



Bullying of Sexually Diverse Children and Adolescents

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NASP Communiqué, Vol. 35, #5

February 2007

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As numerous students, parents, and educators can readily attest, bullying is a frequently-occurring, painful phenomenon of childhood. In fact, peer victimization is a widespread problem in schools throughout the United States, with approximately 30% of all students reporting being bullied by peers sometime during their school careers (Nansel et al., 2001). While overall school violence has declined (Centers for Disease Control and Protection [CDC], 2006), childhood bullying has persisted, possibly because: 1) children's and adolescents' aggressive, dominance-seeking behaviors have not been eradicated, but merely have changed forms from overt demonstrations to more subtle and covert actions that are therefore less likely to be noticed and addressed by educators and parents; 2) there is a discrepancy between students' attitudes (which are often against bullying) and their actual behavior in bullying situations (encouraging the bullying, silently witnessing it, giving little support to victims); and 3) contextual factors persist, such as poor adult supervision, unstructured, unscheduled time at school, and educator ambivalence regarding bullying behavior (Ross, 1996; Salmivalli, Lagerspetz, Björkqvist, Österman, & Kaukiainen, 1996).

Bullies and Victims

Although there are some differences in definitions of bullying, most researchers tend to agree that peer victimization implies a differential power status between bullies and their victims, repeated acts over time, and treatment that is physically, verbally, and/or psychologically damaging to victims (Smith & Brain, 2000). Understanding the breadth of bullying has become increasingly difficult in recent years, as acts of verbal abuse and relational forms of victimization have been added to the list of primarily physically aggressive behaviors that traditionally have defined bullying. Additionally, due to their access to technology, children also may engage in cyber-bullying, wherein bullies humiliate their victims via e-mail, instant messaging, and/or blog postings (Price, 2004).

Regardless of its form, bullying is associated with a variety of negative outcomes for both bullies and their victims. Comorbidity exists between bullying and mental health disorders, such as attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder, depression, oppositional defiant disorder, and conduct disorder (Kumpulainen, Rasanen, & Puura, 2001), and there is a greater likelihood that perpetrators of bullying behavior will engage in criminal behavior, domestic violence, and substance abuse as adolescents or adults (Farrington, 1993). Students who frequently bully seem to continue to rely upon dominance-oriented strategies as they age, which may partially explain why they tend to experience a decline in popularity when they enter high school (Olweus, 1993).

Child bullies are also more likely than peers to have poor academic achievement and struggle with career performance in adulthood (Carney & Merrell, 2001).

Victims of bullying often suffer from feelings of loneliness and low self-esteem (Bullock, 2002). At school, these students are frequently fearful and intimidated, which hampers their ability to concentrate in class and learn effectively (Bullock, 2002; Price, 2004). In a longitudinal investigation of relational aggression, physical aggression, and social-psychological adjustment in elementary school students, Crick, Ostrov, and Werner (2006) found that the strongest predictor of future internalizing and externalizing behavior problems, as well as increases in these behaviors, was the combination of relational and physical aggression. Further support for the relationship between being bullied and externalizing behavior problems was found by Sullivan, Farrell, and Klierer (2006), who concluded that different forms of peer victimization were significantly related to cigarette use, drug and alcohol use, and delinquent behaviors in a sample of urban middle school students. For some young victims, school becomes such an aversive place that they desire to cease attending altogether. Although specific studies regarding the relationship between school avoidance or refusal and bullying are few, some researchers have speculated that suffering from peer victimization keeps many students from attending school each day, causing many young people to miss valuable instructional time, thus further undermining their capacity to be successful academically (Buhs, Ladd, & Herald, 2006; Kochenderfer & Ladd, 1996).

Bullying of Sexual Minority Youth

Among those at greatest risk for being bullied by peers are youth whose non-gender conformity or sexual orientation places them in the minority, which includes those who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender (LGBT) and perhaps those questioning their sexual orientation as well, a group of adolescents who represent about 5% of American high school students (GLSEN, 2006). For as many as two million school-age children and adolescents, victimization may be related to their perceived sexual orientation, including verbal and physical harassment, threats, and intimidation (Browman, 2001). Such youngsters also tend to be subjected to derogatory comments, name-calling, and/or jokes pertaining to their actual or perceived sexual preference (Horowitz & Loehning, 2005). In a study of 218 secondary school students and teachers in Pennsylvania, more than 80% of students reported that they heard various homophobic remarks at school (Grant, 2006). Such treatment can have a variety of negative outcomes for the development of sexual minority youth, including low self-esteem, depression, suicidal ideation or completion, abuse of alcohol and other substances, sexual acting out, exposure to sexually transmitted diseases, and subjection to violence at rates higher than their heterosexual counterparts (Callahan, 2001; National Association of School Psychologists, 2004).

Adams, Cox, and Dunstan (2004) contend that much of the prejudice, discrimination, and victimization associated with developing a non-heterosexual identity are encountered at school. As a result, for many sexual minority students, school is experienced as unsafe, and hence their survival, rather than their education, assumes top priority (Weiler, 2004). Because LGBT youth often fear being attacked and/or ridiculed while at school, remaining focused on learning tasks presents quite a challenge, placing these students at heightened risk for a variety of academic difficulties and scholastic underachievement (NASP, 2004). When compared to their

heterosexual peers, sexual minority youth are also more likely to be absent frequently and leave school altogether, with 28% dropping out of school before graduation (NASP, 2004; National Mental Health Association, 2004).

The adverse effects that bullying can have upon the lives of sexual minority youth extend far beyond the academic realm. For example, students whose behavior is atypical for their gender (Young & Sweeting, 2004) and sexual minority youth frequently report a loss of friends due to their sexual orientation (D'Augelli, 2002), and many feel lonely and isolated from members of their peer group (Callahan, 2001). In an attempt to avoid rejection and/or ridicule at the hands of their peers, sexually-diverse youth may hide their sexual orientation, which often intensifies the sense of confusion and self-doubt that typically plague these children and adolescents. As previously indicated, those who choose to reveal their sexual orientation to others generally fare only marginally better, however, as they risk violence, harassment, prejudice, and discrimination by their peers, families, and/or teachers, as well as society at large (Weiler, 2004).

Gender-role nonconformity has been found to be associated with suicidality among gay male youth, with bullying mediating this relationship (Friedman, Koeske, Silvestre, Korr, & Sites, 2006). Further, as sexually-diverse youth progress from adolescence into adulthood, they may carry the scars from peer harassment with them. In a study of 1,285 gay, lesbian, and bisexual adults in the United Kingdom, 31% reported attempting suicide, which was associated with discrimination such as physical attack or school bullying (Warner, 2004). Thus, while sexual minority youth may face the same social and developmental challenges as their heterosexual peers, the added burdens of social isolation, selfdoubt, and fear create difficulties beyond those experienced by their non-sexual minority counterparts, during adolescence and beyond (Weiler, 2004).

Of particular concern to schools is that much victimization of students based on sexual orientation occurs at a low level, and as a result, often goes undetected by educators and other school-based professionals. While LGBT students are frequently bullied and harassed by peers, many do not report the problem to school officials (Grant, 2006). Additionally, when they are aware of the problem, educators may not address bullying of sexually-diverse children and adolescents because of fear of discrimination, fear of job loss, their own prejudices, or failure to recognize bullying based on sexual orientation as a serious problem (Browman, 2001). Nonetheless, as Dupper and Meyer-Adams (2002) assert, even low level victimization angers and alienates youth, and contributes to an overall hostile school environment. In addition, harassment by peers undermines students' physical and emotional well-being and safety, and could potentially result in retaliatory violence (Dupper & Meyer-Adams, 2002). Unfortunately, research conducted by Adams and colleagues (2004) indicates that few schools specifically address issues pertaining to sexual orientation in their anti-bullying policies. Thus, in order to improve the educational experience of sexual minority students, it is vitally important that school psychologists, educators, and other school staff develop an increased awareness of the issues faced by these students, and learn effective strategies for preventing and intervening in instances of bullying of LGBT children and adolescents.

Role of the School Psychologist

In a recent survey of school psychologists (all of whom were members of NASP), Savage, Prout, and Chard (2004) found that school psychologists tend to report positive attitudes toward sexual minority youth, and that many are willing to address the issues faced by these students while on the job. However, numerous practitioners surveyed reported low-to-moderate levels of knowledge regarding the difficulties faced by sexual minority youth, and most felt inadequately prepared to deal effectively with these students in their schools (Savage et al., 2004). As educators trained in prevention, assessment, and intervention regarding mental health issues, school psychologists are in an ideal position to effect positive change in the lives of sexual minority youth. The following recommendations provide an outline of specific steps that school psychologists can take in their efforts to improve the educational, social, and emotional experiences of sexually-diverse children and adolescents at school.

Providing education and training to school personnel and students. Dupper and Meyer-Adams (2002) indicate that school personnel are often indifferent and lack training relevant to sexual minority youth; in some instances, they may actually be perpetrators of victimization of this population. Clearly, this finding underscores the need for school psychologists to provide training and education for educational personnel regarding the ethical and legal responsibility to ensure that all students, regardless of their sexual orientation, are protected and treated respectfully (Weiler, 2004). Educating staff regarding the unique difficulties often faced by sexual minority youth, as well as effective ways to interact with and respond to concerns voiced by sexually-diverse children and adolescents, should likewise be beneficial.

Similarly, educating students in this regard is critical to improving the experience of LGBT youth at school (NASP, 2004). School psychologists and other school-based mental health professionals can present information about bullying of sexually-diverse students and the damaging effects of peer-harassment upon children's and adolescents' present and future functioning. Films such as *Let's Get Real*, the Columbine Award winner for Best Short Documentary by the Moondance International Film Festival, can be used to initiate discussions among middle and high school students about the social issues related to bullying and peer-violence. In this film, sixth through ninth grade students talk about bullying from a wide range of perspectives, including those who have been perpetrators, victims, and bystanders (New Day Films, 2006).

Showing support for diversity. School psychologists should model the use of accepting and affirming language, attitudes, and behavior in their daily interactions with students and school staff (NASP, 2004). In addition, it is critical that school psychologists provide acceptance and support to sexual minority or questioning youth, as these students tend to fear being misunderstood and/or rejected, yet desperately need to feel that they are accepted both by peers and trusted adults (Weiler, 2004). School psychologists can identify themselves as supportive of sexually-diverse youth by affixing rainbow posters or stickers outside of their office, or by placing "safe zone" stickers on their doors (Weiler, 2004). These gestures also send the message to students that the school psychologist is a trusted adult who can be consulted when issues relating to sexual orientation arise. For interested individuals, several posters (such as those referenced above) are available for download and printing from the NASP website at <http://www.nasponline.org/advocacy/glbtposters.aspx>.

To further demonstrate their acceptance of all students, school psychologists can support the development of groups that promote understanding and acceptance of human diversity (NASP, 2004). For example, they can advocate for the formation of Gay/ Straight Alliances within their school system to provide sexual minority youth with a forum for discussion and support, and to educate their heterosexual peers. The Safe Schools Manual, created by the Saint Paul Public Schools' Out for Equity program, can be used to provide support to sexually-diverse students, families, and educators through suggestions for implementing and supporting Gay/Straight Alliance after-school clubs and guidelines for operating school-based LGBT support groups (Horowitz & Loehnig, 2005).

Counseling. In counseling (either individual or group-based), school psychologists can encourage sexual minority youth to discuss incidents of victimization based on their sexual orientation, and address any mental health issues that may arise as a result of these experiences (D'Augelli, Pilkington, & Hershberger, 2002). Before initiating a counseling relationship with a LGBT student, it is imperative that school psychologists be well-informed of the difficulties often faced by these individuals. Practitioners may gain such knowledge through a variety of avenues, possibly by reading, pursuing additional coursework, particularly in the area of human sexuality, or consulting with colleagues who have more knowledge and experience working with sexual minority youth. In addition, it is crucial that school psychologists continually monitor their own attitudes regarding nontraditional sexual orientation in an effort to ensure that any biases and beliefs they hold do not hamper their ability to work effectively with members of this population. In schools in which the student body is particularly diverse, knowledge of the stance that various cultural, ethnic, and religious groups take regarding homosexuality is also advisable.

Consulting for curricular changes. School psychologists can also advocate for the inclusion of information about homosexuality and sexual minority individuals into existing curricula. Making such curricular modifications provides sexually-diverse youth with role models and demonstrates to students that individuals who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender are capable of leading meaningful, productive lives. Altering the school curriculum to reflect greater tolerance and acceptance of LGBT individuals should also help to reduce social stigma and homophobic attitudes among students and staff alike (Callahan, 2001). Furthermore, including information relevant to sexual minority youth in the curriculum may help to reduce the sense of being misunderstood and the feeling of being invisible that are often experienced by these students (NASP, 2004). Specific curricular changes may include requiring students to read works written by well-known LGBT authors in an English class, or discussing the gay rights movement along with other civil rights movements in a history course (NASP, 2004). Further, the Safe Schools Manual contains psychoeducational lesson ideas and practical strategies to make schools safer for LGBT youth, as well as a comprehensive selection of local and national organizations and websites that provide service and support to sexual minority students (Horowitz & Loehnig, 2005).

Given that school psychologists often receive little or no professional training relevant to sexual orientation, advocating for curricular changes at the university level may also be beneficial. School psychologists should therefore encourage training programs to include coursework and field practice relevant to work with sexual minority youth, and to devote increased instructional time to discussions of issues faced by these students within the school setting. Additionally,

school psychologists can consult with college and university librarians to increase holdings of books, periodicals, and media devoted to topics of relevance and concern to students and faculty regarding sexual diversity.

Assisting in the development of school-wide policy. To ensure that sexual minority youth feel safe, school-wide policies forbidding anti-gay harassment should be developed and implemented or added to existing policies. School psychologists can assist in developing a systemic school policy of zero tolerance for discrimination and harassment, with particular attention devoted to bullying of sexually diverse students, since children and adolescents, faculty, and staff may not perceive this form of victimization to be as damaging as other kinds of intolerance. Elements of such policies should include a clear statement regarding specific incidents that will not be tolerated, such as name-calling, property damage, and physical or sexual assault (Weiler, 2004).

School-based practitioners can also assist in determining appropriate consequences for students violating school policy, and collaborate with school staff in its implementation. Because feeling safe at school is a necessary precursor to both academic and social success, the development of policies designed to protect sexual minority students from victimization is essential to improving the school experiences of these youth. An example of this may be found in the Harvey Milk High School in New York City, which was established in 1985 for the purpose of providing a safe learning environment for LGBT adolescents (Mayes, 2006).

Furthering knowledge through research activities. Although the issue of bullying in schools has received much attention in the research literature in recent years, a paucity of studies investigating victimization among LGBT youth in the United States have been conducted to date. However, because these students are likely to be bullied at rates higher than their heterosexual peers, and suffer from a variety of negative consequences as a result, a broader, in-depth understanding of the victimization of this population is sorely needed. School psychologists are thus advised to conduct and support research with this unique population of students, particularly with regard to effective interventions and programs specifically designed to address the needs of LGBT and questioning youth in schools. Additionally, school psychologists should ensure that relevant research findings are disseminated to colleagues, students, and parents (NASP, 2004).

Advocacy at the regional, state, and national levels. Using organizational consultation, school psychologists can also be valuable in assisting legislators in developing policies designed to ensure the safety of all students, regardless of sexual orientation or gender identity. In 2004, New Jersey was ranked as first among all 50 states and the District of Columbia in supporting safe school laws for LGBT youth and educators. Unfortunately, most students do not enjoy legal protections against anti-LGBT bullying and harassment. (Only 8 states and the District of Columbia currently have statewide legal protections for students based on sexual orientation, and only California, Minnesota, and New Jersey include protections based on gender identity or expression.) Further, more than 75% of the approximately 47.7 million K-12 students in the United States attend schools that do not include sexual orientation and gender identity/expression as statewide protected classes alongside federally mandated protections based on religion, race, and national origin (Snorton, 2005).

Conclusion

Although bullying of sexual minority youth in schools is widespread, educators are generally unaware of the degree of victimization faced by these students, and thus often fail to intervene in instances when bullying occurs. Furthermore, because school-wide antibullying policies tend not to directly address issues related to sexual orientation, it may be unclear to students and staff alike what types of behavior will/will not be tolerated in this regard, as well as the repercussions for failing to adhere to school policy. Nonetheless, given the variety of risks faced by sexual minority youth, addressing the unique needs of this population in the school setting is crucial. School psychologists are in an ideal position to effect positive change in the lives of sexual minority youth through a variety of methods, such as education, consultation, counseling, advocacy, and research activity.

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