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Bullying: How We Can Do Better

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COUN 6785: Social Change in Action:
Prevention, Consultation, and Advocacy

Bullying: How We Can Do Better

Theresa Hall

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OVERVIEW

Keywords: [Bullying Prevention, aggression, perpetrator, victim, Iowa, family]

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Goal Statement: My overall goal is to decrease the incidents of bullying among children by integrating the family of the perpetrator of aggression into the therapeutic process.

Significant Findings: Most of the research for this project either focused on the victim and the lasting effects of being bullied or the steps taken by the school to decrease incidents of being bullied. In Iowa despite the anti-bullying policies in place, bullying continued at a high rate, ranking Iowa 11th in the nation. One of the key pieces of information was that family dysfunction was a significant risk. Another finding was that children that live in poverty also tend to perpetrate violence towards others. The CDC discusses the importance of family relationships and that strong familial relationships will decrease adverse childhood experiences.

Objectives/Strategies/Interventions/Next Steps: In order to decrease incidents of bullying it is important that not only the school is involved but the family as well. By using the Systems theory it is felt that the outcome will be successful in reducing the incidents of bullying. This theory focuses on the family dynamic and view it as a interdependent system, meaning that each member contributes to patterns of behavior. The program would consist of parenting skills, coping skills, rebuilding the family relationship, building self-esteem, and any other issue the family may be experiencing. Collaborating with the school is a key in this project. As shown in one study when the parents and the school both work together, the incidents of bullying decreases. There are a couple of steps that would need to take place for this project to be

successful. The first one is that more research needs to be done to look at the impact of one's family life on a child. The second step is working with the Board of Education, or higher to include families in therapy in the anti-bullying policies.

INTRODUCTION

Bullying: How can we do better

Defining bullying can change from person to person. Some will think that it means that another person is harming you either physically or mentally, or both. It can mean to some that you are being harassed over social media. According to the National Centre Against Bullying it is defined as an ongoing and deliberate misuse of power in relationships through repeated verbal, physical and/or social behavior that intends to cause physical, social and/or psychological harm (ncab.org). Most of the programs will work with those kids involved, but it shouldn't stop there. I am going to focus my project on involving the parents of the bully more by implementing a program for parenting skills, coping skills and any other necessary means to stop behavior problems before they leave the house.

PART 1: SCOPE AND CONSEQUENCES

Bullying: How we can do better

I am going to focus my project on involving the parents of the bully more by implementing a program for parenting skills, coping skills and any other necessary means to stop behavior problems before they leave the house. Research documents that parents play a critical role in the development and maintenance of behavior problems in children (Burkhart, Knox, & Brockmyer, 2012).

The statistics prove to be alarming across the nation and is a mental health epidemic. The CDC ranked each state according to reported cases by surveying students over the last 12 months about unintentional injuries that have occurred. The range was between 19.7-26.7 and Iowa came in at 23. Iowa ranked 11th in the nation for the prevalence of Bullying. Every state has various anti-bullying policies and Iowa has a no-tolerance to bullying, yet it is still occurring at a high rate.

The consequences for the one who is perpetrating the harm is usually suspension and sometimes if he/she continues it could result in expulsion. For the victim, it is much worse and the consequences are long lasting, sometimes for years or the rest of his/her life. Being bullied causes academic decline, mental health issues, substance abuse, and maybe even taking his/her life. The intent is to decrease incidents of bullying by integrating the family into the therapeutic process.

PART 2: SOCIAL-ECOLOGICAL MODEL

Bullying: How we can do better

When we look at a bullying situation such as one kid pushing another kid around because he/she is different, or they are smaller. In a scenario of bullying, there is a lot more going on. Bullying is a complex phenomenon influenced by multiple factors (Swearer & Hymel, 2015). When addressing the potential risk factors as well as protective factors, the perpetrator and the victim actually the same, in that each individual may have the same risk and protective factors as each other.

Risk Factors

The family dynamic is a significant risk factor for both individuals. A number of familial traits are linked to bullying perpetration, including poor parental supervision, domestic violence, authoritarian parenting style, and a negative family environment (Swearer, et.al., 2015). Another study indicated that perpetrators were considered the least stable subgroup.

Individual risk factors that are associated with a perpetrator can be many different things such as, conduct disorder, depression, being unemotional, and has psychopathic tendencies. Perpetrators also have been shown to have higher social intelligence (Swearer, et.al.,2015). A similar trait that a victim shares with the bully is depression. The victim struggles with internalizing as well as externalizing. The victim is usually less liked and is not accepted by much of his/her peers, making them very lonely.

Since bullying usually occurs among peers where much of the time the bully gets a majority of the support. However, the perpetrator and the victim both often have negative affiliations with peers. It was found by researchers that the level of support by the peers is a great determinant of the bullying act itself. The bystanders that witness the incident often encourage the practice of bullying (swearer, et.al.,2015). Whether or not teachers have a positive relationship with their students is also the competence of the act of bullying in school. This also plays a major factor in the environment of the school. Sociological theorists assert that school norms can perpetuate inequality, alienation, aggression, and oppression among the students in relation to their race/ethnicity, gender, and socioeconomic background (Espelage, 2014).

When looking at risk factors within the community it can range from living in poverty to it being a racial issue. Another factor is also the amount of friends one has, usually the bully has

many friends and can be popular. In one study it was determined that the number of friends positively associated with being a bully (Alvarez-Garcia, Garcia, Nunez, 2015).

Protective Factors

Because the family dynamic plays an intricate role in both the perpetrator and the victim this can be one of the most profound protective factors to decrease the incidence of bullying. Effective parenting has been shown to mediate the effects of multiple risk factors, including poverty, divorce, and parental mental illness (SAMSHA). According to the CDC in their discussions on violence protection, a family that creates safe, stable, and nurturing relationships, in other words, children have a consistent family life where they feel safe will decrease the likelihood of experiencing adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) (cdc.gov). A protective factor for the victim is having positive relationships outside of the home. Often the victim is someone who is an easy target because they are alone. A child that has a positive experience at home and at school is less likely to be bullied. This child comes from a home that has parents that provide consistent supervision and enforcement of rules.

PART 3: THEORIES OF PREVENTION

Bullying: How we can do better

Since my focus will be on the perpetrator rather the victim for this project, it is important that I utilize a theory that will encompass the bully along with his or her parents. Systems theory focuses on the dynamics of relationships that occur within the family. Because patterns of

behavior tend to begin within the family unit. By describing how family systems theories can inform the development of bullying prevention and intervention strategies (Cross & Barnes, 2014). The belief behind the systems theory is that the family as more than the total of it's parts. Systemic Theorists view families as closely related individuals, the family is viewed as a dynamic, interactive, interdependent system with all members contributing to patterns of behavior (Cross & et.al., 2014). By working with the family as a whole unit I will be able to get to where the possible root of the problem is and work with the family on improving any relationships between family members, developing coping strategies, and parenting skills.

In the research study of using Systems Theory to address bullying, The Friendly Schools Friendly Families Project (FSFF) they had three different randomized control groups. The first on included the whole school, capacity building support and active parental involvement; the second included whole school and capacity building support; lastly only the school program was used. The high-intervention group had the highest success rate out of the three. Based on the results including the family is critical to decreasing bullying. Recognizing the impact of family systems on children's relationships with their peers, and engage with families in their efforts to reduce bullying and aggression (Cross & et.al.,2014). There is some evidence that bullying behaviors can be transmitted across generations; one study showed that fathers who had bullied their peers at school were more likely to have sons who bullied their peers (Holt, Kaufman, & Finkelhor, (2008).

PART 4: DIVERSITY AND ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Bullying: How we can do better

The main purpose of my project is to look at bullying from a different perspective. Statistics on the prevalence of bullying across America are staggering and most of all frightening. According to admissionly.com in 2020 one out of three students admit to being bullied. Bullying is an epidemic that continues to effect thousands of children and adults on a daily basis. Much of the research has been on the effects of bullying on an individual. The question for my project is what is effecting a child or an adult to cause them to bully another person to serve his or her needs.

The U.S. has witnessed high rates of problem behaviors among youth in the past 3 decades, most notably those involving bullying and violence (Lewis, Schure,Bavarian, DuBois, Day, Ji, Silverthorn, Acock, Vuchinich & Flay, 2013). My target population are the children who perpetrates violence and the child's family dynamic. In many of the research studies it showed that the highest rate of bullies come from low income families. According to one study that utilized the 2007 National Survey of Children's Health found that Race and socioeconomic status were key characteristics of perpetrating aggression towards others. They found that African American and Latino children and children living in poverty and who also had emotional, developmental, or behavioral problems had higher odds of bullying (Shetgiri, et.al., 2012). Having a low income causes a great deal of stress within a family, as well as conflict between family members.

When working with low-income families that struggle with children that exhibit aggressive behaviors it is important that they feel validated in their struggles. The counselor needs to work with the family in developing and using interventions that fit their dynamic in order to promote family wellness. The counselor also needs to thoroughly research the

interventions in order to have a more successful outcome which is decreased aggressive behaviors in and out of the home.

The American Counseling Association (ACA) is very adamant about confidentiality and building a trusting relationship with the client, there may be times when sharing information is necessary for the safety of the client. ACA code B.2.a. states that confidentiality does not apply when disclosure is required to protect clients or identified others from serious and foreseeable harm or when legal requirements demand that confidential information be revealed.

PART 5: ADVOCACY

Bullying: How we can do better

Institutional Barriers

When looking at bullying, a majority of it occurs within the school system. The bully is away from parents and has a better access to the individual that they are bullying. In the school system in my community a division takes place between kids that are marginalized and the kids that would be described as privileged. This division begins as early as second grade and continues throughout the school years. Although the school follows the State of Iowa anti-bullying policy which states, that all students and faculty will be treated with respect and dignity... that any bullying towards peers and faculty is in violation of the anti-bullying codes on a local, state ad federal guidelines will not be tolerated by the Board of Education (Iowa State Board of Education). There are consequences for the perpetrator of course, usually suspension if a repeat offender. Parents are contacted by the school, however that is all the further it goes. There isn't a program that will bridge the gap between the marginalized and privileged group.

Community Barriers

According to the Multicultural and Social Justice Counseling Competencies within the community the privileged and marginalized address community norms, values, and regulations that impede on the development of individuals, groups, and communities (Multicultural and Social Justice Counseling Competencies, 2015). Sports is an example in many small communities. Both marginalized and privileged individuals come together for the same ending goal, to win. However, often times it is the privileged that play the most. Whether it is intramural sports or sports within the schools, you will see many kids that sit the bench not because of their ability but because of their last name, or socioeconomic status. I have witnessed this so many times. I have also witnessed kids quitting sports because they are told that no matter how hard they practice, they will never see field time. This doesn't have much effect on the kids that are privileged, as they will continue to play, it is the marginalized kids that it hurts the most. They walk away feeling defeated and inadequate leading to low self-esteem. It is these kids that become the target of being bullied throughout their lives. In essence the community is indirectly bullying these kids.

Public Policy Barriers

Although there are policies that address the bullying issue, it doesn't include delving deeper into the family of the perpetrator, instead it mainly focuses on the disciplining of the child with behaviors and the effects on the victims of the aggression by bullies. During an investigation of the violation of the Anti-Bullying Act, the superintendent is guided by suggestions for developing policy. These are the three main solutions:

- Developing procedures for reporting acts of bullying and harassment behavior

- Organizing training programs for students, school employees, and volunteers regarding how to recognize bullying and harassment behavior and what to do if this behavior is witnessed; and
- Developing a process for evaluating the effectiveness of this policy in reducing bullying and harassing behavior (educateiowa.gov).

It does not include collaborating with the parents of either the perpetrator or the victim. The parents essentially could be involved in all three of the suggestions. Without parental input poses a barrier into decreasing incidents of bullying.

Institutional Advocacy

Institutional Interventions state that privileged and marginalized counselors address inequities at the institutional level (Multicultural and Social Justice Counselor Competencies). There are many ways a counselor can advocate for the perpetrator within and institutional setting. One way is to not only work with the school for advocating for decreasing the incidents of bullying, but to also provide individual counseling along with it. By balancing individual counseling with systems level advocacy there is an opportunity to address the inequities that social institutions create that impede on human growth (Multicultural and Social Justice Counselor Competencies, 2015). This also will allow for the counselor to advocate for family involvement in the counseling process of the perpetrator.

Community Advocacy

There are two different interventions that I would do in order to advocate for a more balanced community between the privileged and marginalized individuals. The first step to take would be to conduct a thorough research study that addresses the views of the community on their perspective of privileged and marginalized individuals. The Multicultural and Social Justice

Counselor Competencies indicates that the counselor conduct qualitative and quantitative research to evaluate the degree to which community norms, values, and regulations influence privileged and marginalized clients. The next step in advocating for a more cohesive community is to take the findings of the research and use it in the advocating process such as working with the local Chamber of Commerce to discuss how to change this troublesome culture that is suppressing many people from being treated equally.

Public Policy Advocacy

When developing public policy governing bullying that occurs within the school system as well as occurring in a community it is important that the counselor gather information regarding how the policies effect individuals that are marginalized and privileged. A way to do this is to initiate discussions with clients who are in both groups about how they feel they are shaped by the policies and if they have any input into the developing of a policy. As a counselor and also an advocate for those that perpetrate violence against others, it is vital that there is a policy that goes beyond the incident it self but to the possible reasons why one instigates violence against others. A way to do this is to get the family of the bully involved so that we can develop policies that include family counseling. Children aren't born to hate, they either experience it or learn it. In brief, hurt people hurt people.

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