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Child Abuse & Neglect



Practical Strategies

Let's prevent peer victimization, not just bullying[☆]

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This commentary argues that it is time to make bullying less of the central concept in efforts to combat peer victimization.

Bullying has been a pivotal concept in the mobilization of effort in recent years to create safe environments for children. It has highlighted a phenomenon that seems to have universal resonance and is recognized internationally (Jimerson, Swearer, & Espelage, 2010). Prevalence for bullying has been measured in many countries, overall assessed as involving about 10% of the school aged population in its chronic form (Molcho et al., 2009). It is associated with serious outcomes (Klomeck et al., 2009) and is higher among abused children (Mohapatra et al., 2010). Public policy efforts are being made in many place to combat its occurrence and its effects (Howlett, 2011; Olweus Bullying Prevention Program, 2011; Salmivalli, Karna, & Poskiparta, 2011).

Much of the early pioneering work on this was done by the Norwegian psychologist Dan Olweus (Olweus, 1993). Olweus recognized that there was much peer conflict, and wished to highlight the most damaging part of the spectrum out of concern that not all of it was of equal seriousness. So he established the convention of defining bullying as incidents that involved not only aggression, but repeated aggression in a relationship where there was a power imbalance.

In Olweus' formulation: "When we talk about bullying, these things happen *repeatedly* and it is *difficult for the student being bullied to defend himself or herself*. We also call it bullying when a student is teased repeatedly in a mean and hurtful way. But we *do not call it bullying* when the teasing is done in a friendly and playful way. Also, it is *not bullying* when two students of about the same strength or power argue or fight" (Olweus, 2007, p. 2).

This formulation has prompted a lot of useful research, and has been embraced by parents, educators and policy makers as demarcating a phenomenon of clear practical utility. Useful as this concept has been, however, it has a number of limitations that have not been resolved even though the field has been active and growing for more than 30 years.

Excludes serious peer aggression. Perhaps the biggest problem is what the formal definition of bullying excludes. So while it excludes trivial conflicts among peers, it also excludes very serious acts of aggression. A peer who whacks a schoolmate

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with a baseball bat and sends him to the hospital –this is not technically bullying if it occurs only once or if there was no pre-existing power differential. A student who sexually assaults another student– this is not technically bullying if it only happens once.

But the reality is that when schools adopt “bullying prevention” programs, they are trying to target and eliminate all interpersonal aggression, the bat assault and the sexual assault included, not simply the repeated aggression in unequal relationships. Teachers and peers are taught to recognize and interrupt all aggression. Why would researchers and practitioners who wish to improve child safety want to exclude or de-emphasize such serious acts?

Technical definition at odds with usage. Related to this, of course, is the fact that in colloquial usage, the technical definition of bullying has not caught on. It is used primarily among experts and researchers. When asked if they have been bullied, most students will think about the time someone was mean to them or teased them or threatened them, whether or not it was repeated and whether or not it was in an unequal relationship (Vaillancourt et al., 2008). “Jack was bullying me,” is a complaint a student might easily make about any nastiness they may experience from another child. Bullying also turns out to be a very hard concept to translate into some other languages, and may even have different meanings in different subcultures within the US (Smith, Cowie, Olafsson, & Liefsoog, 2002).

Even experts and researchers have not always sustained the technical definition of bullying as they have developed the field. For example, there is a rapidly growing literature and prevention effort around what has been termed “cyber-bullying” (Ybarra, Boyd, Korchmaros, & Oppenheim, n.d.). But in the case of much of the meanness and harassment that has been referred to as cyber-bullying, it is not even possible to know who the instigator is let alone whether this person is more powerful or is repeating their insults. So here again the term bullying has shucked its official definition, and come to mean any belligerence, threat or harassment that occurs online.

Although efforts are underway by organizations such as the Center for Disease Control to develop a standard definition of bullying, it is not clear that consensus will be reached, or that the loose usage of the term will be curtailed by whatever experts do. This likely means on-going wrangling among parents, school officials, students and researchers over whether something is or is not bullying. This would be important if we were sure that it made a difference whether something was officially bullying or not (and not just an assault), but since we do not know whether it truly makes a difference (see below), such wrangling may just waste time.

Power imbalance difficult to define. A third problem with the bullying concept, and perhaps one that lies behind its squishiness, is the difficulty of defining clearly what a “power imbalance” is. It is often described as someone who is bigger, stronger or more popular. But these features are not always in alignment. If a stronger but less popular girl repeatedly intimidates a weaker but popular boy, is the controlling dimension popularity, gender or physical strength? Is all aggression by boys against girls eligible to be bullying, and no aggression by girls against boys?

Note that Olweus himself complicates the problem when, in his questionnaires, he translates the power imbalance concept into the phrase, “it is difficult for the student being bullied to defend himself or herself” (Olweus, 1996). Taken literally, this phrase itself does admit the possibility that we can recognize an incident in which a student was bullied, but was nonetheless still able to defend himself or herself, raising the question of why that should not also be called bullying. But in addition, a student may have difficulty defending himself for many reasons— surprise, fatigue, a commitment to non-violence, not just a power imbalance. Moreover, it is often difficult after aggression gets started to know whether there was a *pre-existing* power imbalance. Once someone has aggressed against you or beaten you in a fight you may be legitimately intimidated by them, but that may not mean that a power imbalance existed initially. Given these ambiguities, it is not surprising that the power imbalance component of bullying is widely ignored by parents, teachers and students and even by researchers, who do not have the leisure to fully assess the quality of the relationship (Austin & Joseph, 1996; Espelage & Holt, 2001). They simply call bullying episodes of repeated aggression. It is a disadvantage to organize a field around a concept whose definition is so difficult to pin point.

Distinctions among aggression contexts need an empirical foundation. Although all forms of aggression are worth preventing, Olweus is no doubt justified in his goal of highlighting some as more serious than others, given how common aggression is. But should power imbalance be the main dimension to attend to? It needs to be kept in mind that the bullying concept is in reality currently only a *hypothesis*. It is a hypothesis that peer episodes characterized by repetition and power imbalance have a special seriousness and commonality that deem them worthy of special attention. In recent writing, Olweus (2010) has re-emphasized his allegiance to this power imbalance concept, pointing to research showing that aggression combined with power imbalance can have more negative effects (Hunter, Boyle, & Warden, 2007). This is important research. But it does not answer the question of whether there are other equally serious types of peer aggression (demarcated by other criteria, for example, the use of a weapon or having sexual content) that should be highlighted along with power imbalance. So even evidence that power imbalance results in more harm is not an argument for limiting the definition of serious peer aggression to only such episodes.

By contrast, a more empirical and scientific approach often adopted in aggression research has been to define acts and behaviors in a broad fashion, and then to study the various contextual features that make such acts in some situations and relationships more harmful than others. Such contextual features can include the specific acts, the statuses of the actors and the type of relationship in which the aggression occurs. In the bullying field, unfortunately, whole categories of behaviors have been excluded a priori and not even studied.

It is important to note that in a number of related fields, an initially narrow, advocacy concept was expanded to allow a more empirical definition of seriousness, based on research and clinical experience. For example, the initial mobilization

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