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# A Review of Teachers' Perceptions and Training Regarding School Bullying

## **Abstract**

This review will explore what is currently known regarding teachers' perceptions, knowledge, and training regarding school bullying. Bullying is a serious issue for children and adolescents in schools. Research has consistently reported that bullying may cause lasting psychological and emotional problems (Mishna, Scarcello, Pepler, & Wiener, 2005). Teachers spend a significant amount of time with students at school and may be at the front-line of prevention and intervention strategies (Lund, Blake, Ewing, & Banks, 2012). One of the main determining factors in effectiveness of an anti-bullying program is the quality of staff training (Lund, et al., 2012). Research suggests that teachers are in great need of and desire more training on the topic of school bullying, its prevention, and effective intervention strategies. This review will highlight specific research areas where more information is needed about teachers' perceptions, knowledge, and training regarding bullying in schools and how school districts can best use this information to target training programs for teachers.

## **Keywords**

Bullying, Teachers' Perceptions, Teachers' Knowledge, Teachers' Training, Bullying Prevention, Bullying Intervention

## A Review of Teachers' Perceptions and Training Regarding School Bullying

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This review will explore what is currently known regarding teachers' perceptions, knowledge, and training regarding school bullying. Bullying is a serious issue for children and adolescents in schools. Research has consistently reported that bullying may cause lasting psychological and emotional problems (Mishna, Scarcello, Pepler, & Wiener, 2005). Teachers spend a significant amount of time with students at school and may be at the front-line of prevention and intervention strategies (Lund, Blake, Ewing, & Banks, 2012). One of the main determining factors in effectiveness of an anti-bullying program is the quality of staff training (Lund, et al., 2012). Research suggests that teachers are in great need of and desire more training on the topic of school bullying, its prevention, and effective intervention strategies. This review will highlight specific research areas where more information is needed about teachers' perceptions, knowledge, and training regarding bullying in schools and how school districts can best use this information to target training programs for teachers.

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Every day an estimated 160,000 students miss school because they fear being bullied (Lund, Blake, Ewing, & Banks, 2012). In some cases, bullying can cause suicide (Barone, 1995) or have negative effects on long-term mental, physical, and social health (Mishna, Scarcello, Pepler, & Wiener, 2005; Pearce, Cross, Monks, Waters, & Falconer, 2011; Ttofi, & Farrington, 2012). Although bullying is a long-standing problem, it has only recently gained significant attention in schools and media (Craig, Bell, & Lescheid, 2011; Kennedy, Russom, & Kevorkian, 2012; Newman, Frey, & Jones, 2010; Strohmeier & Noam, 2012). Although experts generally agree that bullying is a "subset of direct or indirect aggressive behavior(s) characterized by intentional harm doing repetitive aggressive acts, and an imbalance of power" (Strohmeier & Noam, 2012, pg 8), no universal definition of bullying exists across school systems.

Despite a significant amount of research, which documents the effects of school bullying on students (Ttofi & Ferrington, 2012), few studies address school bullying from a teacher's perspective. As a result, even though teachers spend the most time with students in the school setting (Benitez, Garcia-Berden, & Fernandez-Cabezas, 2009; Craig et al., 2011; Lund et al., 2012; Newman et al., 2010) and are often in a position to help prevent bullying or

to intervene, they may not always know when and how to respond (Mishna et al., 2005). This paper reviews general bullying prevention and intervention strategies pertinent to schools, summarizes what is currently known about teachers' perceptions of school bullying and anti-bullying policies, and teachers' level of training in administering bullying prevention and intervention strategies. In addition, multiple areas will be identified where more research is needed to understand school bullying from the teachers' perspective. Furthermore, there will be a discussion of the application of this research for school districts to consider when planning anti-bullying strategies and related training for teachers or other school personnel.

### General Bullying Prevention and Intervention Strategies

Successful bullying prevention and intervention efforts can be categorized into different levels: the community level, the school level, the classroom level, and the individual level (Limber, Flerx, Nation, & Melton, 1998; Olweus, 1993; Olweus & Limber, 2010). Although there is no "one size fits all" strategy that can be applied to all school systems (Swearer, Espelage, & Napolitano, 2011), some general components can make prevention/intervention efforts stronger.

As part of the Olweus Bullying Prevention Program (OBPP), Olweus and Limber (2010) provide some guidelines for setting up successful bullying prevention and intervention plans at multiple levels in schools. First, at the community level, the school should help develop a school-community partnership to support the anti-bullying programs. At the school level, it is recommended that anti-bullying policies are in place, and that all school personnel review and refine the rules along the side of the administrative staff. At the classroom level, bullying prevention information should be included in the curriculum for students. Lastly, at the individual level, teachers should hold meetings with the involved students – bullies and victims – and their family when bullying behavior continues and becomes more severe.

A component of a prevention and intervention plan should be the inclusion of younger children. Research shows school bullying starts as early as elementary school and peaks during the middle school years (Bowes et al., 2009; Goldweber, Waasdrop, & Bradshaw, 2012; Lawson, Alameda-Lawson, Downer, & Anderson, 2012). While prevention programs will work with older students due in part to the higher cognitive ability and maturity of the students (Baldry & Ferrington, 2002), it may take longer to obtain results (Olweus & Limber, 2010); prevention efforts targeted to younger children are more effective (Limber et al., 1998; Newman et al., 2010; Olweus & Limber, 2010; Ttofi & Farrington, 2012).

A larger, school-wide prevention strategy, as suggested by Olweus & Limber (2010), is a component of a strong prevention plan. Research, however, also supports targeted interventions for children at risk for developing bullying behaviors, or who are already bullying (Piotroski & Hoot, 2008). The first step in this process would be to identify students who would benefit from a targeted intervention. Behaviors that can help teachers and professionals identify bullies in their school system include high self-esteem (Piotrowski & Hoot, 2008; Sanders, 2004), the inability to empathize (Limber et al., 1998; Olweus, 1993; Piotrowski & Hoot, 2008), continuously breaking rules (Goldweber et al., 2012; Lawson et al., 2012), depression (Piotrowski & Hoot, 2008), poor social skills (Benitez et al., 2009; Newman et al., 2010; Nicolaidis, Toda, & Smith, 2002), and aggression (Craig et al., 2011; Newman et al., 2010; Olweus, 1993; Piotrowski & Hoot, 2008; Sanders, 2004). Early detection of these risk factors may help educators properly identify the at-risk students and refer them for individualized or small group interventions.

Small group programs may also be a valuable component to a plan. A social worker, or other competent mental health professional, led small group program may also be effective, depending on age (Lawson et al., 2012).

Several studies indicate that teachers and school counselors should lead small group interventions for elementary students and for middle school students, but not for high school students (Pearce et al., 2011; Swearer et al., 2011). Ttofi & Farrington (2012) found that small group interventions led by the students' peers are ineffective, and recommend avoiding them. Both teachers and students rate role-playing as the least effective strategy (Crothers and Kolbert, 2004). Having a teacher or principal engage in a serious talk with the bully (or bullies), having the bully (or bullies) sit outside the principal's office, and having the bully (or bullies) stay with a supervisor throughout free time were the most effective strategies for elementary students (Baldry & Ferrington, 2002; Ttofi & Farrington, 2012).

### **Teachers' Perceptions of Bullying**

Teachers are greatly unaware of bullying problems within their schools (Barone, 1995; Bauman & Del Rio, 2005; Beaty & Alexeyev, 2008; Bradshaw, Sawyer, & O'Brennan, 2007; Craig et al., 2011; Strohmeier & Noam, 2012), with students generally reporting that they are greatly aware of the same problems (Bauman & Del Rio, 2005; Beaty & Alexeyev, 2008; Bradshaw, Waasdrop, & O'Brennan, 2013; Mishna et al., 2005). In addition, many researchers report that school personnel have a difficult time distinguishing between school bullying and peer conflict (Bauman & Del Rio, 2005; Beaty & Alexeyev, 2008; Benitez et al., 2009; Newman et al., 2010; Strohmeier & Noam, 2012). Although psychologists have found that verbal bullying is the most common type of bullying (Goldweber et al., 2012; Lund et al., 2012; Piotroski & Hoot, 2008), many teachers and other school personnel do not perceive verbal aggression (e.g. name-calling and teasing) as bullying (Mishna et al., 2005). Barone (1995) suggests that many school personnel have been desensitized to bullying, and therefore, may have difficulty identifying it.

Another particularly challenging aspect in recognizing bullying in schools is that no universal definition for bullying exists. Unless everyone adopts a common definition within a school, there may be confusion among the school staff. When a common definition is used, teachers and other school personnel have reported greater confidence in managing bullying situations (Benitez et al., 2009; Craig et al., 2011; Newman et al., 2010). Thus, initial teacher training regarding bullying should include a school-wide definition to help with identification of bullying behaviors and increase teachers' confidence levels.

### **Teachers' Perceptions of Anti-Bullying Policies**

Conflicting reports exist regarding the percentage of schools where anti-bullying policies are being

implemented. Lund and colleagues (2012) concluded that only 12% of participating schools in their study had anti-bullying policies in place, whereas Bradshaw and colleagues (2013) report that 92% of the schools studied had such policies in place. Even when policies exist, 60-80% of teacher participants reported that they believed the policies were not developmentally appropriate (Bradshaw et al., 2013; Kennedy et al., 2012; Lund et al., 2012). However, Bradshaw and colleagues (2013) report that even when a significant amount of teachers felt the policies were very effective (80%), the majority of students reported that they felt the policies were very ineffective. Teachers need to be aware that they may overestimate the effectiveness of school policies and their role in preventing future bullying. More training for teachers may be required to address this inconsistency between students' and teachers' perceptions of efficacy. Because such perceptions may vary widely between school districts, individual districts may consider surveying a sample of staff and students to better understand the perceptions held in their district, and use the data to inform future training and policy.

### Teachers' Level of Training

One of the main determining factors in effectiveness of an anti-bullying program is the quality of staff training (Lund et al., 2012). However, research about teachers' and other school personnel training about bullying prevention and intervention is limited. In two studies, 93% and 87%, respectively, of those surveyed requested more training (Kennedy et al., 2012; Nicolaidis et al., 2002). Bradshaw and colleagues (2013) studied the perceptions of teachers and educational support professionals and reported that both groups indicated interest in additional training regarding how to address sexual minority bullying. Mishna and colleagues (2005) report teachers want more training in verbal and relational anti-bullying programs.

Research suggests that although schools are providing in-service training across many educational areas, they often do not cover the topic of bullying (Bradshaw et al., 2013; Limber et al., 1998; Lund et al., 2012; Nicolaidis et al., 2002). Lund and colleagues (2012) report that 74% of the school staff surveyed received anti-bullying training from professional conferences and not directly from their own school district. This may cause problems if different staff members within the same school system are trained to use different definitions and/or intervention models. School districts may consider providing in-service training regarding the specific anti-bullying policies of the district and how teachers are expected to participate in interventions. Targeted training for school personnel can improve their knowledge of bullying intervention skills, use of these skills, and self-

efficacy in working with students to prevent bullying actions (Duy, 2013; Howard, Horne, & Jolliff, 2001).

Key components of anti-bullying training include: 1) how to detect school bullies; 2) how to identify the difference between the heavy bullying cases and the light bullying cases; and 3) knowing which intervention practices are appropriate for each case (Craig et al., 2011; Strohmeier & Noam, 2012). It has been established that thorough training programs for teachers, which incorporate all of these key components, are not provided as standard training for many teachers (Bradshaw et al., 2013). Ideally, teachers should receive consistent training in this area. A universal class regarding bullying in their teacher preparation programs, with more specific training provided by their school district regarding any bullying policies and intervention programs adopted at the district or school level, could be a way to address this (Bauman & Del Rio, 2005; Benitez et al., 2009).

### Future Research: Teachers' Knowledge and Confidence Levels

Because teachers spend the most time with students at school, they may need to confront a bullying incident while, or immediately after, it occurs. When confronting a bullying incident, it is important that teachers provide effective, age-appropriate consequences. Yet, without training, teachers lack knowledge of effective discipline practices for bullying behavior, and confidence for implementing such strategies. In addition to this, more research is needed to fully explore the extent of teachers' roles in providing targeted interventions to identified youth, and whether or not additional training will produce more effective outcomes.

Even if teachers are well trained to identify school bullying through the use of a common definition, it is important to examine teachers' knowledge of effective bullying prevention and intervention strategies. This is especially pertinent if teachers are expected to play a role in implementing these strategies on a daily basis. Newman and colleagues (2010) found that teachers are the key players in efforts to prevent, or intervene in, bullying situations. In other words, teachers are thought of as "first responders" (Newman et al., 2010). However, it is unknown if teachers are knowledgeable and confident in assuming this role.

Although many researchers have identified early risk factors for bullying behavior (Craig et al., 2011; Nicolaidis et al., 2002; Olweus, 1998; Piotrowski & Hoot, 2008; Sanders, 2004), future research needs to explore teachers' knowledge of, and ability to identify, these early risk factors (e.g. depression, poor social skills, and aggression, etc.). Teachers' ability to accurately identify bullies should also

be explored. These are very important if teachers are expected to participate in the identification process.

### Conclusion and Implications for School Districts

Teachers and other school personnel need to have a general understanding of bullying and how to identify it. In addition, all teachers should be knowledgeable about any existing specific school policies regarding bullying, its prevention, and intervention practices. Ideally, school districts should provide training about such policies prior to the start of each school year. In addition, school districts should provide additional in-service training for teachers and school personnel so they are knowledgeable about current and updated information.

The evidence regarding the best age for prevention efforts suggests that, although all teachers would benefit from bullying prevention and intervention training, school districts may want to focus most intensely on providing training for elementary and middle school teachers, while providing continued support for teachers of older students. It is also important to incorporate bullying prevention/intervention information into the curriculum so that students learn what bullying is and how they can efficiently react to the bullying situations themselves. If both students and teachers become well educated about bullying prevention, use a common definition, and schools and teachers provide consistent consequences for bullying incidents, school bullying may be reduced. Becoming proficient with the intervention and prevention programs and/or curriculum used in their school may enhance teachers' confidence and self-efficacy in intervening in bullying situations.

Because quality of staff training is a key component in successful anti-bullying programs (Lund et al., 2012), school districts should focus on enhancing teachers' current level of knowledge and confidence in bullying prevention/intervention methods and their implementation.

School bullying is a long-standing problem with potentially severe consequences. Because teachers spend the most time with students while at school (Benitez et al., 2009; Craig et al., 2011; Lund et al., 2012; Newman et al., 2010), it is imperative for teachers to have knowledge and an understanding of effective bullying prevention and intervention programs. In addition it is important for school districts to regularly provide training to support teachers in such bullying prevention and intervention roles.

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