



Editorial

Bullying is an Adverse Childhood Experience

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Editorial

Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) are traumatic childhood events that can have lasting effects on a person. ACEs include emotional, physical, and sexual abuse; domestic violence; substance use and mental illness of someone in the household; separation from parents, including through incarceration and divorce; food insecurity; and homelessness. The Center for Disease Control (CDC) also lists bullying victimization as an Adverse Childhood Experience. For children who are bullied, the prolonged, repeated abuse can impact their development, the way they interact with others, and how they perform in school. ACEs may also be a risk factor for being bullied or bullying others.

Although we are all familiar with the problem of bullying, before considering the interrelationship of these two issues, it is important to begin with a common understanding of what bullying is. Dan Olweus [1] defines bullying as when someone repeatedly and on purpose says or does mean or hurtful things to another person who has a hard time defending himself or herself. Bullying is a form of aggression. The behavior is often repeated and unlike other forms of aggression, there is an imbalance of power or strength between child who is bullying and child who is being bullied. This imbalance can be physical, but often is emotional or verbal and can be quite subtle.

Bullying contributes to youth violence, causes psychological and social problems, and is an obstacle to learning. It often leads to depression, anxiety, difficulties in school, and academic problems. Children who are bullied experience lower self-esteem, higher rates of health problems, loneliness, withdrawal, aggression, feelings of rejection, and suicidal ideation. They may present with somatic disturbances, like sleep problems, gastrointestinal concerns, and headaches. They are also more likely to report wanting to avoid school, dislike school, have higher rates of absenteeism, and receive lower grades.

However, not everyone fares the same when exposed to bullying. Some youth are more susceptible for bullying to have a negative impact while others can more easily brush it off. A chronically activated stress system is one factor that contributes to how a person responds to bullying. According to the Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University, toxic stress - strong, frequent, and or prolonged adversity - can have damaging effects on learning, behavior, and health across the lifespan. Brain science also suggests that exposure to stress can affect early brain development.

The Adverse Childhood Experiences Survey study conducted by Kaiser Permanente and the CDC found that adults have a significantly higher risk of experiencing physical, medical, and mental health issues if they were exposed to adverse experiences in their childhood [2]. The study found a significant relationship between ACEs and a variety of negative adult outcomes, including heart disease,

stroke, depression, suicide attempts, sexually transmitted diseases, and substance abuse. Similar to the negative consequences of bullying, exposure to ACEs can have lasting effects. The more ACEs a person experiences, the higher their risk for social, emotional, and cognitive problems as well as health issues and even a shorter life expectancy.

Unfortunately, ACEs are common. In the Kaiser sample, almost 40% of participants reported two or more ACEs and 12.5% experienced four or more. The CDC reports that most data sources show similar results with about two-thirds of adults reporting at least one ACE, and more than one in five reporting three or more ACEs. According to the 2016 National Survey of Children's Health, 45 percent of children in the United States have experienced at least one ACE and one in ten has experienced three or more. With nearly one out of every five students also reporting being bullied, considering the connection between bullying and adverse childhood experiences is critical.

Fortunately, there is good news. There are things that can be done to prevent bullying and mitigate the effect of bullying as an ACE. One of the best tools for decreasing the problems associated with bullying is to implement evidence-based prevention and intervention strategies that help youth learn self-control, cultivate empathy, manage emotions, and develop social-emotional competencies so they have the tools to deal with problems and stressors they may face.

The National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine Preventing Bullying through Science, Policy, and Practice [3] reports that school-based programs with multiple components that both involve all students and offer targeted interventions for those at high risk for bullying are more likely to be effective. Similarly, one of the school violence prevention strategies identified by the CDC is implementation of universal school based prevention programs delivered to all students regardless of their level of risk. What might this type of bullying prevention and intervention look like in a school setting?

First, to reduce bullying, it is important to change the climate of the school and the social norms surrounding bullying. It must become normative for staff and students to notice and respond when a child is bullied or left out. Every adult should receive clear guidance about how to identify bullying, its effects, how to respond if they observe bullying, and how to prevent bullying from occurring. Next, survey students to determine the amount of bullying that students experience, the types of bullying that are most common, and the hot spots where bullying happens. Follow this by increasing supervision in identified hot spots then developing and teaching simple, clear rules about bullying to ensure that students are aware of adults' expectations that they refrain from bullying and help students who are bullied.

Building positive relationships is another key prevention and intervention strategy. When a child's stress response systems are activated within an environment of supportive relationships with adults, negative effects are buffered. Therefore, when school staff build positive interpersonal relationships with students, this can function as a protective factor against bullying as well as other potential consequences of exposure to ACEs.

School staff play an important role in preventing bullying and protecting students, but they cannot do it alone. Youth also have a role to play. As part of a universal prevention program, teachers (with the support of administrators) should set aside class meeting time to discuss bullying, peer relations, and other social and emotional issues with students. This time can guide students in development of social-emotional skills that may prevent them from resorting to pushing, teasing, or hurting peers as an emotional release.

Research has found a significant relationship between stress, anger, fighting, and bullying behaviors. Knowing this, including strategies that focus on reducing stress and aggression can be an important component of universal prevention efforts. In addition to talking specifically about bullying during class meeting time, mindfulness based activities can reduce stress, control emotions, and empower students to become more aware of their thoughts and feelings thus better able to react in a socially acceptable manner.

Although relatively new, research in this area is beginning to show the positive impact mindfulness based approaches can have on managing stress and self-regulation. Mindfulness based activities help build resilience, lessen anxiety, teach anger control, improve impulse control, enhance self-confidence, and develop social confidence. Mindfulness can also result in a reduction in bullying behaviors as children learn to control how they interpret and react to things around them. An example of this was shown in a study published in the *Journal of Applied School Psychology* that found strong and significant reductions in youth reports of revenge motivation and hostility after participation in a school-based yoga program [4].

Not only can mindfulness activities be useful for children involved in bullying, they may also mitigate the impact of ACEs. Effects of trauma, including bullying, are cumulative and can be long lasting. Emerging research suggests that resilience and stress management can negate the consequences of acute and chronic exposure to stress. Teaching mindfulness can help students develop these traits.

Few studies have examined the association between bullying and ACEs, but research has confirmed their co-existence. While they are generally studied separately and addressed differently, making the connection and working to prevent both may go a long way in dealing with both public health problems. Addressing ACEs may lessen bullying in schools and reducing bullying in schools may lessen ACEs. Recognizing this overlap, an integrated approach to prevention and intervention makes sense.

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