits or physical traits. A typical victim is likely to be shy, sensitive and perhaps anxious or insecure. Some children are picked on for physical reasons such as being overweight or physically small, having a disability, or belonging to a different race or religious faith.

Bullies can make victims feel really sad, depressed, angry, vengeful, scared and confused. Victims are typically anxious, insecure, cautious, and suffer from low self-esteem and rarely defending themselves or retaliating when confronted by bullies. They may lack social skills and friends, and they are often socially isolated. Victims tend to be close to their parents and may have parents who can be described as overprotective. The major defining physical characteristic of victims is that they tend to be physically weaker than their peers. Victims are usually loners. Children who appear to be friendless can be targets for bullies. Many times it's how victims carry themselves outwardly like lacking in assertiveness and lacking confident with themselves. The bullies pick up on that. They also might pick on children who are different like mental or physical handicaps. Sometimes there is "no reason" why a bully picks a certain kid to pick on. But, the bullying leaves victims believing there is something wrong with themselves which result in more self-esteem has been shattered.

Victims often fear secondary schools and consider them to be an unsafe and unhappy place. The act of being bullied tends to increase some students' isolation because their peers do not want to lose status by associating with them or because they do not want to increase the risks of being bullied themselves. Being bullied leads to depression and low self-esteem, problems that can carry into adulthood (Olweus, 1993; Batsche & Knoff, 1994)

### **Strategies for Bully Free Secondary Schools**

Bullying is a problem that occurs in the social environment as a whole. The bullies' aggression occurs in social contexts in which teachers and parents are generally unaware of the extent of the problem and other children are either reluctant to get involved or simply do not know how to help (Charach, Pepler, & Ziegler, 1995). Given this situation, effective interventions must involve the entire school community rather than focus on the perpetrators and victims alone. Smith and Sharp (1994) emphasize the need to develop whole-school bullying policies, implement curricular measures, improve the school ground environment, and empower students through conflict resolution, peer counseling, and assertiveness training.

Secondary schools are responsible for protecting their students' population. Students cannot learn effectively if they fear for their safety. Troubled students, both victims and bullies, need a supportive environment to learn and grow. There are a number of strategies that the management of secondary schools can adopt to eliminate or minimize bullying activities in their schools. These include setting code of students conduct and behavior; teaching skills on anger management, friendship, assertiveness, conflict resolution, and peer mediation; exploring ways to deal with bullies; promoting structured activities and team work; providing effective supervision; building empathy and understanding; getting students involve in services; teaching students to be affirmative and positive. Each of these strategies is discussed below.

**i. Establishing and Enforcing Rules about Bullying and Behavior**

An international school in a neighboring country encourages its students to inform confidentially their teachers about any form of bullying. The school has a code of behavior as follows: "The school authority does not tolerate bullying, name calling, harassment, teasing or intimidation of others including harassment of younger students, female students, and students from minority groups. It expects students to show tolerance, understanding, and courtesy to the people with whom they come into contact, fellow students, teachers, and members of the public. If any students are facing problems

with their friends, family or others, they are encouraged to talk to their coordinator, teachers or counselors.” A code of behavior like this can be adopted so that students are aware that bullying behavior is not accepted in the schools premises and they would voluntarily come forward to report any forms of bullying activities that they come across or witness or even heard of. Such rules clearly communicate a zero tolerance for bullying and an expectation of positive behavior. They also meet students’ physical and psychological needs for safety for it is hard to learn when they are intimidated, threatened, and scared of or when they are witness to intimidating, threatening and scary behavior.

For rules to be effective, they should be created with student’s input, short and simple, easy to understand, specific, agreed upon and accepted by everyone, enforceable, communicated to and supported by parents, others, teachers and staff, and reviewed periodically and updated when needed.

## **ii. Teaching Anger Management Skills**

When students are in danger or under some kind of stress, they tend to experience the “fight-or-flight” response. They battle the cause of the danger they perceive or the stress they experience or they run as fast as they can to get away. When students are bullied, running away is an option and sometimes it’s the only option. They need to know that fighting is not an option except in cases where self-defense is essential. What can they do instead of fighting or trying to hurt someone back? They can learn and practice other ways to manage their anger. These ways include like don retaliated or do anything right away but consider various options. For example the options of walking away, finding another person to be with, telling an adult of what happened or counting slowly from 1 to 10 and backwards to cool anger or control your temper and remain cool and calm.

## **iii. Teaching Friendship Skills**

Some secondary schools students become bullies because they don't have friends, feel lonely and seek attention by bullying. Some kids become victims because they're isolated and easier to pick on. All students, be they bullies or victims and others can benefit from learning and practicing friendship skills. Students can be taught skills on how to make and keep friends. These skills include reaching out to people first, involvement in social clubs, letting people know that you are interested in them, not showing off, be honest, kind and accepting or accommodative.

#### **iv. Teaching Assertive Skills**

Some secondary schools students do not know what to do or how to react when they are being bullied. Should they cry, run away, fight back or get even? Victims tend to be passive that is behaving as if other people's right matter more than theirs. Assertive people respect their own rights and other people's right. Students should know their rights like the right to stand up to people who tease, criticize or look down upon them and the right to respond when someone violates their rights. Secondary schools students can be taught how to look assertive like standing up straight, keeping head up, looking people in the eye and so on. When students appear assertive, they are more likely to feel assertive and fellow students will treat them with respect.

#### **v. Teaching Conflict Resolution Skills**

Conflict between people is normal and inevitable and not all conflict is harmful or bad. Destructive conflict damages relationships, creates bad feelings and lead to future problems. But constructive conflict helps people learn, grow, and change for the better like seeing things from other perspectives, become more open minded, tolerant and accepting. Everyone benefits from learning and practicing conflict resolution. Bullies discover the real power of solving problems without using intimidation. Victims are empowered to seek solutions instead of giving up and giving in. Students who are taught in conflict resolution are more likely to face conflicts, use problem solving to negotiate solutions. They can benefit from learning conflict resolution skills that will empower



them, increase their confidence in their ability to handle a situation and teach them how to respond assertively, particularly in cases of verbal bullying. Conflict resolution steps are begins by cooling down, describing the conflict including caused and effect, brainstorming solutions and trying the best solution. It is about communicating, listening and problem-solving techniques.

**vi. Exploring Ways to Deal with Bullies**

Students can be taught of several answers to the question of what should a victim does when being bullied? The answers depend on the situation but the common ones are like tell a friend, or tell a teacher or tell parents, stay calm and walk away or standup straight and look the bully in the eye and say in a firm confident voice to leave you alone. Using peer mediators (impartial fellow students) another way to deal with bullies. Mediators are facilitators who do not take sides. They will ask open-ended questions, encourage discussion, and guide students involved in the conflict to come up with and try their own solutions. Ideal mediators are students who are calm, listen carefully, remain objective, avoid taking sides and be patient. However, peer mediation may not work if victims have low communication skills in the presence of bullies.

**vii. Effective Respond to Reports of Bullying**

Much bullying occurs where adults cannot see it and intervene as confessed by an ex student of a secondary school mentioned under introduction and background above. Bullies do not want adult audiences. Therefore the school authorities like the principal, his assistants, disciplinary teachers, counselors and other teachers rely on students for information about bullying that are not aware of. Students must be encouraged to come forth with information on bullying activities having code of behavior as mentioned earlier on and putting up notices saying that if you see or know or thought that someone is being bullied, report it to the school authorities. No matter how much the school authority

encourage students to report on bullying; reporting will stop if there is no quick and effective response. The students will lose trust in the authority to handle the menace.

#### **viii. Promoting Structured Activities**

As a result of the tragic case of bullying mentioned in the introduction and background section, the government i.e. the Ministry of Education immediately responded by setting up a hotline for the public to report bullying activities in schools through the country. To date 348 people has responded on issues about the misconduct of students and on school management as well proposals to overcome the problem. One of the proposals received was to see how students could help their peers overcome problems they faced in school and one of the ways of fostering this relationship is through extra-curricular activities. The cabinet wants to place more emphasis on extra-curricular activities to curb indiscipline and promote national integration. The Education Ministry is to reassess all activities and students' participation in uniformed bodies, clubs and societies and sports. There are 24 uniformed bodies, 120 clubs and societies and 30 sports and games registered with the ministry.

Much bullying takes place during unstructured activities especially during recess time or waiting for the afternoon class session. Students can be encouraged to plan ahead for those times and tell their plans like playing a particular game. Try also to get those students who do not play games to have the habit of deciding in advance how they will spend unstructured time. If they have difficulty making plans, offer them suggestions. Since bullies tend to be older, stronger and more powerful than their victims, explore the possibility of assigning older and younger students to different playground areas.

Getting students involve in services is a form of involvement in structured activities. Examples of services are doing cleanliness work in a nearby villages, or helping out in the home for handicap children or home for the age. When students work together to reach a common goal especially when that goal involves helping others they experience a sense of unity, personal worth and belonging. This has a bonding effect on

the group as a whole. It also gives students an opportunity to observe and appreciate each others' knowledge and skills. The benefits to students involved in voluntary service include learning to respect others, learning to get along with and relate to others, learning to understand people who are different from them and learning to be helpful and kind.

Through involvement in structured activities and voluntary services which are group work, promotion of team work also takes place. Students who participate in group activities are more likely to have positive feelings about others. They develop fewer biases and prejudices. Good team members accept each other as equals, support group's goals and rules, participate in discussions and express their needs and feelings honestly, have positive attitude and disagree without being disagreeable.

#### **ix. Providing Effective Supervision**

One the contributing factors to the death of a form four student highlighted in the introduction and background section above is the lack of supervision or being vigilant by the school authority. An ex-school administrator pointed out that "leadership is very important for without good leaders, things at schools will spiral out of control and, in some instances, students may control the school. Residential schoolteachers must be committed, must be proactive and not operate on a reactive basis. Teachers must make their presence felt and join in student activities. One of the steps is to monitor the wardens and ensure that they carry out their duties, especially on weekends and public holidays."

It is believed that some students become bullies because the supervision they get is minimal or nonexistent. And bullies tend to do their bullying where adults can't observe and intervene. Close supervision of students at schools may be one of the most effective bully prevention strategies available. It's true that spending more time supervising students will increase teachers' workload. But more positive supervision where you interact with students, suggest ways they can interact with each other and model kindness, acceptance, affirmation and getting along promotes positive behavior.

**x. Building Empathy and Understanding,**

Empathy is the ability to identify with and understand another person's feelings, situation, motives and concerns to put ourselves in someone else's shoes. Empathy is basic to positive relationships with friends, peers, family members and everyone else that one encounters throughout his life. Often when students are not liked by others it's because they lack empathy. It's not enough for students to empathize with people they have things in common with. They also need to empathize with people who are very different from them in their needs, experiences, points of view, life circumstances, beliefs, ethnic and cultural background, talents, abilities, accomplishments etc. They also need to be able to think about how other people might feel in response to specific events and circumstances.

Understanding on why do bullies bully and why do victims put up with it is another strategy. There are no easy answers to these questions but some students bully because they love having power over other people, because other people bully them, because they want attention, because they are jealous of other people and because they have their own problems. Some students are victims because they are different in some way, they do not know how to make friends, and they are socially awkward. Students can be invited to contribute their own reasons on why some students are bullies and why some are victims. With this information it will help them to understand why they and their classmates or schoolmates do some of the things they do.

**xi. Teaching Students to be Affirmative and Positive**

Everyone appreciates a compliment. Students especially enjoy knowing that their teacher thinks well of them. Take every opportunity to say something positive to each of your students through out the day. Get students to know about what they like, what they are good at, their positive characteristics, what make them proud of themselves and what good things they would like other people to know about them. This information can be shared with other students to encourage them to recognize and acknowledge each other's

positive characteristics and notice similarities. When students affirm each other, everyone feels accepted, appreciated and valued.

Positive thinking can be powerful especially positive thinking about ourselves and our abilities to solve problems, reach goals, cope with hard times and accomplish what we set out to do. Positive self talk creates positive beliefs. Positive beliefs lead to positive attitudes and feelings about oneself and others. Positive attitudes and feelings promote positive behaviors.

## **Conclusion**

Bullying is a serious problem that can dramatically affect the ability of students to progress academically and socially. A comprehensive intervention and prevention plan or program that involves all students, parents, and school staff is required to ensure that all students can learn in a safe and fear-free environment. Even the government, in the wake of public outcry on bullying in schools, is setting a task force to monitor and overcome discipline problems in schools. The government is very serious in combating bullying problems and the education minister was quoted in a news report as follows: “Finally to those who prefer to bully rather than learn, I have this to say to you: ‘If I accept you as you are, I will make you worse; however if I treat you as though you are what you are capable of becoming, I will help you become that.’ (Johann Wolfgang Goethe).”

The minister has since directed state education departments and schools to work hard to eliminate the bullying phenomenon in the country. In the coming months, schools will be under tremendous pressure to formulate, develop, implement and review strategies, program and plans to control bullying activities. There will be training courses, seminars, workshops and symposium on techniques, methods and tools to prevent bullying in schools. Therefore, this article offers to the schools and education authorities the various strategies and ideas to be adopted and adapted in carrying the directive from the Minister of Education to eliminate the menace of bullying in secondary schools.

In order to carry the tasks of eradicating bullying with vigor and dedication, the administrators of schools and education offices must recognize the facts that bullying is a serious problem for it is more than just teasing and anyone can be a bully and a victim. As bullying affects everyone therefore students, parents and teachers and the community can work together to find solutions by coming out with a comprehensive strategy that will give the best results. And always bear in mind that schools are responsible for protecting students. Students have the right to feel safe, secure, accepted and valued at schools that are free from direct and indirect bullying. Teachers and educationists must also recognize that they can make the difference. They are the ones who can shape students lives but reaching out to them, treat them with kindness and respect, giving them positive attention liken from caring adults. They are role model of acceptance and tolerance which students can follow in their lives.

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