Position Paper on Bullying in the Schools

Prevalence of Bullying Behavior

Peer victimization is a significant problem in U.S. schools. In 1999, an estimated 5% of students ages 12 through 18 reported fearing attack or harm at school (U.S. Department of Education [USDE], 2000). In a recent national study, Nansel, et al. (2001) found that about 30% of 6th-through 10th-grade students had been involved in bullying incidents with moderate or frequent regularity. Similar prevalence rates can be found in the state of Florida. For example, in a study by Bully Police, USA, they found that of the 2, 701, 022 school age children in Florida, approximately 442, 157 students were involved in bullying.

Defining Bullying

Researchers commonly define peer victimization or bullying as a negative act of aggression (or oppression) which is unprovoked, is deliberately intended to cause harm, is carried out repeatedly over time and involves an actual and/or perceived imbalance of power in which the aggressor or group of aggressors are physically or psychologically more powerful than the victim (Boulton & Underwood, 1992; Farrington, 1993; Olweus, 1999; Rigby, 1996; Smith & Thompson, 1991). To clarify further, the USDE (1998) indicates that bullying can take the form of physical abuse (e.g., hitting, punching), verbal abuse (e.g., name-calling, threats), emotional abuse (e.g., ostracizing, humiliating, maliciously gossiping, rating/ranking personal characteristics such as race or sexual orientation), sexual abuse (e.g., sexual assault, sexual harassment), or hazing (imposing hurtful or embarrassing rituals against new students or team members). Recently, cyber-bullying has become another form of victimization. Cyber-bullying can be defined as sending or posting harmful or hurtful messages using the internet or other digital forms of communication (Willard, 2004).

Consequences of Bullying

The effect of bullying others and being victimized can significantly impact a student's performance in the classroom. For example Nansel, et al. (2001) found that bullies are less interested in school than students not involved in bullying. In addition both bullies and victims were more likely to experience feelings of loneliness and poor relationships with classmates than students not involved in bullying. Moreover, in a review of the literature, Dake, Price, & Telljohann (2003) found that bullies are more likely to have lower academic achievement. Supporting this is Garett's (2003) finding that being victimized can lead to declining grades.

Dake et al., also found that victims of bullies tend to be less popular in school than other students not involved in bullying. As a result of being bullied, 16% of boys and 31% of girls reported being absent from school in attempts to avoid being victimized (Rigby, 1998).

In addition to bullying's effects on students' academic performance, there is substantial evidence that bullying impacts the mental health of our students. Supporting this is Nansel, et al.'s (2001) finding that children who are bullied have poor psychosocial functioning compared with students

not involved in bullying. More specifically, they found that smoking, alcohol consumption, and conduct problems were associated with students who bully others. Dake, et al. (2003), in their review of the literature, found that bullies are also more likely to suffer from eating disorders than students not involved in bullying. Anxiety has also been linked with students involved in bullying (Bond, Carlin, Thomas, Rubin, & Patton, 2001; Craig, 1998; Dake, et al., 2003; Garett, 2003; Rigby, 1998). An even greater concern is evidence that there is a relationship between being victimized and Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (Mynard, Joseph, & Alexander, 2000).

Both bullies and victims are more likely to have lower self esteem than non-bullies and non-victims (Seals & Young, 2003). More concerning is that students involved in bullying are more likely to suffer from depression (Bond, Carlin, Thomas, Rubin, & Patton, 2001; Craig, 1998; Dake, et al., 2003; Kaltiala-Heino, Rimpela, Marttunen, Rimpela, & Rantanen, 1999; Rigby 1998; Roland, 2002; Seals & Young, 2003). Even more frightening is that students involved in bullying are at greater risk of suicidal behavior (Carney, 2000; Kaltiala-Heino et al, 1999; Rigby & Slee, 1999; Roland, 2002).

<u>What can be Done?</u>
The Florida Association of School Psychologists (FASP) opposes bullying behavior in our schools. FASP recognizes the consequences of bullying and encourages schools to utilize one or more of the numerous ways to prevent bullying in our schools, including:
- Implementing an empirically supported bully prevention program (such as the Olweus Bully Prevention Program, Bully Busters, etc.)
- Improving supervision of children in hallways, playgrounds, cafeteria, rest-rooms, and other areas where bullying is likely*
- Providing regular trainings to raise consciousness concerning bullying issues*
- Instituting a "zero tolerance" policy against bullying behavior*
- Providing clear rules and regulations about bullying and be sure to display them where they can be seen*
- Enforcing school rules consistently*
- Encouraging parent participation*
- Providing a means for students to report bullying behavior confidentially*
- Rewarding/reinforcing students for positive behaviors*
- Encouraging pro-social classroom activities such as self-esteem building*
- Allowing opportunities for students to discuss bullying and to participate in classroom activities which elicit their feedback regarding the definition of bullying *
- Allowing students to collaborate with teachers in the development of classroom rules and guidelines against bullying behavior*
- Establishing a clear plan of action should bullying take place to ensure that students know how to respond*
- Encouraging collaboration among students by assigning tasks and activities that necessitate teamwork*
- Should bullying behavior be observed, taking immediate action to halt it*
- Confronting and speaking to bullies about bullying in private, rather than in a public situation which may further exacerbate his/her hostility*
- Should bullying behavior occur, contacting the parents immediately*

- If appropriate, considering referring both the victim and the bully for counseling*
- Providing protection for the victim(s) when needed, which may include establishing a "buddy system" where students are connected with other students*
- Encouraging students to seek help and to report bullying to an adult/faculty/staff/parent, etc…*
- Encouraging students and other bystanders of bullying behavior to support the victim*
- Helping students to support one another in matters of bullying*
- Encouraging bystanders to condemn bullying by not partaking in spreading rumors, teasing, etc….*

Note: Asterisks indicate strategies adapted from the U.S. Department of Education's *Preventing bullying: A manual for schools and communities* (1998).

School Psychologists can help educate school staff and faculty about the extent and consequences of bullying and what can be done to prevent it. FASP supports legislation that helps prevent bullying behavior in the schools and encourages legislators, teachers, parents, and school administrators to devise strategies and policies to help create a bully free environment.

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