

A LINE ON LIFE

10/27/96

"Bully-Proofing" Your School *

David A. Gershaw, Ph.D.

At the 1996 annual convention of the American Psychological Association, one of the many topics discussed was "*bully-proofing*" elementary schools. In the United States, there are about 160,000 children who miss school each day, because they are afraid of bullies. To combat this, a pilot program was carried out in the Cherry Creek School District in Englewood, Colorado. First, school psychologists explored the roles of all the participants.

- **Bullies:** Besides being defiant and impulsive, bullies are popular, and they like the power of their position. They have little remorse and interpret the behavior of others as hostile. They rarely follow rules or take blame, and they lie to keep themselves out of trouble. Because of this, individual therapy is unlikely to change their behavior.
- **Victims:** Classic victims are passive loners. They cry easily, lack self-defense skills and don't adapt to new situations well. About 10-15% of these children are "*provocative victims*." These restless children tease the bully. Even though they lose fights with the bully, they come back for more.
- **Bystanders:** The majority of children fend off bullies with humor. They are more likely to offer a compromise to the bully. Even better, they have friends, and there is strength in numbers.
- **Teachers:** Often aides, rather than teachers, are present during recess and lunch, when bullying most often occurs. Since bullies are persuasive liars, it makes it difficult for teachers to accurately assess the situation afterward.

In starting the bully-proofing program, brainstorming sessions were held in classrooms. Students were asked to describe bullying behavior and draw pictures of the bullying episodes. Boys pictured bullies as big and physically menacing. In contrast, girls drew bullies who attacked verbally. Their bullies used ethnic slurs and made the victims look foolish with statements like, "*Look at her gross dress*." The drawings were used for "*No bullying*" posters placed around the schools.

Meanwhile, the teachers and counselors were meeting. They developed programs to help newcomers find friends, so they were less likely to become victims. They mobilized a "*caring majority*" of students, rewarding students for positive, empathetic behavior.

When bullies were caught, they did not receive long lectures, but only a "*brief, no-nonsense talk*." Since suspensions seem to work only the first time (or not at all), bullies were made to face consequences, like having to replace broken property.

Rather than being the problem, some bullies can become part of the solution.

Some bullies can be persuaded to use their power in positive ways. One example was a fifth-grader who was terrorizing first-graders. A counselor confidentially asked for the student's help, because someone was picking on the younger children. The bully became their guardian rather than their tormentor.

In another instance, bullies were made to clean up the kindergarten classroom. In response, the kindergartners praised them by writing "*thank you*" cards. In this way, the bullies were rewarded for positive power.

Bullies were picked to pass out "*social caring*" awards to other students who had done helpful deeds. This was part of a new norm that was implanted the school. Victims were taught skills for defusing potentially aggressive situations. An acronym for the basic skills was "**HA HA SO**". It stands for:

Help is available,
Assert yourself,
Humor works well,
Avoid trouble,
Self-talk, and
Own the situation.

Some children have "*buttons*" that, when pushed, lead to aggressive behavior. The buttons may be related to their families, their apparel or other characteristics. If other children are aware of these sensitive topics, they can avoid provoking bullies accidentally.

The Cherry Creek program creates an environment with a "*caring majority*." With the classroom brainstorming sessions about bullying, tormenting others is no longer seen as "*being cool*." As one school official puts it, "*Beforehand, the norm was set by fear and silence. Now it's set by caring and speaking out.*"

With this program, bullies become less dominant. The victims become less vulnerable and have more self-esteem. Teachers learn more effective conflict resolution skills. Parents – especially those of the victims – feel better about the safety of their children at school.

Compared to other children, bullies face more violent discipline at home, spend less time with adults, and have fewer positive models from peers and parents. Possibly related to

this information, researchers are against bringing together the parents of bullies and their victims. It is not likely to help the situation. After one such meeting, the parents wound up fighting the parking lot!

Problems with bullies will not go away by themselves. They require some type of intervention. Researchers have developed a manual describing their method – *Bully-Proofing Your School: A Comprehensive Approach to Elementary Schools*. To receive more information on this manual, you can call **1-800-547-6747**.

* Adapted from Nathan Seppa's articles, "Keeping schoolyards safe from bullies" and "Bullies spend less time with adults," [*APA Monitor*](#), October, 1996, page 41.