



Position Statement Regarding Understanding and Preventing Bullying in Our Society

The American Psychoanalytic Association condemns bullying in our schools, playgrounds, sports fields, youth organizations, homes, communities, and workplaces. The Association endorses specific measures to educate the public regarding bullying and develop intervention programs to prevent bullying and deal with its deleterious effects.

Background

Bullying is one of the most common forms of aggression and victimization: 27% of middle school students,^{1,2} 16% of high school students,² and one-quarter of workers³ are bullied. Depression, suicide, substance abuse, and other serious psychiatric, medical, and public health problems are consequences of bullying. Bullying occurs across the lifespan and in many social settings. As professionals devoted to listening to and fully appreciating each individual's unique story, psychoanalysts are exquisitely aware of the importance of the positive regard of others in helping each person reach his or her full potential, and of the innate human need for love and friendship. We are deeply concerned about the emotional pain caused by and the destructive power of bullying.

Definitions

Bullying is any repeated act or speech that subjects someone to hurt, indignity, humiliation, intimidation, physical abuse or threat of physical abuse, social or other isolation, shame, or disgrace. Bullying includes teasing, name-calling, mockery, threats, harassment, social exclusion, rumors, dating violence, hazing, and cyber-bullying (texting, sexting, sharing photographs or videos, and misuse of other social media). It is unacceptable in all its forms. Too often our schools, communities, churches, sports teams, and workplaces tolerate or ignore this destructive group and individual behavior.

Understanding the Bully-Bystander Phenomenon

Bullies will only do what bystanders allow⁴--it is a group process and a social dynamic that grips a victim's entire world. As part of the American Psychoanalytic Association's expertise in these matters, we view bullying as a triadic (three party), rather than dyadic (two party), process in which there are interactions between bully, victim and bystander(s). The bully does not act only as an individual. Via complex and often hidden psychological forces, the bully becomes an "agent" of the bystander audience and together they create a complex and destructive power dynamic. Thus harm may be caused through direct physical or psychological means and/or indirectly through encouragement of the process or avoidance by the bystanders. Given this new triadic characterization of bullying, any intervention must consider the interlocking social interaction among bully, victim, and the audience of bystanders observing or being involved directly or indirectly with the process. The bully is therefore part of this complex group process, not simply an individual driven by his or own psychopathology.⁴

Policy Recommendations

The American Psychoanalytic Association endorses the following to further the goal of preventing bullying and its associated morbidity and mortality:

- Promoting public awareness about the nature, impact, and prevention of bullying.
- Reviewing the efficacy of available/currently implemented anti-bullying programs

- Developing safe schools, homes, communities, and workplaces through evidence-based prevention and intervention bullying programs that enhance respect, empathy, tolerance of diversity, and disapproval of bullying.

- Implementing measures that improve the school, community, and workplace climate and enhance the sense of community and belonging. The antidote to bullying is friendship.⁴

- Establishing graduated systems of discipline for bullying. Policies should carefully define infractions, and staff and supervisors trained in appropriate means of speedily handling each distinct type of violation.

- Establishing comprehensive school-wide and workplace education programs for administrators, teachers, staff, supervisors, students and employees to specifically address bullying.

- Providing confidential support for victims of bullying.

- Instituting programs to help educate administrators, teachers, staff, supervisors, students and employees on how to identify and assist those in distress.

- Increasing funding to study bullying and its effects in schools, homes, communities, and workplaces, and to study ways to prevent and minimize the incidence of bullying.

- Supporting research efforts to understand the psychology of the bully.

- Supporting research efforts and develop intervention strategies directed at understanding the bystander community, which is manifesting maladaptive and destructive mechanisms for handling aggression and social relationships.

In endorsing these principles, we join our colleagues in the American Psychological Association⁵, the American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry⁶, and the American Psychiatric Association.⁷

Conclusion

As psychoanalysts, we see the effects of bullying in the lives of our young patients, in the current lives of our adult patients, and its repercussions in the lives of our adult patients. The threat of physical aggression and social scorn can have a devastating effect on development and progression in life. The potential for a positive self-image and identity is lost and what can emerge instead is an identity built on internalization of the hatred and loathing of the aggressors. Although it is less obvious, bullies and bystanders also suffer destructive consequences due to their participation in bullying. These negative effects on all participants are preventable.

References

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