Misdirections in Bullying Prevention and Intervention

In recent years, increasing numbers of educators, health professionals, parents, and other adults who interact with children and youth understand the seriousness of bullying. A number of proven and promising prevention and intervention strategies have been developed.

Unfortunately, a number of misdirected intervention and prevention strategies also have been developed in recent years.

Zero Tolerance Policies

A number of schools and school districts have adopted "zero tolerance" or "three strikes and you're out" policies towards bullying, in which children who bully others are suspended or expelled from school. These policies (also called "student exclusion" policies) raise a number of concerns.

- They affect a large number of students. Recent surveys of elementary and middle school students indicate that approximately one in five students admit to bullying their peers periodically (Melton et al., 1998). Even if policies are limited to physical bullying, the numbers of affected children are still significant.

- Threats of severe punishments, such as suspension or expulsion, may actually *discourage* children and adults from reporting bullying that they observe.

- Bullying can be an early marker of other problem behaviors. Children who frequently bully their peers are at risk of engaging in other problem behaviors such as truancy, fighting, theft, and vandalism. Children who bully are in need of positive, pro-social role models, including adults and students in their school.

Although suspension and expulsion of students may be necessary in a very small number of cases to maintain public safety, these practices are not recommended as a broad-based bullying prevention/intervention policy.

Conflict Resolution/Peer Mediation

Conflict resolution and peer mediation are common strategies to deal with conflicts among students. Many schools also use peer mediation and conflict resolution to address bullying problems, but this is not recommended. Why?

- Bullying is a form of victimization, not conflict. It is no more a "conflict" than are child abuse or domestic violence.

- Mediating a bullying incident may send inappropriate messages to the students who are involved (such as, "You are both partly right and partly wrong," or "We need to work out this conflict between you."). The appropriate message to the child who is bullied should be, "No one deserves to be bullied and we are going to do everything we can to stop it." The message for children who bully should be, "Your behavior is inappropriate and must be stopped."

- Mediation may further victimize a child who has been bullied. It may be very upsetting for a child who has been bullied to face his or her tormenter in mediation.

- There is no evidence to indicate that conflict resolution or peer mediation is effective in stopping bullying.

Group Treatment for Children Who Bully

Another strategy that some schools use to address bullying behavior involves group therapeutic treatment for children who bully, including anger management, skill-building, empathy-building, or seeking ways to build the self-esteem of bullies. Although these interventions are well-intentioned, they often are counter-productive. Students' behavior may further deteriorate, as group members tend to serve as role models and reinforcers for each others' antisocial and bullying behavior.

Simple, Short-Term Solutions

Often, school administrators and their staff adopt a short-term, piece-meal approach to bullying prevention. Bullying may be the topic of a staff in-service training, a PTA meeting, a school-wide assembly, or lessons taught by individual teachers. Although each of these efforts may represent important initial steps in the adoption of a comprehensive, long-term bullying prevention strategy, they likely will do little to significantly reduce bullying problems if implemented in a piece-meal way. What is required to reduce the prevalence of bullying is a change in the climate of the school and its exceptions for student behavior.

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