

# *Preventing Peer Victimisation in Schools*

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The field of victimology has been concerned primarily with adults as victims of crime. Where children are involved, it is typically as victims of adult perpetrators. But clearly children are sometimes the victims of other children. When this occurs, it is often described as ‘bullying’—and there is usually no ‘crime’ as such recognised.

For countless years peer victimisation or ‘bullying’, as we shall call it, was regarded as part and parcel of ‘going to school’, largely unavoidable for some—with little or no harm done. However, in the last few years there has been a remarkable change in the way bullying at school is regarded. Beginning in Scandinavia in the 1970s with the pioneering work of Professor Olweus from the University of Bergen in Norway, interest spread to the United Kingdom in the late eighties; over the last five years there has been growing concern about school bullying in Australia.

Peer victimisation in schools is, in my view, an important area for victimologists to study. This is firstly because the harm that it does has been greatly underestimated. Secondly, because it sets a pattern for subsequent interactions involving victimisation in the wider adult society. And finally because we now know that there are measures that can be taken to significantly reduce it.

In this paper I shall concentrate on the phenomenon of bullying, which in many schools is a major means of victimisation. ‘Bullying’ is of course an emotive term, and its use has a strong impact on students and teachers. Once its essence has been grasped, most, if not all people, want to consider how it can be stopped.

The definition of bullying which I prefer is an adaptation of that proposed by the British criminologist, Farrington, in 1993. It may be defined as follows: ‘repeated oppression, psychological or physical of a less powerful person by a more powerful individual or group of persons.’

This definition draws attention to the fact that being bullied, whether physically or psychologically, exists in the mind of the victim, not only when he or she is being abused, but also in anticipation of abusive treatment, and during the aftermath of that treatment. It also identifies a central feature of bullying, that is, an imbalance of power between bully or bullies and victim.

Bullying takes various forms, sometimes physical, as in hitting and kicking which occurs mainly among boys. More often, however, bullying takes a non-physical form. These include verbal abuse especially repeated name-calling; cruel and continued teasing; removing and hiding belongings; and leaving people out of things on purpose; this last practice more frequently involving girls.

The incidence of bullying is best estimated through the use of self-administered anonymous questionnaires. This is because children are frequently reluctant to admit that it is happening to them. In preparing children to answer the questionnaire, it is necessary to define bullying carefully in language they understand and to give clear examples. It must be differentiated from fighting or quarrelling between people of roughly equal strength or power. In surveys conducted by Rigby and Slee (1991, 1993) in Australia, serious bullying has been defined operationally as bullying that is reported as occurring at least once a week. Using this criterion, approximately 15 per cent, or one in seven children, are being bullied by their peers in Australian schools.

The age and gender distribution of victimisation has been estimated using a large sample of schoolchildren of ten years of age and over and attending coeducational schools in South Australia (Rigby 1994a). Boys are more likely than girls to report being bullied, particularly when an anonymous questionnaire is used. Victimisation tends to decrease in successive years of attendance at primary schools, only to increase significantly when children enter high school and find themselves with bigger and stronger children. These results correspond closely to those obtained by the national KidsLine phone-in service in 1993. The figures from that source indicated that numbers of children reporting peer victimisation also peak at the age of thirteen.

There have been many recent studies of the effects of peer victimisation on the well-being of children. In summary, they show that victimised children are more likely than others to have low self-esteem, suffer high levels of depression and have poor general health. They are also likely to be socially isolated and more frequently absent from school. Of particular importance, recent research conducted in South Australia has shown that victimised children are two or three times more likely than others to report having suicidal thoughts (Rigby 1994b). There is also a growing body of evidence that seriously bullied children have been driven to take their own lives. We also know that the effects of bullying can persist into adult years, resulting in lowered self-esteem and, in some, recurring bouts of depression (Farrington 1993; Olweus 1993).

### **How Peer Victimization in Schools can be Prevented**

The first step must clearly be to increase awareness of the problem of bullying, especially among school teachers. Such awareness is definitely growing, but there are still some principals and teachers who wish to deny that it can be

happening in their schools. The fact that recently a Western Australian school was accused by parents of not taking appropriate action when their children were bullied at school and were paid a \$6000 settlement, has done much to encourage the acknowledgment of the problem.

There are now a good many sources of information and practical advice about bullying in schools in the form of books, articles and videos, such as the video, 'Bullying in Schools' by Rigby and Slee (1992), which is being used widely in Australian schools. There is also a more recent book, *Bullying in Schools and what to do about it* (Rigby, in press). The Australian Council for Educational Research in Melbourne can be contacted to obtain such information about both books and videos available on the subject.

Reading books and viewing videos about bullying can be helpful, but schools are much more likely to be convinced of the importance of the issue if they explore what is happening in their own schools. The best approach is to use a well designed anonymous questionnaire, for example, the Peer Relations Questionnaire (PRQ) of Rigby and Slee (1995). In this way it is possible to get reliable information about the incidence of bullying, where and when it occurs, what forms it takes, and most importantly the readiness of students to receive help or to discuss the issue of bullying in their school with other students.

Such data gathering culminating in a detailed analysis and report to the staff of a school is likely to lead to a general recognition of the problem and the development of appropriate policies. This can best be done through planned discussions involving all teachers in the school and also some students and parents.

A policy statement will include some general statements about the school's position on peer victimisation, such as:

'Bullying is unacceptable in our school.'

'Students have a right to a safe environment.'

But clearly such sentiments, valuable as they are, must be followed up with procedures and actions for dealing with actual cases of victimisation when they occur. To this I will return shortly.

If prevention is the aim, this means creating a school ethos which is inimical to bullying behaviour. This implies, first of all, teachers modelling behaviour in their dealings with children that is non-authoritarian (this does not mean teachers should not be authoritative!) and also promoting cooperation in learning. Further, if teachers can engage the real interest of their students, bullying is likely to diminish. The desire to victimise others thrives on chronic boredom.

Most importantly, bullying can be largely prevented by teachers talking about bullying with their classes and helping them to formulate *their* response to it. At the 1990 Victimology Conference in Adelaide, I presented research findings on what students thought about the victims of peer bullying. Even in the most 'macho' schools, the majority of students were supportive of victims and disliked bullies. But they were inclined to be passive in their reaction to it, and to act as bystanders when it occurred.

Dr. Slee and I have subsequently found that children are most supportive of victims at two stages in their school career: in the early years of primary school and in the later years of secondary school. It is easiest to work with students in

these age groups; but it is possible with all classes, because the injustice of bullying is acknowledged by most children at all levels.

When teachers are able to get groups of schoolchildren to discuss bullying constructively, they are likely to come up with rules which they would wish all children to follow. According to Olweus (1993) these rules are often formulated:

1. We shall not bully other children
2. We shall try to help children who are bullied
3. We shall make a point of including children who are easily left out.

## **Dealing with Incidents of Bullying**

Dealing with incidents of bullying is rarely easy or obvious. Teachers are often very uncertain whether to act at all. They may be personally fearful of supporting the victims in case they themselves are victimised. They often feel that they simply do not have the appropriate skills. The children may not trust the teachers to handle their problem effectively. According to the survey results only about one in five of children who are seriously bullied tell a teacher. They are much more likely to tell their friends. Of those who do inform teachers, in about 40 per cent of cases there is no change in the situation. In 10 per cent of cases students have reported that the situation got worse. This means that teachers cannot rely exclusively upon victims of school bullying telling them about it. They need to make their own observations and listen to what bystanders are prepared to tell them.

## **What can Teachers do when it happens?**

Not surprisingly this is controversial. There are commonly two different sets of assumptions about the nature of the bully. According to one viewpoint, the bully is typically a tough guy without remorse or conscience, basically anti-social, perhaps even a deviant psychopath. He (or she) operates alone or with someone very much like him (or her). The prototype is that suggested by the James Bulger case reported last year in the United Kingdom. The alternative viewpoint is that the bully is typically a thoughtless conformist operating in a group and is not fully aware of the harm or hurt that is being caused.

The first view (bully as psychopath) tends to result in an approach characterised by interrogation, blame and punishment. The second view is not concerned overly with the precise facts of the case. It encourages avoidance of explicit blame. It is concerned primarily with conveying to the bully a sense of the harm that is being caused. It seeks to provide an opportunity and encouragement for the group member to behave responsibly and as a mature individual. Treating the bully as a criminal or a potential criminal is the traditional way of approaching the problem. It is in fact very difficult to stop the practice of bullying in this way, because it requires continual surveillance; and we know that bullying can continue in hidden and subtle ways.

The view of bullies as thoughtless conformists who do not appreciate the harm they are doing has led to the development of several methods of

intervention of which those proposed by Maines and Robinson (1994) in the United Kingdom and Anatol Pikas (1989) in Sweden are the best known.

The former which is known as the No Blame Approach proposes that once identified by a victim, the group of bullies should be confronted by the teacher with the evidence of the harm that they have caused. This may take the form of a poem, drawing or piece of writing provided by the victim describing his or her feelings. The group of children may also include bystanders. The teacher invites the group to consider the victim's feelings and to indicate how they intend to improve the relationship. This method is regarded as being more appropriate for primary schoolchildren.

Anatol Pikas has developed a method of intervention which he called the Method of Common Concern, later changed to the Method of Shared Concern. In this approach, which is more suitable for secondary school students, members of the bully group are seen individually, and the victim is not initially involved. Again interrogation and blame are avoided, and the teacher seeks (and usually gets) an agreement with each group member to behave more positively in future. The aim is to develop a shared concern regarding the victim.

It should be noted that in both the No Blame Approach and the Method of Common Concern the issue of bullying is treated as a matter for the school to develop in children more responsible attitudes and behaviours in relation to each other. Parents are not necessarily asked to become involved, but the behaviour of the children is carefully monitored.

### **Support Groups for Victims**

A further, supplementary approach has been suggested for children who are frequently victimised and want to develop better coping skills. For these children groups may be run (usually at lunch time) to help the children to become more assertive and to avoid some forms of victimisation.

A reported consequence of such work is enhanced self-esteem which can help children to avoid being targeted by bullies. Some critics have argued that this approach involves 'blaming the victim'. However, skilfully planned and executed, such group work has been shown to enable some children to protect themselves more adequately (*see* Arora 1991; Rigby & Sharp 1993).

### **Under what Circumstances or Conditions may specific Measures be usefully employed?**

The first and most important condition is that the procedure or measure to be employed must be generally acceptable to a school staff. In some schools it will seem like a choice between (a) a tough uncompromising approach in which sanctions follow every bullying incident, and, if need be, serious talks with parents, and (b) a softer approach in which an attempt is made to avoid blame and to get individuals or groups to appreciate the damage they are causing and to act positively. This latter approach may require patience and skill that is hard to find in some schools, as well as training in a well developed method of intervention. We do know, however, that the newer non-traditional methods have

been used effectively. For example, Professor Peter Smith at the University of Sheffield, has reported that the Method of Common Concern has been used successfully in two-thirds of the cases in which it has been tried in schools in the Sheffield area (Smith 1994).

It seems to me that it is not impossible to use different approaches in different situations. For example, it may be wise to begin with a No Blame Approach or a Method of Common or Shared Concern in the expectation that in many cases one would be successful. Sanctions, however, and talks with parents may be necessary for some children as a last resort.

## Conclusion

We are now at the stage in the study of peer victimisation in schools of evaluating different approaches, and some work has already been done in this area (*see* Rigby 1994c). But let me stress that bullying will only be significantly reduced when school staff are convinced of the seriousness of the problem and that there are good grounds (as there are) for believing that interventions can be effective. Solutions imposed upon schools by Education Departments or experts are not likely to work. Schools must develop their own responses—after being informed of the options.

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