Bullying, Suicide, and Homicide

Understanding, Assessing, and Preventing Threats to Self and Others for Victims of Bullying

Butch Losey
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Effective School Prevention

Some of the kids knew about it before it happened, but they didn’t want to say anything—they have a code of honor and they did not want to tattletale. But someone has to stand up; someone has to take a stand because, if you don’t, then somebody else is going to get hurt.

Gregory Carter, Teacher, Richmond, Virginia

Victim of a school shooting

The research shows that one in five children in primary and secondary schools is the victim of some type of bullying. Conflict between peers, including bullying behavior, aggression, and physical violence, begins in preschool and persists throughout the school years. Studies have consistently found that a substantial number of schoolchildren are the victims of bullying, and although levels of bullying vary, some estimates indicate that schools will have no less than 19% of their population reporting incidents of bullying at some time during the school term (Nansel et al., 2001; Whitney & Smith, 1991).

On the prevalence of bullying behavior, I draw from my own research through a survey I conducted in Clermont County, Ohio (Losey & Graham, 2004). In 2003, while working at Child Focus Incorporated, a community mental health agency on the east side of Cincinnati, our staff surveyed students in seven Clermont County elementary schools across three districts to assess the prevalence of bullying behavior in the schools of our community. The survey was administered in 33 homeroom classrooms to 630 students in Grades 3–6. Almost half of the students surveyed reported that they had been bullied two or three times per month. One fourth of the students surveyed reported that they had bullied someone else two or three times per month. This is much higher than our national average of around
19%, and I believe this is due to the district at the time lacking a consistent effort in bullying prevention.

Some people view private schools differently, believing that these schools are a refuge from bullying, and that bullying is more an element of the public school system. In April 2009, I conducted a survey at a small private school in Cincinnati. The survey was administered to 287 children in Grades 3–8. Surprising to their staff, 23% of the students reported being bullied two or three times a month, which is slightly above a national comparison of about 19%.

With bullying so prevalent in the school system, it is critical that prevention efforts are focused on the population in which it is occurring and the location where it takes place. Understandably, bullying occurs across the life span and in a variety of locations, even though it could be argued that bullying is most prevalent during the school age years and within the school environment. Since this book is about children, prevention, and intervention in the schools, I focus my discussion here on this population and location.

Levels of Ecology

Almost three quarters of a century ago, Kurt Lewin (1936) proposed his well-known equation $B = f(P \times E)$ in his book *Principles of Topological Psychology*. It is not a mathematical equation, but an equation that describes a social construct. Simply stated, it means that the behavior ($B$) can be seen as a function ($f$) of a person’s ($P$) interaction with his or her environment ($E$). From this equation, the ecological model was born.

Years later, Urie Bronfenbrenner (1977) added to our ecological understanding by describing what he called his evolving scientific perspective of the ecology of human development. Most important from this article was his four levels of ecological contexts, which he called systems (Table 2.1).

These moved from the most near to the person to the most distant. Bronfenbrenner named these systems the microsystem (relations between the person and environment in the immediate setting containing that person); the mesosystem (the interaction among major settings containing the person, such as interaction between family
and school or family and church); the exosystem (contexts that are an extension of the mesosystem but do not contain the person but effect and influence the immediate settings in which that person is found); and the macrosystem (the institutional patterns of the culture or subculture, such as the economic, social, educational, and legal, that have an impact on behavior and meaning making).

### Ecological Interventions

An ecological approach to bullying prevention should use a full range of intervention targets that occur simultaneously on different levels of the ecology (Conyne & Cook, 2004) from the microlevel to the macrolevel. From an ecological perspective, one of the criteria for evaluating the impact of interventions is whether the intervention has increased the resources of the school where they are implemented. This can be seen through improvements in school policy, increasing bullying prevention skills for staff, increasing students’ social competency, or adding bullying prevention curriculum to the faculty library. The critical feature of increasing the resources of the school is whether the school is able to follow through on the intervention, which is no easy task. Because the transfer of skills is so important from the ecological perspective, it is important that interventions are created using current research in the field of bullying prevention and that people on site are involved in the creation and delivery of the interventions.

This does not commonly occur, however. In a large study of research on prevention programs (Durlak & Wells, 1997), it was observed that many interventions were delivered by people outside the setting where they occurred. These were usually mental health professionals and college students; this raises the question of whether it would be difficult for those resources to remain after the intervention is finished.

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**Table 2.1** Bronfenbrenner’s Levels of Ecological Context

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Microsystem</td>
<td>Primary setting, containing person</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mesosystem</td>
<td>Interaction between two microsystems</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exosystem</td>
<td>Influencing system not containing person</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Macrosystem</td>
<td>Broader culture</td>
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</table>

In the rest of this chapter, I discuss what I believe should be goals of bullying prevention and intervention for each of the four main ecological levels. I have also added the chronosystem level and discuss the effects of time on prevention. Keep in mind that the overarching goal is to increase the resources of the staff and students of the school.

**Microsystem**

Bullying is contextual, and in the case of school bullying, 85% of bullying incidents occur in the context of peers (Pepler & Craig, 2000) at the microsystem level. In the broader context, bullying comes from problems in school climate and is not simply a student’s response to a particular environment (e.g., school) but is better described as an interaction between the peer group and the environment. Therefore, intervention must target the environment and the peer group (Table 2.2).

Microsystem influences include the actual interaction among the bully, victim, and bystanders. An obvious intervention that targets the microsystem would be an immediate intervention with the bully and the victim “in the moment” of the interaction. An example of this is the teacher stopping the bullying in progress, instructing the bully to stop, and telling the bystanders to behave differently. Another example is for the school counselor to work directly with the victim to develop skills or strategize to make a change in behavior.

**Empower Victims and Bystanders**

Empowerment of the victim and bystanders can be accomplished by education and skill development. Victim and bystander should be educated on the nature of bullying and the bullying prevention efforts of the school. Social skill development in areas such as assertiveness,

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Table 2.2  Goals at the Microlevel</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Empower victims and bystanders</td>
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<tr>
<td>Increase effective leadership</td>
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<tr>
<td>Develop competency in staff intervention</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increase support and individual resources</td>
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<tr>
<td>Change accepting attitudes of bullying and violence</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
social awareness, or social skill training will be particularly important for both the victim and bystanders.

I do make the distinction between social skill training and social awareness training. Social awareness training is most helpful for provocative victims who tend to miss the cues from other students and school staff. They are trained to notice and critique how others respond to their behavior. Social skills training would teach and model specific social skills to the student, with the student rehearsing the skills with the teacher and then the teacher offering honest feedback to the student on his or her use of the skill. The goal is to increase the student’s repertoire of skills and develop competency in the skills that are taught.

Students will also need knowledge of how to access the system to prevent and report bullying. It is important that all the students in the school have knowledge and understanding of how to access the resources and people of the school. Ultimately, increasing skills at this level will help the victim be assertive and seek help and for the bystander to act in some way to stop the bullying, by either safely intervening or reporting the incidents to others who can help.

Increase Effective Leadership

Leadership at the microsystem level includes the principal and other administrators of the school. In the course of my dissertation, I learned that leadership can make or break a prevention program. In my study, I had two schools in the same district with similar student populations implementing the same bullying prevention program. A noticeable difference was the leadership styles of the principals. One principal was highly effective in communicating the goals of the prevention program and following up to ensure tasks were completed. The other principal did not provide enough direction and communication to the prevention team. This was interpreted by the faculty and staff as the principal appearing unsupportive of the prevention efforts. This ultimately reduced the effectiveness of the bullying prevention program.

It is necessary to have administrative support and, truly, an inspirational and effective leader who can pull together the internal resources
and strengths necessary to support the development of an intervention that will live well beyond its creation.

*Develop Competency in Staff Intervention*

When a bullying prevention program begins at school, it is important that staff respond immediately in all situations of bullying. If this does not happen, students get the message that nothing has changed and may get the impression that staff are either okay with the behavior or do not know what to do about it.

As staff consistently responds to bullying situations, students understand that it is important to intervene. Staff modeling may lead to students coming to the aid of victimized students because there will be a sense of safety that staff will intervene.

School staff will need to be effective in their communication with each other. There will be a need to report bullying incidents to other staff and a means of accessing this information quickly so that staff can understand the extent to which a student is being bullied or bullying others. This would include reporting of any consequences that may have been imposed, interventions that have been tried, parent interaction, and individual plans created with students.

*Increase Support and Individual Resources*

Students who are excluded, disconnected, or in some way viewed differently are highly susceptible to victimization and need the support of staff and students. I believe that it is the responsibility of everyone (staff, students, and nonteaching staff) in the school to include all students in the activities of school. I tell students that this does not mean that they need to be best friends with everyone, but it is their responsibility to include other students in school activities, such as work groups and sports activities in physical education; yes, it would be nice if they included others in conversation at lunchtime.

Increasing positive adult relationships in the school setting can offer considerable support for students. It is important that students feel they have an adult in the school with whom they have a positive relationship and who is available to them. This does not necessarily
need to be one of the teaching staff. I remember being in grade school and the strong positive influence Mr. Culbertson, our school custodian, was for many of us boys.

Another way to view bullying of others is to consider it in terms of peer influence. I ask students to evaluate how they influence their peers. I acknowledge that kids who bully make a choice to influence in destructive ways. I like to remind kids, particularly the popular ones, to use their influence wisely and positively. It is easy to see how just one or two bullies can influence the school climate and make the environment an unsafe place; I remind everyone that the same principle applies if students utilize their influence positively.

Some students will need even more support. In the schools where I work, we typically have mental health prevention workers who serve on a bullying prevention committee. The professionals support students by creating individualized behavior plans and working with students on bullying issues on a regular basis.

One of the most difficult times of the day for victims of bullying is during transitional times and times of less structure. Having staff increase observation and monitoring during lunchroom periods and playground activities and in hallways during transition is a supportive strategy that creates safety and helps students see that staff are in charge.

Students need to learn new skills, practice new skills, develop empathy, and hear the challenges and successes of fellow students. Many prevention programs do this by having a specific time of the day when classroom-level meetings are conducted. Dan Olweus (1993) recommended that these meetings happen weekly and, depending on the age of the students, be 20–45 minutes long. Having implemented bullying prevention programs in many schools, the classroom meeting is the one component of bullying prevention that I regularly hear from students and faculty as having a significant influence on school behavior and connectedness.

*Change the Accepting Attitudes of Bullying and Violence*

Accepting attitudes of bullying can be subtle yet corrosive. I frequently hear accepting and complacent attitudes as I offer workshops
some people believe that bullying is just a part of growing up, and that there is little that you can do but get through it. Others believe that violence should be met with violence. I have also heard the stories of adults who talk about when they grew up and the successes of stopping bullying by getting a group of kids to attack and hurt the bully.

These beliefs are inaccurate. Bullying is not a part of growing up, and it is not true that with successful navigation of bullying children will become better adults. It is also not useful to attack violence with violence. Typically, bullies choose their victims by some imbalance of power; with boys, this is often physical strength. Children who fight back are likely only going to cause themselves more harm. That does not mean that they cannot be assertive, but they certainly should not consider violence.

Mesosystem

The mesosystem is the interaction of two or more microsystems. Examples of mesosystems include interaction between family and school, such as parent–teacher collaboration; interaction of the family and the legal system; and collaboration between school and a place of student employment. The primary mesosystem in school bullying prevention is the school–parent mesosystem. There are number of goals for intervention at this level (Table 2.3).

Educate Parents on Bullying and Bullying Prevention Efforts

Schools can intervene on the mesosystem level first by educating students and families on the nature of bullying and the prevention efforts

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Table 2.3</th>
<th>Goals at the Mesolevel</th>
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<tr>
<td>Educate parents about bullying and bullying prevention program</td>
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<tr>
<td>Regular communication with parents</td>
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<tr>
<td>Report incidents of bullying and victimization</td>
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<tr>
<td>Encourage community building</td>
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<tr>
<td>Work with parents of involved students</td>
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<tr>
<td>Involve parents in school prevention planning and activities</td>
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</table>
and policies of the school. Parents should understand whether data were collected and what that means to the school, how the school is responding to the data, and what the projected outcomes of the prevention program are. Data collection and follow-up with parents and other stakeholders at the end of the school year would be important to show successes and plans for the next year.

Parents should also understand the internal workings of the program. These include the interventions that will be utilized, the rules and consequences concerning bullying and school violence, and how parents will be informed of situations as they arise.

Regular Communication With Parents

The old adage that an ounce of prevention equals a pound of cure would go a long way when communicating with parents. Parents are greatly distressed when they feel that they are hearing for the first time of their child being bullied despite evidence that bullying has been going on for quite some time. Communicating all bullying situations to parents will help them make critical decisions regarding their children’s safety and welfare.

Schools that are successful at ongoing communication with parents use a variety of methods to keep them informed. They use traditional and contemporary means of communicating. They report progress through one-page reports posted on their Web sites, send monthly newsletters on bullying prevention through the e-mail marketing tool Constant Contact, and send video clip links of student-developed infomercials through YouTube.

Report Incidents of Bullying and Victimization

For any situation in which a student has bullied another or has been victimized, notification is important, and the parents of both the bully and the victim should be advised. The school should report the circumstances of this situation, the school’s response, any discipline that was applied, and techniques provided for students to change their behavior (in the case of bullying) or to access help, report, or respond effectively to bullying (in the case of victimization).
Reporting to local law enforcement should also be considered. Many bullying situations cross the line between school bullying that can be addressed in the principal’s office and criminal behavior. A good mesosystem interaction is one of regular contact with law enforcement or, better yet, a school resource officer.

Encourage Community Building

Another activity of the mesosystem is community building. Schools that have high levels of support, belongingness, trust, and cooperation contribute to positive socioemotional and behavioral outcomes (Maton, 1999). Community-building activities enhance the ability of students to work together for a common purpose in work, social groups, or organizations. A sense of community occurs when students are in charge, can have the power to set the rules and standards, and ultimately work together to accomplish shared goals (Naparstek, 1999).

Work With Parents of Involved Students

Effective communication will be critical in how staff convey issues of bullying and victimization with parents. An effective strategy that I have found is to help the parent understand that school personnel and the parent have a common goal, which is to provide the best school experience for their child. Inviting the parent to help meet this goal and be a part of the process of addressing a particular issue can be successful in reducing resistance and blame, particularly when you are calling a parent to discuss his or her child’s bullying behavior. Calls home to parents are also a great way to educate the parents on bullying prevention efforts.

Involve Parents in School Prevention Planning and Activities

I recently worked with a school that had an initiative to have a father or grandfather participate in school activities for a full day, every day of the school year. In essence, there would be an adult male volunteer at the school every day of the school year. These men would be in
the classroom helping students with their work, attending lunch, and assisting with gym and recess. The strategy was initially introduced to get more male parent involvement in the school, but they found that the strategy increased positive behavior in the classroom; they planned to make the initiative a regular part of the school curriculum. Schools could take this strategy a step further and involve parents on planning committees for bullying prevention and as part of a volunteer program that supports bullying prevention efforts.

Exosystem

Table 2.4 presents interventions to utilize at the exosystem level. These interventions are discussed next.

Create Understanding of Baseline Behavior

Bronfenbrenner (1977) states that the exosystem is an extension of the mesosystem, but that it does not contain the student. It could, however, have a significant impact on them. A beginning exosystem intervention is to make an assessment of the nature and prevalence of bullying at the school. Schools typically do this by surveying students and staff regarding the prevalence and type of bullying in school. This is important because prevention efforts will be focused on data collected. Data typically collected include the students’ perceptions of types of bullying, types of victimization, locations where there are many incidents of bullying behavior, and responses by adults. The survey that is accepted by many researchers and schools is Dan Olweus’s Bullying Victim Questionnaire (Olweus, 2001). Other schools monitor bullying incident density by having adults observe and tally bullying behavior in specific locations.

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<th>Table 2.4</th>
<th>Goals at the Exolevel</th>
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<tr>
<td>Create understanding of baseline behavior</td>
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<tr>
<td>Develop bullying prevention policy and procedures</td>
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<tr>
<td>Develop a bullying prevention committee to drive prevention program</td>
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<tr>
<td>Train all school staff</td>
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<tr>
<td>Use internal and external experts</td>
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</table>
**Develop Bullying Prevention Policy and Procedures**

I recommend that schools first make the decision to create a bullying policy and not position it in an existing discipline code. Bullying is a complex issue that has specific strategies and prevention efforts that should not be addressed as only a discipline issue.

There are several key elements of an effective stand-alone school bullying policy that should be considered (O’Moore, 2000):

- To create a school culture that encourages children to report and discuss incidents of bullying
- To raise awareness of bullying and identify it as an unacceptable behavior with all of the school staff, students, and parents
- To ensure comprehensive monitoring of all areas of school and all school activities
- To establish procedures for noting and reporting incidents of bullying
- To establish procedures for investigating and dealing with incidents of bullying
- To establish support for those affected by bullying behavior and for those involved in bullying
- To work with various local agencies in countering all forms of bullying
- To evaluate the effectiveness of school policy on reducing bullying behavior

It is important to remember that no policy on bullying will be effective if it is not in the context of a bullying prevention program that intervenes simultaneously on all levels of the ecology. It must have a firm commitment from the leadership of the school and district, and the policy should be evaluated regularly.

**Develop a Bullying Prevention Committee to Drive Prevention Program**

The efforts of a bullying prevention committee will have a dramatic affect on change in school climate and drive the implementation beyond its initial efforts. Typically, intervention begins in this stage in work groups. These groups are dedicated to bringing together
various representatives of concerned people to problem solve and devise solutions. Interdisciplinary leaders, or those who have a passion for bullying prevention, should be considered for these work groups. Schools should try to appoint a representative of all employees within the school, including a principal or assistant principal, teachers, and nonteaching staff, such as cafeteria and custodial staff, bus drivers, and the school resource officer. Intervention at this level in the school setting must be seen as a schoolwide intervention.

The coordinating committee generally works with a trained consultant, who trains the committee on bullying prevention and assists in developing a comprehensive bullying prevention program that has interventions at all levels of the school ecology. The committee would then train all the staff and students of the school and ensure ongoing implementation of the bullying prevention interventions.

*Train All School Staff*

Everyone has their own concept of bullying drawn from a variety of situations: our childhood experiences with bullying, what others have told us as we grew up, and what we have learned in our adult years. Many of our ideas about bullying can come from long-held myths. For this reason, it is important to train all staff on the true nature of bullying, the policy and procedures of the prevention program that will be implemented in the school, and the interventions that will be used within the school setting.

*Use Internal and External Experts*

It is often helpful to have a consultant assist with any schoolwide transformation. Consultants are recommended because they have expertise in the process of consultation and bullying prevention. They can focus the group to become as effective and efficient in reaching the goals it has created. The consultation process begins typically with an initial discussion between the consultant and someone from the administration of the school. Development of a committee follows, and the consultant guides the group through a process of planning and implementing goals established for school policy and bullying prevention and intervention.
strategies. Consultation with a bullying prevention expert increases the likelihood of obtaining one of the essential ingredients of the ecological approach, which is to increase the resources of the school. Having the in-house expertise of a bullying prevention committee meets a second essential ingredient: sustainability. Following the first year of implementation, the consultant serves only as a resource to the school. The bullying prevention committee takes the responsibility for sustaining the enthusiasm and implementation beyond the first year.

Macrosystem

The macrosystem is the context that is the most distant from the individual. The macrosystem includes broader societal attitudes (Barboza et al., 2009), and these attitudes might be influenced by the media and various subcultures. An example of macrosystem influence could be the belief of one’s inability to escape poverty based on the cultural beliefs of a community with a low socioeconomic level. Interventions specific to the macrosystem are given in Table 2.5.

Adapt Policy to Conform to State and Federal Law

A transformation that is happening across the country related to bullying prevention is that legislation is now reforming educational approaches, with states enacting antibullying laws. Many states are now providing model policies that can be easily adopted into existing school policy. Schools need to be aware of recent legislation and adapt their school policy accordingly.

Use Media to Announce Bullying Prevention Efforts

The primary macrolevel intervention in the school setting is to use local media to educate the public on the harmful effects of bullying
victimization or how they can join in prevention efforts. Schools have found many creative ways to do this, including having the mayor of the city make a proclamation for a bullying prevention day, public service announcements, and offering interviews for local television.

*Advocate to Reduce School Violence*

Advocacy is another intervention at this level. Brenda High and Robin Todd are examples of how individuals can lead successful advocacy at the macrolevel. They have developed comprehensive Web sites (http://www.jaredstory.com, http://www.bullypolice.org), have written a book on bullying and suicide, and work within their communities to have an impact on bullying prevention legislation. Other media for advocacy efforts can be social networking sites such as Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, and MySpace.