

HOW TO STOP BULLYING IN SCHOOLS A DUTCH WAY

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Abstract: *This article contains information about a 5 pillar method to prevent and to stop violence in schools. Preventing violence in schools is a complex process. Not only does the victim need help, but those around the victim also need to understand the implications and learn to control the situation. Teachers, parents the aggressor, (the bully) the victim and the classmates all need knowledge, rules and social skills that help them stop the psychological mechanisms of violence, commonly known as bullying. Bullying will not disappear, but can be controlled if people (start to work together) cooperate. It asks commitment of everybody involved.*

Key words: *bullying at schools, teachers, social skills, psychological mechanisms of bullying.*

1. Introduction

I was about 10 years old when I first encountered violence in school, commonly known as bullying. One of the girls was not accepted or merely tolerated by the rest of the class. Her parents voted for the wrong political party, she already had breasts and her mother was ‘a prostitute’, according to my classmates...

Several forms of violence were recurrent as far as she was concerned. A lot of times during recess, the whole class would yell at her. She tried to defend herself but eventually she lost. There were about 15 people against her!

I felt sorry for her, but was very shy and afraid to say anything. I tried once, but at the same moment everybody turned to me and started yelling at me. I stopped helping her.

The teachers at my school saw what

happened but didn’t know how to counter or prevent the situation. There were no interventions except a friendly ‘don’t fight with each other’.

I still feel sad when I think about this girl. I have no record of her current status, but I am sure she had a horrible time that influenced her life in a negative way that year.

When I finished my study ‘Social Work and Drama’ I decided to dedicate myself to preventing violence in schools. I went to primary schools and secondary schools with forum theatre, I had many discussions with numerous teenagers and children about the differences between teasing and bullying and I’ve organized a lot of parent & teacher events. In this article I am to describe the method we use in the Netherlands to prevent violence in local schools. Considering the fact that school violence can severely affect the later

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development of the victim's personality and social skills it is advisable that all those involved in the educational process should cooperate in order to prevent violent manifestations among children and teenagers alike.

2. History

The year 1998 marks the debut of school violence research in the Netherlands. It was then that a first book to deal with such a topic appeared. 'The black sheep in the classroom!' immediately arouse interest for the subject. Parents, teachers, youth workers, psychologists and students read the book. After that first book a lot of different materials were published and developed, but there was a need for common thinking and for a more systematic way of working.

If we want to stop violence, it's very important to do that in a professional way. Not only does the victim need help, but those around the victim also need to understand the implications of what is happening and learn to control the situation. The Dutch pedagogue, Bob van der Meer [3], wrote a method consisting of 5 pillars.

His method contains the following aspects:

Most often, violence in schools and the subsequent types of aggression are commonly being referred to as 'bullying'. Consequently, according to van der Meer, everybody involved needs to *know* the definition of bullying, the difference between bullying and teasing, the different parties who are involved and the psychological mechanisms that take place. Children, parents, teachers and school board all need to *change* their attitudes towards the way in which bullying is perceived. And finally it's important to know the *reasons* why the bullying happens.

3. Research

The latest research has been published in Holland in June 2009 by the Dutch Youth Institute [5], [8].

Since 2001 Holland has been part of the international research program: Health Behaviour in School-aged Children (HBSC). Every four years research will be done under Dutch children at primary schools, aged 10 to 12 and at secondary schools under children aged 11 to 16 year.

About 11 % of the children in primary schools are being bullied weekly; about 25% of the children say it happens occasionally (a few times in a period of a few months).

About 5 % of the teenagers of secondary schools are being bullied more than once a week.

When referring to cyber-bullying 17-23% of the children and teenagers claim to being bullied regularly, whereas 30 to 35% have the experience of being bullied on the internet, about once a month.

At European level Dutch children are being bullied less than in Turkey, Greece and Romania. And Dutch Children are bullied more than the children in the Czech Republic, Spain and England.

If one considers a classroom of 30 children or teenagers, in every class, 3 children can be the victim of bullying, which is worrisome. Thus, programs about bullying are very important to develop. But what is the definition of bullying? What do we need to *know*?

4. What We Need to Know

"Bullying is the (psychic, physical or sexual) systematic violence from one person or a group towards one or more classmates, who aren't capable (anymore) to defend themselves!" [4].

By observing this definition of bullying, one can notice the differences between

teasing and bullying. Teasing helps to build up character. Through teasing people get stronger and learn how to stand up for themselves. Teasing is something that happens all the time between different people, bullying on the other hand is systematically aimed at one person. Thus bullying is the exact opposite of teasing; the victim is not permitted to resist. Bullying breaks down character and has a direct influence on the development of one's personality. People who have been bullied will feel weaker and will learn that they have to fight or flee Cannon [1].

In this definition one notices that there are already three parties involved: the aggressor (the bully), his friends and the aggressed (the victim.) But there are more parties. The context is also important.

There is the teacher. Does he or she know what is happening? And there is the family of the victim (parents, brothers and sisters). There is the rest of the class who disregard bullying most often. Some children in the class join the bully because they are afraid. Some children join the bully for their own well being. Finally there is the group that doesn't do anything. They do not bully, but they do not help the victim either. Every now and then there is an individual in the group with authority amongst his peers who will defend the victim.

The psychological mechanisms that we recognize in this process are:

1. The collective choice to be silent about what is happening (everybody in the class knows what is happening, but nobody dares to speak out to the teacher, because they are afraid to be the traitor).
2. The bystander dilemma (teachers and/or parents see what is happening, but are not sure if or how to act).
3. Blaming the victim (teachers, bully, rest of the class and the parents have the idea that the victim is the guilty one.

There is the notion that something in the attitude of the victim triggers the bullying)

The internet site www.bullying.org has found a very good way to explain the above mechanisms for the wide audience. Some examples of myths and facts:

Myth: *"Bullying is just a phase, a normal part of life. I went through it, my kids will too!"*

Fact: Bullying is not "normal" or socially acceptable behaviour. We give bullies power by our acceptance of this behaviour.

Myth: *"If I tell someone, it will just make it worse."*

Fact: Research shows that bullying will stop when adults in authority and peers get involved.

Myth: *"Bullying is a school problem, the teachers should handle it"*

Fact: Bullying is a broader social problem that often happens outside of schools, on the street, at shopping centers, the local pool, summer camp and in the adult workplace."

Myth: *"People are born bullies"*

Fact: Bullying is a learned behaviour and behaviours can be changed.

In fact these mechanisms are attitudes, which we can try to *change* by giving attention to the subject.

5. What We Need to Change!

When we speak about attitudes we can see three parts [2], [6]:

- A cognitive part.
- A conative part.
- An emotional affective part.

To treat bullying in a professional way, each of the three parts of an attitude needs to be dealt with. Only when teachers are working on the different parts of the attitude, the interventions will be powerful and lead to good results.

Teachers, parents and the class need to attain knowledge about the mechanisms of

bullying (cognitive). But knowledge is not enough. A protocol of rules and agreements on how to restrict bullying in school should be made and agreed upon by all parties who are involved (conative). However, the most important part is the emotional affective part. If people are touched by what is happening, they will find inner motivation to stop its continuation (emotional affective).

6. What We Need to Know about the Reasons!

It is important to know why the bullying happens:

- A. a non democratic system at school,
- B. no contact between school and parents;
- C. or anonymity of children within schools;
- D. unsafe atmosphere in the classroom, because of competition amongst peers;
- E. personal traits such as a form of disability, problems at home or psychological problems.

7. How to Stop Bullying in Schools – a Dutch Experience

Numerous schools in Holland are working with the 5 pillar method of Van der Meer [4]. The first thing the school board has to decide is that they will commit to structurally prevent and stop bullying at school. They have to agree on the fact that no form of bullying will be tolerated. They'll have to develop a charter for action [10] and a protocol that is implemented through the entire school. Next steps that need to be taken for the implementation of the above charter and protocol are:

- The training and the education of teachers.

Pedagogues, psychologists and specialists on the matter of bullying, can give information on the subject and should be contacted. Teachers should educate

themselves by reading books on the subject. Teachers need to know how to communicate with parents, victims, the aggressor (the bully) and the class. They need to know which possibilities there are for these different target groups (are there courses for social skills? Is there a psychologist they can turn to? Which are the important internet sites where you can learn more about how to prevent and stop bullying) and they need to know what kind of punishment they can reinforce if bullying does not stop.

- Background information and advice for parents.

This can be done by specialists and teachers. If it's done by a specialist it is very important that teachers be involved as well, so that they can meet with the parents and communicate with them about their children. Parents should be educated on some background information about bullying, but most importantly they need to know what can happen when their child is a bully or the victim of bullying. Parents need to be informed about who they can turn to, to ask for help.

- Mobilizing the silent group, which forms the majority of the class and thus is able to stop the bullying.

Different projects can help to mobilize the entire class. For example by using forum theatre where children and teenagers can experience what they can do when they are being bullied, or when they see that somebody else is a victim of bullying.

- Help and training for the bully.

The bully needs to know that there will be a punishment when he or she continues bullying.

He or she needs to know what the rules and the agreements are.

Furthermore it is important that the teacher or specialist analyze the reasons for the behaviour of the bully in order to understand and change the behaviour of the aggressor. Parents must be informed

about what happened. Sometimes a course for social and emotional skills can help; the bully can experience how it feels to be the victim, and he / she can also learn how to communicate about the things that he or she worries about in life.

- Assistance for the victim.

The victim needs to get advice on how to respond to the behaviour of the bully. The victim needs to learn how to stop the bully, but also needs to ask for help from classmates, teacher and parents. Finally the victim can take part in a course for social and emotional skills.

The victim needs to build self-confidence and a positive self-image.

8. Critical Note: Community & Internet

One thing is missing in the 5 pillar method: Bullying does not only take place at school. It can take place at a fitness club, on the playground, or just in the neighbourhood. There are a lot of places where bullying can continue happening unnoticed. So if possible, the school can try to build up a relation with the youth clubs and youth workers on the streets to prevent the bullying and to inform each other when there are signs of bullying. Parents can also play an important role in this communication. Is the school responsible for what happens outside the institution?. It may seem unusual to also deal with bullying outside school, but even when the bullying takes place outside this institutional setting, the school is still involved, because violence will continue inside its borders. Children will feel unsafe because of the bullying and this will have a negative effect on the school results.

9. Cyber Bullying

The most recent form of bullying is cyber bullying [9].

Digital bullying happens mostly through

email, chatbox or MSN or by placing a picture of somebody on the internet (for example by using the webcam)The effects are worse than face to face bullying because the victim cannot respond due to the fact that he (or she) doesn't know who is attacking him (or her). The anonymity of cyber bullying enables the bully use more aggressive language, thus making this form of aggression more hurtful. About 30% to 40% of the children are complaining about cyber bullying, internet gossip and people who steal their passwords.

About 56%-80% of the children only confide in their friends about being on the internet. They do not inform their parents and teachers.

Therefore it's important that teachers and parents know enough about the internet to assist children in their online activities! In 2005, only 50% of the teachers in the Netherlands knew enough about the internet to assist children professionally.

10. Conclusions

Bullying happens at all ages, in all countries, between children, teenagers and grown-ups. It happens mostly between the ages of 10-14. No form of bullying should be tolerated. Bullying in schools must be dealt with as a serious issue; it is not a normal behaviour and it can bring serious damage to the further development of the individuals being aggressed.

Bullying will not disappear, but it can be controlled if people start to work together and decide to work on the entire system around the children. School is the place where children spend five days a week, for almost the entire year. Moreover, school is the place where children develop moral, social and emotional skills beside cognitive knowledge. At school, the school board, teachers, parents, psychologists, bully-specialists, pedagogues, and children can easily meet each other and work

committed together to prevent and stop the bullying. Stopping violence in general and bullying in particular requires commitment of everybody involved. It makes it easier to stop bullying at school if the environment around school – clubs, playground, street, - have a good collaboration in their efforts to counter its effects.

Finally teachers and parents need to know enough about the internet to assist children in their online activities!

I hope I've inspired and challenged you to prevent and stop bullying! I hope from now on we are working together for a class where children can learn and develop in a safe atmosphere.

Other information may be obtained from the address: cmbakema@CHE.NL

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