Bullying Interventions in Schools

Six Basic Approaches

Ken Rigby

WILEY-BLACKWELL

Contents

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Foreword

Dr Ken Rigby's work is at the vanguard of the leadership South Australia has taken to address bullying and has been established on a foundation of research that seeks sound evidence and best practice.

Indeed, for decades Dr Rigby has been an internationally renowned leader in this area. He brings clarity, intellect, and rigor to the assessment of research and evidence and acknowledges there are no magic solutions.

Our South Australian community has sought to work together to support young people in our schools. For example, our Coalition to decrease bullying, harassment, and violence, which includes Dr Ken Rigby as an inaugural member, brings together the three schooling sectors and eminent researchers to provide expert advice to our education sector. Increased awareness of bullying has led to school communities becoming better informed as policies, subsequent training, and more effective responses have been developed.

This book adds to our store of knowledge and practical approaches, based on Dr Rigby's acknowledged wealth of research and experience. He helps practitioners and parents alike by virtue of his accessible and lucid presentation of the facts and research.

I trust this book will further assist and inform school leaders, teachers, and counselors as they work to overcome bullying and create a safe and supportive learning environment.

The Hon. Dr Jane Lomax-Smith MP Minister for Education, South Australia

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Introduction

After many years of neglect, there has recently been a flood of articles and books on bullying in schools. This is to be welcomed in that it recognizes the importance of this topic, not merely from an academic perspective but also from a social and humane point of view. It is difficult – if not impossible – to assess the amount of serious harm that is being done daily to millions of children throughout the world who are continually being victimized by their peers at school. But we do know that the effects of bullying are enormously damaging to the physical and mental health of many of these children and that the effects can persist into adult years.[1] Many people never recover from the bullying they experience at school.

There is no doubt that those concerned with the education of students are now much more aware of the situation than was the case some 30 or 40 years ago. As a school teacher in several schools in Australia in the 1960s, I cannot recall a single occasion on which the subject of school bullying was ever discussed among the staff. Of course, it was known to exist, as we knew from our own school days. But it was simply not a matter which anyone thought should be addressed. In most countries, it was not until the 1990s that schools began to take bullying seriously. Even then there were schools – and even Departments of Education – that were reluctant to acknowledge the problem and take systematic action. First slowly and then at an accelerating rate, measures were proposed, intervention programs were devised, and schools began to implement so-called anti-bullying policies. In many countries, such as Australia and Britain and in some states in the United States, it became

mandatory to have such a written policy or plan describing what each school had agreed to do.

Over the last 10 years or so, we have entered a phase in which researchers have begun to ask whether the increased focus on school bullying has made any difference. Longitudinal studies have suggested that in many countries progress has been made, albeit small. In an examination of trends in levels of peer victimization in North America and Europe, significant reductions in reported peer victimization were indicated in 19 of the 27 schools from which data were obtained between 1997 and 2006.[2] The researchers point out, however, that the problem still remains a very serious one. A third of all the children in the overall sample reported occasional bullying or victimization and around 1 in 10 children reported chronic involvement, either as perpetrator or victim.

The study cited above suggests that the measures being taken to reduce bullying in schools have not yet proved to be very effective. This suggestion has been strongly supported by an increasing number of studies undertaken over the last five years that have sought to determine just how effective a range of interventive strategies have been in addressing the problem of school bullying.[3] These reports make sobering reading. Some researchers have reported that on average the numerous interventions have been ineffective; others point to small reductions of not more than 20 percent. In practical terms, this implies that if there are 10 cases of bullying taking place in a school, after the application of an anti-bullying program, one might expect 8 cases to be continuing! It is nevertheless true that in some schools anti-bullying programs have been much more effective than average, especially when programs have been implemented thoroughly. This provides us with some hope that a higher level of success can be achieved. But there is certainly a long way to go before most schools can

confidently expect to eradicate most of the bullying that is going on.

In general, efforts to reduce bullying in schools have involved two complementary approaches. One is to direct attention to improving the attitudes and interpersonal behavior of *all* children in a school. This has been called the universal approach. Its aim is to prevent cases of bullying from ever occurring. It is thought that this may be done by educational means, for example, by educating students about the nature and harmfulness of bullying and promoting pro-social attitudes and the development of social skills that will result in positive interpersonal relations among all students.[4] To this end, appropriate curricula and teaching methods may be designed and applied to help children to interact more cooperatively and to respond more empathically to the distress experienced by others. One important development has been the use of 'circle time' in schools, which enables students to share their experiences and problems at school in a safe and structured classroom environment.[5] Peer support programs may also be devised to enable interested students to help and support students experiencing difficulties with others, for instance, by intervening as bystanders when bullying takes place and providing psychological support for those victimized. Sometimes attempts to reduce bullying have been focused on improved classroom management and better engagement with students.[6] With improvements in the school ethos, we might expect bullying to become less common.

The second approach is to focus especially on the students who have become involved in bully/victim problems at school. The aim here is to stop the bullying from continuing and (sometimes) to help those who bully or have been victimized to lead more constructive or less troubled lives.

Rather than direct attention to all the students in a school as occurs in the universal approach, this approach is selective in identifying those students who need specialized attention. A range of methods have been devised for this purpose. These form the main focus in this book and will be examined in detail later.

As noted above, these two approaches should be regarded as complementary. If the universal approach is successful, there will be fewer cases of bullying that need to be addressed. If the case-focused approach is successful, the task of bringing about positive changes in the total school ethos will be easier to accomplish. The relationship between the two may indeed be reciprocal: the more successful one of these approaches turns out to be, the less will be the need for the other.

There remains, however, the practical question of how much emphasis should be placed on each of these two approaches. It is easy to see that an emphasis on one approach to the exclusion of the other will simply not do. We would have to be exceedingly optimistic to believe that a program of prevention can be devised and implemented in schools to guarantee that no one will ever bully anyone. Surprisingly, there have been claims to this effect. One book title suggests that you can ‘bully proof your school’; another, if you are a parent, that you can ‘bully proof your child’.[7] I think we can discount such thinking as utopian. Equally, it would be foolish to suggest that we must rely entirely on waiting until bullying has occurred before we act. Children who bully are clearly influenced by the attitudes of those around them at school. We should not neglect the opportunity to inform all children about their social obligations and seek to promote ways in which they can relate to each other more positively. Moral and social education should form a part of every curriculum.

It is the ‘universal approach’ that currently dominates thinking about bullying. For some it is almost synonymous with the ‘whole school approach’. Emphasis upon improving intervention methods to address actual cases of bullying is being described by many as ‘reactive’. It is seen as closing the stable door after the horse has bolted. Recently, I gave a presentation on bullying to business managers in which I argued that preventative methods and interventive methods were both needed in tackling bullying in schools and the workplace. I was predictably told that I was being too reactive. Often now the universal approach is conceived as the basic approach. It is argued that every child is capable of engaging in bullying and every child should therefore be educated to engage in cooperative and helpful behavior among peers. Such social education should therefore be directed equally at all members of the school community. With enlightened educational practice – so it is maintained – the school ethos will be transformed and there will be no more bullying.

In studies of school bullying, the emerging orthodoxy can be summed up by a claim that is repeatedly being made in books and journals. It is that interventions that focus on the entire school population are more *effective* in reducing the bully/victim problem than interventions that focus on individual students.[8] This proposition to my knowledge has never been tested. Unfortunately, it has the effect of detracting from, or stifling developments in, work that is desperately needed to help individual children who are involved in serious bully/victim problems with their peers and see no end to the torment that they are experiencing.

What is needed, in my opinion, is a better balance between the universal and the more individualistic interventionist approaches. In this book, I want to correct or redress what I see as an overemphasis on the preventative and holistic approach to school bullying *at the expense of*

dealing with actual incidents of bullying. I want to focus more on what schools can do when cases arise.

My reasons for believing that much more attention needs to be given to how to intervene in cases of bullying are as follows.

First of all, as numerous surveys have shown, there exists a relatively small proportion of students who are directly involved in a very high proportion of the cases of bullying that occur in a school. Although the interpersonal behavior of these students is affected by the general ethos of a school, their involvement in bullying is, to a considerable extent, determined by a range of factors that are *not* closely associated with what happens at school. These include predisposing personality factors and personal vulnerabilities which have their origin in genetic or biological influences, as well as environmental pressures from outside the school, most obviously through negative experiences of family life, beginning from early childhood. Whether the school environment contributes to the problem of bullying or helps to ameliorate the problem, schools are called upon to deal with these difficult cases. They constitute a high priority.

Parents – especially of those children who are bullied repeatedly at school – expect cases of bullying to be dealt with effectively. They are frequently disappointed. This was brought home to me several years ago when I received a large number of e-mails and letters from parents, many of them angry, miserable, and depressed, complaining bitterly of the failure of schools to help their children to be free from bullying.[9] Parents urgently want the problem relating to their child to be dealt with now and are not inclined to think that conditions will be created in the school that will make any intervention unnecessary.

Actual interventions that are undertaken by schools in cases of bullying that come to their attention are often unsuccessful. The low proportion of students who actually

go to teachers requesting help to stop them being bullied (around 30 percent) commonly report that the situation does not improve.[10] Arguably, the students who are being bullied are the best judges of the effectiveness of teacher interventions.

Teachers typically are uncertain about how they can best deal with cases of bullying. This has become evident in surveys sampling the responses of teachers and counselors in different countries to questions about what they think they would do in cases of bullying.[11] This is not to blame school personnel. As we will see, knowing how to act so as to solve bully/victim problems is often problematic, and teachers are often not aware of what can be done and what actions are needed.

The case for improving the effectiveness of school interventions in cases of bullying is, I believe, overwhelming. But how is it to be done? I argue that, in the first instance, we need to recognize that far more attention needs to be paid to what can be done in addressing actual cases of bullying *as well as* seeking to create a school environment in which the task may be more manageable. Next, schools need to be aware of the range of approaches that may be adopted and applied in dealing with particular cases. The main purpose of this book is to promote an understanding of what methods exist and when and how they can best be applied.

Endnotes

1 The evidence on the effects of bullying on the health of children has been documented in numerous studies. For a summary of these effects, see Rigby (2003). It is known that children who have been psychologically damaged at an early age often continue to be affected in their adult years. In a recent Finnish study, young men were assessed

for psychiatric symptoms when they registered for national service between the ages of 18 and 23 years. They had earlier, at the age of eight years, been assessed at school to discover whether they had been involved in bully/victim problems as bullies or victims. Those that had bullied others frequently or had been bullied frequently were approximately three times more likely than those who had not been involved in bullying at school to be classified as psychiatrically disordered (see Ronning *et al*. 2009).

2 Cross-national trends in bullying in schools in North America and Europe between 1994 and 2006 have been reported for the United States, Canada, and most European countries (Molcho *et al*. 2009).

3 These include evaluations of anti-bullying programs conducted by Smith *et al*. (2004c), Smith *et al*. (2004a); Vreeman and Carroll (2007); Baldry and Farrington (2007); Ferguson *et al*. (2007); Rigby and Slee (2008); and Mishna (2008). All agree in claiming that outcomes from interventions have been inconsistent and relatively little or no progress has been made in reducing bullying in schools. The most favorable of the evaluations as reported by Baldry and Farrington (2007) suggest that, in general, anti-bullying programs reduce victimization in schools by around 20 percent. By contrast, Ferguson *et al*. (2007) claim that school-based anti-bullying programs have proved to be 'ineffective in reducing bullying or violent behaviours in the schools' (p. 7).

4 How teachers can help children to become more resilient is set out in a helpful book by McGrath and Noble (2006).

5 'Circle time' involves students attending meetings conducted at intervals with a teacher who enables each of the participants in turn to explain and share what is on their minds, typically about school life, and to hear helpful suggestions from others in the group. It can help young people develop skills such as listening and empathizing

and also build self-esteem and respect for others. On occasion, it can act as a forum at which the nature and effects of bullying can be considered and lead to the development of an anti-bullying code to which all members of the school community have contributed. See Mosley and Tew (1999) and Bellhouse (2009).

6 It has been claimed that bullying can be countered indirectly through the exercise of good classroom management (Roland & Galloway 2002).

7 Garrity *et al*. (1996) have provided extensive materials on how a school can be 'bully proofed.' Haber (2007) employs the same metaphor in claiming that a child can be comprehensively bully proofed – and for life!

8 An article published in the *Brown University Child and Adolescent Behavior* letter (2002) on behalf of the Menninger Institute is typical. It claimed that a universal intervention to reduce bullying, targeting all students, was the most effective approach. Evidence was provided of increased empathy toward others and less supportive attitudes toward aggression, but, as in most other studies concerned with methods of preventing bullying through programs directed to all students, evidence of reduced bullying was notably lacking.

9 See Rigby (1996, 2008) on how parents and educators can reduce bullying in schools.

10 Based on an Australian sample of over 38 000 students, some 30 percent of respondents between the ages of 7 and 16 years reported that they had been bullied at school and had told a teacher about it (see Rigby 1997b). According to students, teacher interventions were successful in less than 50 percent of cases (Rigby & Barnes, 2002; Rigby, 2008).

11 The online survey was conducted by Rigby and Bauman in 2006. The results from the survey of US teachers and counselors were reported by Bauman *et al*. in 2008. Rigby

and Bauman reported the results for Australian respondents in 2007. As details of teacher preferences for actions to address cases of bullying are highly relevant, they are given in full for US respondents in Appendix A.