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Six myths cloud our understanding of bullying behavior in schools and prevent us from addressing the issue effectively.

R&D appears in each issue of *Kappan* with the assistance of the **Deans' Alliance**, which is composed of the deans of the education schools/colleges at the following universities: Harvard University, Michigan State University, Northwestern University, Stanford University, Teachers College Columbia University, University of California Berkeley, University of California Los Angeles, University of Michigan, University of Pennsylvania, and University of Wisconsin.

What Educators Need to Know About Bullying Behaviors

Peer victimization — also commonly labeled *harassment* or *bullying* — is not a new problem in American schools, though it appears to have taken on more epic proportions in recent years. Survey data indicate that anywhere from 30% to 80% of school-age youth report that they have personally experienced victimization from peers, and 10% to 15% may be chronic victims (e.g., Card and Hodges 2008). A generation ago, if we had asked children what they worry most about at school, they probably would have said, “Passing exams and being promoted to the next grade.” Today, students’ school concerns often revolve around safety as much as achievement, as the perpetrators of peer harassment are perceived as more aggressive and the victims of their abuse report feeling more vulnerable.

In the past 10 years — perhaps in response to students’ growing concerns — there has been a proliferation of new studies on school bullying. For example, a search of the psychology (PsycINFO) and Educational Resources Information Center (ERIC) databases using the key words *peer victimization*, *peer harassment*, and *school bullying* uncovered 10 times more studies from 2000 to 2010 than during the previous decade (about 800 versus 80).

Even though the empirical base has increased dramatically during these past 10 years, many widespread beliefs about school bullying are more myth than fact. I label these beliefs as myths because researchers who study bullies and victims of many different ages and in many different contexts have not found them to be true.

I define peer victimization as physical, verbal, or psychological abuse that occurs in and around school, especially where adult supervision is minimal. The critical features that distinguish victimization from simple conflict between peers are the intent to cause harm and

an imbalance of power between perpetrator and victim. This intended harm can be either direct, entailing face-to-face confrontation; indirect, involving a third party and some form of social ostracism; or even “cyber-bullying.” Taunting, name-calling, racial slurs, hitting, spreading rumors, and social exclusion by powerful others are all examples of behaviors that constitute peer victimization. My definition doesn’t include the more lethal types of peer hostility, such as those seen in the widely publicized school shootings; although some of those shootings may have been precipitated by a history of peer abuse, they remain rare events. My definition emphasizes more prevalent forms of harassment that affect the lives of many youth and that the American Medical Association has labeled a public health concern.

Myth #1: Bullies have low self-esteem and are rejected by their peers.

A portion of this myth has its roots in the widely and uncritically accepted view that people who bully others act that way because they think poorly of themselves. Recall the self-esteem movement of the 1980s whose advocates proposed that raising self-esteem was the key to improving the outcomes of children with academic and social problems. Yet there is little evidence in peer research to support the notion that bullies suffer from low self-esteem. To the contrary, many studies report that bullies perceive themselves in a positive light, often displaying inflated self-views (Baumeister et al. 2003).

Many people also believe that everybody dislikes the class bully. In truth, research shows that many bullies have high status in the classroom and have many friends. Some bullies are quite popular among classmates, which may in part account for their relatively high self-esteem. In our research with middle school students, we have found that others perceive bullies as especially “cool,” where coolness implies both popularity and possession of desired traits (Juvonen, Graham, and Schuster 2003). As

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young teens test their need to be more independent, bullies sometimes enjoy a new kind of notoriety among classmates who admire their toughness and may even try to imitate them.

Myth #2: Getting bullied is a natural part of growing up.

One misconception about victims is that bullying is a normal part of childhood and that the experience builds character. In contrast, research quite clearly shows that bullying experiences increase the vulnerabilities of children, rather than making them more resilient. Victims are often disliked or rejected by their peers and feel depressed, anxious, and lonely (Card and Hodges 2008). Part of this psychological distress may revolve around how victims think about the reasons for their plight. For example, repeated encounters with peer hostility, or even an isolated yet especially painful experience, might lead that victim to ask, “Why me?” Such an individual might come to blame the predicament on personal shortcomings, concluding, “I’m someone who deserves to be picked on,” which can increase depressive affect (Graham, Bellmore, and Mize 2006). Some victimized youth also have elevated levels of physical symptoms, leading to frequent visits to the nurse as well as school absenteeism. It is not difficult to imagine the chronic victim who becomes so anxious about going to school that she or he tries to avoid it at all costs. Nothing is character building about such experiences.

Myth #3: Once a victim, always a victim.

Although there is good reason to be concerned about the long-term consequences of bullying, research remains inconclusive about the stability of victim status. In fact, there is much more discontinuity than continuity in victim trajectories. In our research, only about a third of students who had reputations as victims in the fall of 6th grade maintained that reputation at the end of the school year and, by the end of 8th grade, the number of victims had dropped to less than 10% (Nylund, Nishina, Bellmore, and Graham 2007). Although certain personality characteristics, such as shyness, place children at higher risk for being bullied, there are also a host of changing situational factors, such as transitioning to a new school or delayed pubertal development, that affect the likelihood of a child continuing to

get bullied. These situational factors explain why there are more temporary than chronic victims of bullying.

Myth #4: Boys are physical and girls are relational victims and bullies.

The gender myth emerges in discussions that distinguish between physical and psychological victimization. The psychological type, often called “relational bullying,” usually involves social ostracism or attempts to damage the reputation of the victim. Some research has suggested that girls are more likely to be both perpetrator and target of the relational type (for example, Crick and Grotpeter 1996). Because a whole popular culture has emerged around relationally aggressive girls (so-called *queen bees* or *alpha girls*) and their victims, putting these gender findings in proper perspective is important. In many studies, physical and relational victimization tend to be correlated, suggesting that the victim of relational harassment is also the victim of physical harassment. Moreover, if relational victimization is more prevalent in girls than boys (and the results are mixed), this gender difference is most likely

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RESOURCES

Teaching Tolerance, a project of the Southern Poverty Law Center

Dedicated to reducing prejudice, improving intergroup relations, and supporting equitable school experiences for children. Teaching Tolerance provides free educational materials to teachers. The organization’s magazine, *Teaching Tolerance*, is also available free to educators.

www.tolerance.org

Office of Safe and Drug-Free Schools

Provides in-depth, online workshops focused on bullying prevention: “Exploring the Nature and Prevention of Bullying.” Materials from that workshop are available online.

www2.ed.gov/admins/lead/safety/training/bullying/index.html

In addition, clicking on the link for “Resources and Links” will connect you with a lengthy list of relevant organizations, books, web sites, and videos.

Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network (GLSEN)

Provides resources and support for schools to implement effective and age-appropriate antibullying programs to improve school climate for all students.

www.glsen.org



confined to middle childhood and early adolescence (Archer and Coyne 2005). By middle adolescence, relational victimization becomes the norm for both genders as it becomes less socially accepted for individuals to be physically aggressive against peers. Relational victimization is a particularly insidious type of peer abuse because it inflicts psychological pain and is often difficult for others to detect. However, it's probably a less gendered subtype than previously thought.

Myth #5: Zero tolerance policies reduce bullying.

Zero tolerance approaches, which advocate suspending or expelling bullies, are sometimes preferred because they presumably send a message to the student body that bullying won't be tolerated. However, research suggests that these policies often don't work as intended and can sometimes backfire, leading to increases in

forcers, or defenders of victims. Assistants take part in ridiculing or intimidating a schoolmate, and reinforcers encourage the bully by showing their approval. However, those who come to aid the victim are rare. Unfortunately, many bystanders believe victims of harassment are responsible for their plight and bring problems on themselves.

Thoughts on Interventions

Educators who want to better understand the dynamics of school bullying will need to learn that the problems of victims and bullies aren't the same. Interventions for bullies don't need to focus on self-esteem; rather, bullies need to learn strategies to control their anger and their tendency to blame others for their problems. Victims, on the other hand, need interventions that help them develop more positive self-views, and that teach them not to blame themselves for the harassment. And peers need to learn that as witnesses to bullying, their responses aren't neutral and either support or oppose bullying behaviors.

Most bullying interventions are schoolwide approaches that target all students, parents, and adults in the school. They operate under the belief that bullying is a systemic problem and that finding a solution is the collective responsibility of everyone in the school. Two recent meta-analyses of research on antibullying programs suggest that the effects are modest at best (Merrell et al. 2008; Smith et al. 2004). Only about a third of the school-based interventions included in the analyses showed any positive effects as measured by fewer reported incidents of bullying; a few even revealed increased bullying, suggesting interventions may have backfired. These findings don't mean schools should abandon whole-school interventions that have a research base. Instead, the modest results remind us that schools are complex systems and what works in one context may not be easily portable to other contexts with very different organizational structures, student demographics, and staff buy-in. Research on decision making about program adoption reveals that many teachers are reluctant to wholly embrace bullying interventions because they either believe the curriculum doesn't provide enough time and space to integrate such policies or that parents are responsible for developing antibullying attitudes (Cunningham et al. 2009).

Although obvious gains from systemwide interventions may be modest, teachers can take

HOW CAN SCHOOLS AND TEACHERS RESPOND TO BULLYING?

Adults should intervene whenever they witness a bullying incident.
Use bullying incidents as teachable moments to stimulate conversations,
not merely as opportunities to punish the perpetrator.
Teach tolerance for differences and an appreciation of diversity.

antisocial behavior (APA Zero Tolerance Task Force 2008). Moreover, black youth are disproportionately the targets of suspension and expulsion, resulting in a racial discipline gap that mirrors the well-documented racial achievement gap (Gregory, Skiba, and Noguera 2010). Before deciding on a discipline strategy, school administrators must consider the scope of the problem, who will be affected, the fairness of the strategy, and what messages are communicated to students.

Myth #6: Bullying involves only a perpetrator and a victim.

Many parents, teachers, and students view bullying as a problem that's limited to bullies and victims. Yet, much research shows that bullying involves more than the bully-victim dyad (Salmivalli 2001). For example, bullying incidents are typically public events that have witnesses. Studies based on playground observations have found that in most bullying incidents, at least four other peers were present as either bystanders, assistants to bullies, rein-



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steps on an individual and daily basis to address bullying. First, teachers should never ignore a bullying incident. Because most bullying occurs in “un-owned spaces” like hallways and restrooms where adult supervision is minimal, teachers should respond to all bullying incidents that they witness. A response by a teacher communicates to perpetrators that their actions are not acceptable and helps victims feel less powerless about their predicament. This is especially important because students often perceive school staff as unresponsive to students’ experiences of bullying.

Second, when possible, adults can use witnessed bullying incidents as “teachable moments,” situations that open the door for conversations with students about difficult topics. For example, teachers may intervene to confront students directly about why many youth play bystander roles and are unwilling to come to the aid of victims, or how social ostracism can be a particularly painful form of peer abuse. At times, engaging in such difficult dialogues may be a more useful teacher response than quick and harsh punishment of perpetrators.

Finally, one meaningful factor that consistently predicts victimization is an individual’s differences from the larger peer group. Thus, having a physical or mental handicap or being highly gifted in a regular school setting, being a member of an ethnic or linguistic minority group, suffering from obesity, or being gay or lesbian are all risk factors for bullying because individuals who have these characteristics are often perceived to deviate from the normative standards of the larger peer group. Students also tend to favor the in-group (those who are similar to them) and to derogate the out-group (those who are different). A strong antidote to this tendency is to teach tolerance for differences, an appreciation of diversity, and the value of multiple social norms and social identities co-habiting the same school environment. The effects of teaching tolerance may last a lifetime. **K**

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Bullying experiences make children more vulnerable, not more resilient.