Misdirections in Bullying Prevention and Intervention

What is Bullying?

Bullying is unwanted, aggressive behavior among school aged children. It involves a real or perceived power imbalance and the behavior is repeated, or has the potential to be repeated, over time.

Both kids who are bullied and kids who bully others may have serious, lasting problems.

Many educators, health professionals, parents, and adults who interact with children and youth understand how serious bullying is. Although there are proven and promising bullying prevention and intervention strategies, some common methods do not work or can even make matters worse.

Zero Tolerance Policies

Many schools and school districts have "zero tolerance" or "three strikes and you're out" bullying policies. These policies suspend or expel children who bully others. However:

- Recent surveys of elementary and middle school students show that about one in five students admit to occasionally bullying their peers (Melton et al., 1998). Even if policies address only physical bullying, the number of children affected by zero tolerance policies is significant.

- The threat of suspension or expulsion may discourage children and adults from reporting bullying.

- Bullying can be an early indicator of other problem behaviors. Children who regularly bully their peers are at risk of unexcused absences, fighting, theft, and vandalism. These children need positive role models, including the adults and students in their school.

Although suspension and expulsion may be necessary in a small number of cases, they should not be the standard bullying prevention or intervention policy.

Conflict Resolution and Peer Mediation

Conflict resolution and peer mediation are common strategies for dealing with issues between students. Because of this, schools may use these methods to address bullying problems. However:

- Bullying is not a conflict; it is a form of victimization. Like those who experience

child abuse or domestic violence, children who are bullied are victimized.

- Using mediation to address bullying may send the wrong message to students--for example, "you are both partly right and partly wrong," or "we need to work out this conflict between you." The message to a child who is bullied should be, "no one deserves to be bullied, and we will do everything we can to stop it." The message for children who bully should be, "your behavior is inappropriate and you, must stop it."

- Mediation may be very upsetting to a child who has been bullied. Facing the child who bullied may make the child who was bullied feel worse.

- There is no evidence that conflict resolution or peer mediation stops bullying.

Group Treatment for Children Who Bully

Some schools use group therapy to address bullying behavior. This therapy teaches children who bully how to manage anger while building skills, empathy, and self-esteem. Although these programs have the best intentions, students' behavior may get even worse. Group members tend to serve as role models for each other, which typically reinforces antisocial or bullying behavior.

Simple, Short-Term Solutions

Schools often adopt short-term bullying prevention and intervention approaches that don't address the entire issue. For example, bullying may be the topic of a staff in-service training, a PTA meeting, a school-wide assembly, or lessons taught by individual teachers. Although each of these efforts is an important piece of a bullying prevention and intervention strategy, none of these alone is sufficient. Because of that, they are not likely to significantly reduce bullying problems. To reduce the prevalence of bullying, the school's climate and its exceptions for student behavior must change.

References and Resources

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