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Beyond The Bully Victim Dyad:

The Role of Peers in Bullying Relationships

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According to Olweus, “a person is being bullied when he or she is exposed, repeatedly and over time, to negative actions on the part of one or more other persons” (as cited in Swearer & Doll, 2001, p 12). The traditional view of bullying is that it is a dyadic relationship between a bully and a victim in which there is an imbalance of physical or psychological power that exists between the bully and the victims and the abuse is largely unprovoked (O’Connell, Pepler, & Craig, 1999; Swearer & Doll, 2001). Studies to date have been limited by a focus on the characteristics and the interactions between individual bullies and victims (Craig & Pepler, 1995; Salmivalli, 1996 as cited in Hawkins & Pepler, 2001; Pepler, 1995). Because of this, however, many broader factors contributing to bullying are overlooked. In this discussion, we will be taking a more encompassing perspective of the problem of bullying, the dynamic systems perspective.

Dynamic systems theory originates from the physical sciences. It is a theoretical perspective that describes relations between systems, especially how many random occurrences can be pulled together to with time to form a single, stable unit (Pepler & Craig, 1999). With this definition, it is possible to see how it can be applied to an

understanding of complex relationships between people. With respect to bullying, a dynamic systems perspective would posit that bullying is not just the result of two individuals having characteristics that make them prone to becoming a bully and victim, nor just the result of environmental influences or circumstances. Rather, bullying is viewed as a process that unfolds within a social ecological context (Atlas & Pepler, 1998). Therefore it is not only just the individual characteristics of the bully and the victim or the dyadic interactions between the individual bully and victim that causes bullying to occur. It is also influences of peer and teachers and administrators, the playground and classroom environments, familial influences, and many other factors that contribute to this system. When all these factors come together within a certain context, it allows for the bullying process to unfold. Using this definition, we see that there are many aspects of bullying that need to be examined in order to understand the bullying process in a way that might lead to the development of effective solutions. This paper will examine how *peers* in particular contribute to the bullying process. Using a dynamic systems perspective, we will go beyond the bully victim dyad to show how peers play an important role in establishing, maintaining, and breaking the bully-victim cycle.

The Role of Peers

There are two ways in which peers have contributed to the system of bullying. The first is through their role as friends. The second is through their role as bystanders.

Peers as friends

Peers as friends are very important when it comes to breaking the bully victim dyad. Children who are victimized often prefer to go to other students for help rather

than teachers. Rigby et al. found in a study of children in secondary schools, that less than one in four of the children who indicated in surveys that they had been bullied reported ever having informed a teacher compared with more than half who had spoken about it to another student (Rigby, 1997 as cited in Peterson & Rigby, 1999). Mutual friends are also more likely to defend each other if they fall victim to teasing or aggressive behavior. Boulton, Trueman, Chau, Whitehand, and Amatya (1999) found that those early adolescents who had a reciprocated best friend in their class received significantly fewer peer nominations for victimization than did classmates without a reciprocated best friend. These findings suggest the importance of friendship in reducing and preventing victimization.

Unlike bullies, who seem to have high amounts of peer acceptance, victims of bullying tend to have very few reciprocated friendships (Espelage & Holt, 2001). They are often viewed negatively by their peers and lack important social skills to make them more socially accepted (Shaffer, 2000). Victimization can further their dislike by their peers, as peers may tend to see them as deserving and less human (Jeffrey, Miller, & Linn, 2001). It can also reduce their self worth, which can lead to more insecurity and deepen social skills deficiencies, thus making it more difficult for the person to make friends. The lack of mutual friendships for victims contributes to the downward spiral of victimization in the bullying system.

For this reason, it is imperative to involve peers as friends in the solution to breaking the cycle of bullying. One way to do this is to provide social skills training for the victims (Shaffer, 2000). Another important, aspect, however, is to educate peers about the bullying problem and to help them gain understanding, particularly empathy,

regarding what a victim goes through. Through the development of a peer support system that encourages befriending, mentoring, counseling, and mediation, a “climate of care” can be created which can provide victims with essential peer support (Naylor & Cowie, 1999). The importance of friends to break the bullying cycle shows how peers as friends can play a positive role in intervening in the bullying systems.

Peers as bystanders

Peers can also play an important role as bystanders in incidences of bullying. Several studies show that in cases of bully, peers were present approximately 85% of the time (Atlas & Pepler, 1998; Craig & Pepler, 1995; Pepler, Hawkins, & Craig, 2001). These high percentages suggest that having peers present is important in the establishment phase of bullying behavior. Thus bullying acts may be more likely to occur if peers are around.

How does peer presence establish and maintain acts of bullying? First, peers may contribute directly by actively participating in the bullying. Craig & Pepler (1997) found through videotaped observations of bullying behavior on the playground that 30% of peers actively contributed to the episode (as cited in Espelage & Holt, 2001). This participation reinforces the bully’s behavior, making it not only acceptable, but also actively supported by peers. Furthermore, peer’s behaviors were coded as being respectful to the bully in 74% of the episodes (Espelage & Holt, 2001). Thus, the bully often does not lose any respect of peers by engaging in this behavior, and may actually be encouraged to engage in bullying behavior to gain respect from peers.

Second, peers can also contribute simply by observing the bullying process. In the same study by Pepler & Craig (1997), 20% of peers were coded as passively observing the interaction (as cited in Espelage & Holt, 2001). Jeffrey et al. (2001) found that almost half, 40.5% of males and 48.4% of females, of the middle school children in their sample rated themselves as outsiders in a bullying episode. They also found that the number of passive observers seems to increase with age. By witnessing a bullying act and not intervening on either side's behalf, passive observers can also reinforce bullying behavior.

Indeed, interventions by peers comprised an extremely small proportion of peer involvement in bullying episodes. In the study by Pepler and Craig (1997), intervening only occurred in 12% of the episodes. Atlas and Pepler (1998) found this number to be at 10% in classroom observations and 11% in playground observations, whereas Pepler and Hawkins (2001) found it to be at 19% in their naturalistic observational study of playgrounds. Overall, this lack of intervention by peers contributes to the maintenance of systems of bullying.

Many explanations have been for why peers tend to intervene so little on the victims' behalf. One reason is that they are afraid that by doing so they themselves might be victimized (Tattum, 1989 as cited in Atlas & Pepler, 1998). Also, bystanders may be uncertain how to help, or may be embarrassed and fear retaliation (Jeffrey et al., 2001). This fear factor can also specifically encourage bullying behavior because the bully may observe this fear response in others. The bully may see the effectiveness of using aggression to achieve their goals (Shaffer, 2000). Bullying behavior becomes a useful way for the bully to exert power over her/his peers.

Passive observers may also suffer from diffusion of responsibility, whereas because they see themselves as outsiders, they do not feel that they need to involve themselves in the actions (Jeffrey et al., 2001). Finally, bystanders may begin to view victims as less than human and even deserving of the treatment he or she is receiving, known as the “just world hypothesis” (e.g., Lerner, 1980). As stated in Jeffrey et al. (2001) peers learn “self-protective distancing from aggression that carries with it the price of loss of sympathy and identification with the victim. A valuable opportunity for learning personal efficacy and social empowerment is lost” (p. 153). The high prevalence of peers as either active supporters of bullying or silent acceptors, contributes greatly to the establishment and maintenance of bullying systems.

There is, however, a discrepancy between how peers act and how they feel about bullying. According to a study by Rigby and Slee (1993), 80 to 85% of students did not approve of bullying. Furthermore, 80% of students expressed admiration for peers who intervened (as cited in Hawkins, Pepler, & Craig, 2001). Charach et al (1995) found that 86% of children found it unpleasant to watch bullying. They also found that 43% of children said they would try to help a child who was being victimized, and another 33% said that they felt they should help but did not (as cited in Hawkins, Pepler, & Craig, 2001). These findings suggest a strong desire of children to help eliminate bullying behaviors. This discrepancy in how peers act in bullying situations and their attitudes towards bullying may be the key to establishing positive peer intervention strategies. By training peers in effective ways to take action against bullying, while ensuring their safety from any victimization of their own, the discrepancy between peers’ actions and their feelings may be reduced.

Using a dynamic systems perspective, we will go beyond the bully victim dyad to show how peers play an important role in establishing, maintaining, and breaking the bully-victim cycle. Peers serve a role as both friends and bystanders in a bullying system. The nature of how these roles are played out can have either a positive or negative effect on bullying behavior. Suggestions for intervention include increasing friendship opportunities for victims, educating peers about the bullying problem, creating peer support networks, and developing effective, safe, intervention strategies.

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