

## **Bullying and School Crisis Intervention**

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### **Abstract**

*School leaders seek to ensure secure, prepared campuses. Students who bully can attempt to undermine such efforts. School administrators can implement crisis management phases, including crisis prevention and response techniques, to ensure that schools remain some of the safest places that students can be. The techniques can assist in preventing and mitigating violent incidents.*

**Keywords:** bullying, crisis leadership

### **Introduction**

Educators and students face a seemingly limitless threat of possible school violence scenarios. From taunting on the playground, to threats in the hallway, to angry ex-spouses of faculty showing up on campus, it seems as if almost anything could go wrong. However, schools have been shown to be among the safest places that children can be. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), less than 1% of all homicides amid school-aged students occur on school campuses or traveling to or from school (*School Violence and the News*, 2011). The author of *School Violence and the News* (2011) wrote that “as terrible and frightening as incidents of school violence are, they are rare. Although it may not seem that way, the rate of crime involving physical harm has been declining at U.S. schools since the early 1990s” (para. 1). However, the presence of any school violence is intolerable. “Parents, teachers, and administrators expect schools to be safe havens of learning. Acts of violence can disrupt the learning process and have a negative effect on students, the school itself, and the broader community” (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2011, para. 1).

PK-12 school leaders spend a substantial amount of time discussing, facilitating, and contemplating school safety and security issues. As the forum for educating future generations of our nation, schools must also serve as an example of high expectations for safety and security. Recent Texas legislation has placed on school faculty a greater burden to protect students from campus bullying. Schools are compelled to attempt to decrease the likelihood that an incident or crisis will occur (U.S. Department of Education, Office of Safe and Drug-Free Schools, 2010). School bullying is reported as a growing problem in schools; therefore, addressing bullying issues is a way to help prevent violent episodes.

### **1. Background**

Bullying is the most common form of school violence today (Espelage & Swearer, 2003; Leff, Power, Costigan, & Manz, 2003; Nansel, Overpeck, Pilla, Ruan, Simons-Morton, & Scheidt, 2001; Newsome & Kelly, 2006; Orpinas, Horne, & Staniszewski, 2003). The campus bully has been observed in classrooms, lunchrooms, playgrounds, bathrooms, locker rooms, hallways, bus stops, and on the school bus (Craig, Pepler, & Atlas, 2000; Newsome & Kelly, 2006; Seale, 2004). A recent study by Buckman (2011) confirmed that cafeterias and hallways are locations where bullying occurs the most which “underscores the need for teachers and other adults to be more involved in the active supervision and intervention in hotspot areas outside of the classroom” (Buckman, para. 24).

In American schools, an estimated 30% of students self-reported that they had either been bullied, been victims of bullying, or both (Nansel et al.). Robers, Zhang, and Truman (2010) reported that in 2007, approximately 32% of students aged 12-18 said they have been bullied during the school year while at school. Further, approximately 5% of students aged 12–18 said that “they were afraid of attack or harm at school, compared to [3%] of students who report that they were afraid of attack or harm away from school” (Robers et al., p. 66). The researchers found that during the school year 2007-2008, “[25%] of public schools reported that bullying occurred among students on a daily or weekly basis” while “[11%] reported that student acts of disrespect for teachers other than verbal abuse took place on a daily or weekly basis, and [6%] reported that student verbal abuse of teachers occurred on a daily or weekly basis” (Robers et al., p. 30). Langdon and Preble (2008) found a positive correlation linking the lack of respect between teachers and students and the number of reported incidents of bullying. Demaray and Malecki (2003) and Morrison (2006) cited poor school climate as a potential variable to increased reports of bullying and victimization.

No longer is bullying viewed as a problem related to growing up (Newsome & Kelly, 2006). On the contrary, research indicates that students who are repeatedly victimized by bullies display a reluctance to attend school; perform poorly at school; suffer from nightmares; experience fear, anxiety, depression; or some combination of these (Espelage & Swearer, 2003; Newsome & Kelly; Olweus, 1995; Powell & Ladd, 2010). Bullies, on the other hand, typically have average self-esteem; like to dominate others; are impulsive, stronger, and more popular than their victims (males); but have problems with close, long-term relationships. The bullies may frequently abuse drugs or alcohol, and may be involved with gangs (Newsome & Kelly; Powell & Ladd). Bullying is considered a gateway into crime, especially when a child’s bullying behavior is reinforced, and the aggressor receives what he or she wants or needs (Powell & Ladd). The link between violent behavior and bullying has been confirmed in studies of former school shooters when their subsequent attacks were motivated by revenge (Meyer-Adams & Conner, 2008; Seale, 2004; Vossekuil, Fein, Reddy, Borum, & Modzeleski, 2002).

Horrific acts of violence were possible, in large measure, due to the ease with which perpetrators acquired weapons. In fact, Miniño (2010) reported that “[homicide] is the leading cause of death for non-Hispanic black male teenagers, with more than two of every five deaths due to homicide” (p. 5). According to Reich, Culross, and Behrman (2002), “[gun] violence is a significant cause of death and injury among young people, and imposes serious psychological, economic, and social consequences on children, families, and communities” (p. 5). Thankfully, reported instances of students in grades 9-12 who carried a weapon at least once during the last 30 days has “declined from [22% to 17%], and the percentage carrying a weapon on school property declined from [12% to 6%]” (Robers et al., 2010, p. 54). The American Psychological Association (n.d.) confirmed that “witnessing violence at home, in the community or in the media, and easy access to weapons” are factors that can lead to violent behavior (p. 2). Schools are no place for weapons or other violent activities.

Teacher intervention serves an important function in maintaining a positive climate and a safe school environment (James, 1994), however, many teachers feel inadequately prepared to address bullying behavior. Perhaps this is due to their lack of understanding of the definition of bullying (Newsome & Kelly, 2006). Boulton (1997) concluded that 25% of participating teachers did not view social exclusion or rumor spreading as a form of bullying. Craig and Pepler (1997) noted that staff members redressed only 4% of observed bully behaviors on the playground. Eighty-five percent of teachers in Pepler, Craig, Ziegler, and Charach’s (1994) study reported that they *always* or *often* intervened to stop bullying but only 35% of their students agreed with them. Charach, Pepler, and Ziegler (1995) found that 71% of teachers surveyed but only 25% of students surveyed indicated that teachers *almost always* intervened to stop bullying. Craig, Pepler, and Atlas (2000) observed classroom intervention in only 15% to 18% of bullying episodes while the teachers in the study perceived themselves as intervening *often*. Such contrasting views suggest that there is a need for a single, universally accepted definition of what constitutes bullying behavior.

Teachers may be reticent to intervene in bullying situation out of fear that they themselves will become victims of bullies. The Constitutional Rights Foundation (n.d.) found that “[8%] of teachers say they are threatened with violence on school grounds at least once a month. Two percent reported being physically attacked each year” (para. 4). Johnston, O’Malley, and Bachman’s (1993) research revealed that 28% of teachers in their study had been verbally abused, 15% were threatened with physical harm, and 3% were attacked. In all cases, the responsible parties involved were students.

Studies such as these call attention to the fact that teachers are not just *looking the other way*; there are other variables involving their motivation to intervene (or not) in bullying behavior at school that may need to be explored. Some school leaders adopt strict policies in order to deter major codes of conduct violations such as bullying. Skiba and Edl (2004) suggested that nearly half of the administrators surveyed (41%) were advocates of a zero tolerance approach to campus-wide discipline issues, including bullying. Fenning et al. (2008) reached similar conclusions when they noted that administrators used suspension or expulsion for offenses ranging from excessive tardies to fighting.

In-school suspension (ISS) is an approach commonly used by school personnel where “a student is assigned because of disruptive behavior for a specific amount of time” (Sheets, 1996, p. 87). The primary goal of ISS is to exclude the wrongdoer from the mainstream campus life as a consequence for misbehavior, while still providing the student an opportunity to receive an education (Short & Noblit, 1985).

Prevention programs are often used to ameliorate bullying. However, such prevention programs must address bullying within its social context (Newsome & Kelly, 2006). Smith, Schneider, Smith, and Ananiadou (2004) advanced similar arguments and advocate the whole-school approach when redressing bullying behavior. The major advantage of the whole school approach is that it “avoids the potentially problematic stigmatization of either bullies or victims (Smith et al., p. 548).

## **2. Crisis Management Phases**

In the event violent episodes occur despite preventive measures, mitigation is necessary to help control crisis situations. Mitigation is defined as action taken to eliminate or reduce the loss of life and property damage related to an event or crisis, particularly those that cannot be prevented (U.S. Department of Education, Office of Safe and Drug-Free Schools, 2010).

The authors of *Practical Information on Crisis Planning: A Guide for Schools and Communities* posited that despite the amount of time and effort spent planning for a crisis, “there will always be an element of surprise and accompanying confusion when a school is confronted with a crisis” (U.S. Department of Education, Office of Safe and Drug-Free Schools, 2007, p. 4-2). When a violent episode occurs, school leaders must react. Leaders should assess what type of action is needed and respond within seconds. The ability to carry out a timely response requires a plan with clearly delineated responsibilities and functions, as well as preparation and practice (U.S. Department of Education, Office of Safe and Drug-Free Schools). The U.S. Department of Education, Office of Safe and Drug-Free Schools advised four management phases that should be employed in times of crisis: mitigation/prevention, preparedness, response, and recovery.

### **2.1 Mitigation/Prevention and Preparedness**

People may go on *autopilot* when a crisis transpires (U.S. Department of Education, Office of Safe and Drug-Free Schools, 2007); therefore school faculty and staff members need to know how to respond. “Chances of responding appropriately in a crisis will be much greater if all players have practiced the basic steps they will need to take. Training and drills are crucial” (U.S. Department of Education, Office of Safe and Drug-Free Schools, p. 6-35). Some schools are checking student lockers and backpacks, “limiting entry and exit points at the school, and keeping the entryways under teacher supervision. Other schools use metal detectors” (*School Violence and the News*, 2011, para. 8).

The U.S. Department of Education, Office of Safe and Drug-Free Schools (2007), advised that the school principal lead by implementing the following steps:

1. Identify stakeholders who need to be involved in crisis planning, such as community groups, emergency responders, families, and staff. Cultivate relationships with these groups.
2. Establish a crisis planning team. Secure commitment to crisis planning within the school and the larger community.
3. Create an incident management structure. The structure should provide a comprehensive organizational structure designed for all types of emergencies. It is based on the premise that every crisis has certain major elements requiring clear lines of command and control.
4. Know available resources. This activity includes identifying and becoming familiar with resources in the school such as staff members certified in cardio-pulmonary resuscitation (CPR); in the community, including everyone from emergency responders to counselors; and, in organizations such as the parent-teacher association.

5. Set up time to train and practice with staff, students, and emergency responders. Training is multifaceted and can include drills, in-service events, tabletop exercises, and written materials. Also include time to review and evaluate the plan. In times of crisis, the principal serves as the manager and a leader. This does not always equate with being the person in charge of the entire crisis response. (pp. 6-5—6-6)

## 2.2 Crisis Response

School leaders at every level must exhibit appropriate safety responses and prevention techniques to ensure that their campuses are secure and prepared for the unimaginable. The U.S. Department of Education, Office of Safe and Drug-Free Schools (2007), recommended the following crisis response steps for the school principal to take during an actual crisis:

1. Respond within seconds and lead with a serious, calm, confident style.
2. Implement the crisis plan.
3. Yield authority, when appropriate, to others in the plan's designated command structure.
4. Facilitate collaboration among school staff and emergency responders.
5. Remain open to suggestions and information that may be critical in adjusting the response. (p. 6-6)

## 3. Summary

Schools in the United States enroll approximately 50 million students in grades PK-12 (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2011). Schools, overall, are safe places, where “violent deaths. . .are rare but tragic events with far-reaching effects on the school population and surrounding community (Roberts et al., 2010, p. 6). Awareness is a huge step in helping to prevent and mitigate bullying and crisis scenarios. Educators are charged with making schools even safer, and continuing their anti-violence pursuits to help ensure that violent situations are prevented, bullying is deterred, and as many tragedies as possible are prevented. In the event that a crisis does occur, we must utilize our resources to react, respond, and recover.

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