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Handling Bullying In Schools

Tan Ai Girl

When children come home showing no sign of physical abuse and/or abnormal behaviours, parents might not realise that unpleasant events have happened to them in schools. Parents may refer to a child's academic records for his intellectual performance. These records, to a certain extent, can be used as indicators of his cognitive development, but they are not an effective measurement of his affective and social development. How can parents and educators identify whether children feel secure in schools and ensure that children are happy with their school environment and peers? How do they uncover whether their children are victims of bullying?

Direct or indirect bullying?

Bullying is an imbalance in strength (Olweus, 1994). A child is being bullied or victimized when he is exposed, repeatedly and over time, to negative actions by one or more people of the same age or senior in age. *Direct bullying* occurs in the form of a relatively open attack. Parents and educators may be aware of the occurrence, if a child is hurt physically. *Indirect bullying*, on the other hand, is in the form of social isolation, verbal threats, and teasing. It is relatively difficult for parents and teachers to recognise it, if a child does not disclose the incident explicitly. Emotional abuse is likely to be neglected by parents and teachers, because it often does not leave visible evidence. Research findings with Japanese pupils showed that *direct bullying* happened frequently in higher grades, whereas *indirect bullying* was common in lower grades. Boys are frequent victims of *direct bullying*, whereas girls are more likely victims of *indirect bullying*. The former type of bullying may correlate with physical development. A study on Norwegian pupils showed that bullying was often carried out by older pupils on younger children in the lower grades. There is gender difference in bully-victim relationship. More than 60% of bullied girls (in grades 5 to 7, corresponding to ages 11 to 13) reported being bullied by boys. According to Olweus, there are three causes of bullying: a large size of class, severe competition and striving for good grades, and physical appearance. Bullies are likely to be physically stronger. In contrast, victims are likely to be physically weaker. Studies on Japanese pupils show that there is an increase in

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bullying and violence among pupils of junior high schools (ages 12 to 15) and senior high schools (ages 15 to 18). One of the possible reasons for this inclination is the competitive studying environment and prolonged examination stress. Other causes are the length of school days (6 days a week), the rigidity of the school system that discourages changing schools, and extreme in-group behaviours. In a collectivist society like Japan, pupils of elementary schools are organised into social groups or *dans*. Every member is obliged to maintain and preserve harmony of the in-group. Changing school is perceived as one of the most distressful life events by Japanese pupils. Distress as such may be interpreted as one's worries of his acceptance by members of the new in-group. Current research on bullying focuses mainly on pupils. Bullying in schools is not merely incidents happening among pupils but it can be from teachers to pupils. Favouritism, verbal insults, and unjust punishment are also forms of bullying.

Long-term impacts of bullying

Bullying may leave long-term psychological and emotional negative impacts on victims, if the victims do not undertake coping intervention. Banzai's studies demonstrated that active coping styles such as self-defence and seeking social support improved or eliminated bullying effects. Passive coping styles such as not doing anything increased negative impacts.

The long-term impacts of bullying include physical disturbance such as sleeplessness and tiredness; loss of self-confidence; loss of interests in study and play; oversensitivity; pessimistic attitudes towards interpersonal relationships; and negative feelings toward the future.

Long-term effects remain as a psychological hindrance of adults who were victims of bullying. Intervention programmes may be effective in reducing and/or eliminating these effects.

Disclosure

Self-disclosure is one of the most effective ways to reveal whether a person is a victim of bullying. Teachers and other adults' observations are another significant means. Research findings conducted by Monbusho (Ministry of Education, Japan) showed that at lower ages (eg elementary schools), victims were in a relatively passive position. Few would reveal that they were being bullied. Classroom teachers and parents were

resourceful persons who reported the incidents. More pupils of senior high schools employed the means of self-disclosure than those of junior high and elementary schools.

There could be several reasons why younger children are reluctant to reveal that they are being bullied. They could have been threatened into silence - telling would lead them into more trouble. Some hope that in keeping silent, they can gain acceptance - the "snitch" or "tell-taler" is never liked by their peers.

Self-disclosure is essential in the intervention process because it can draw the attention of the adult to the seriousness of an event. Children, especially victims of bullying, should be given a conducive environment to disclose their problems. A person normally discloses his problems to someone he trusts. A psychologically safe environment is a pre-requisite condition for intervention.

Intervention and prevention

Suggestions for intervention and prevention include :

- lend a listening ear. Research has shown that adults perceive bullying differently from pupils.
- set class rules against bullying
- conduct regular class meetings with pupils
- conduct conversations with bullies and victims. Usually, the bullies are victims themselves, of abuse - perhaps in their homes.
- keep a check on verbal behaviour - ban put-downs in the classroom
- discuss the effects of stereotyping and excessive teasing
- be on the look-out for "loners" and cases of withdrawals and underachievement
- follow-up on the case immediately after disclosure. If there is a delay, the victim may be punished, and will never trust adults again.

Conclusion

Bullying in schools is an old but a valid social phenomenon. Children of younger ages are more vulnerable to such incidents and in particular to indirect bullying. Educators and parents should take an active role to create a secure social environment in schools and at home. Parents and educators should insist on warm, interactive, and psychologically safe classroom and home settings. They should realise that they are the immediate sources of social supports for children. Among pupils, positive

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attitudes of interpersonal relationship should be cultivated. Children should also learn to disclose their problems to peer, teachers and parents. Only with an explicit conversation, are teachers and parents able to disclose bullying among children. Interactive communication enhances pupils' trust toward teachers and parents.

It is indispensable to include bullying and violence in social studies or moral education. Equally important is to set school regulations that eliminate favouritism, verbal threats and unjust punishment in the classroom.

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Case Study : Fending-off Indirect Bullying

Peter is an average 14 year-old Secondary 2 student in a neighbourhood school. He has a ready smile and is quite popular with his peers.

One day, he is approached during recess time by a 15 year-old Secondary 3 boy who told him: "Hey, Peter. I like you. How would you like to be my 'Sai-lo' (Small Brother)? If you'll join me, I can take care of you."

Peter was immediately wary but he kept his smile. Lightly touching the older boy on his shoulder, Peter replied: " 'Tai-ko' (Older Brother), I like you too and, I am so happy that you want to address me as 'Sai-lo' but, may I respectfully be your friend without actually joining you?"

The older boy searched the younger boy's eyes at this speech and the younger lad steadily returned his gaze, all the time, keeping his smile on his face. After a minute or two, the older boy clapped his hand on Peter's shoulder and said: "O.K. I like you."

The two boys parted and went their separate ways, equilibrium was restored.

[This actually happened but character names have been changed to protect the privacy concerned.]