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Bullying: How Counselors Can Intervene

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Summary Tease

A brief intervention that establishes school counselors as implementation leaders trains students to intervene as “defender” when they observe instances of bullying.

Bullying is a major problem today that affects individuals of all backgrounds. According to national data in 2015 from the U.S. Department of Education, approximately 25 percent of students between the ages of 12 and 18 report being bullied at school. In addition, bullying is a social phenomenon that often occurs in the presence of a peer audience, so most students have been involved in bullying as bystanders. Therefore, it is important for counselors to be intentional about addressing bullying at school and when working with clients.

To address bullying at school, counselors first have to be able to identify it. The literature defines bullying as intentional, unwanted and aggressive behavior that is often repeated in relationships with a perceived power differential.

Generally, researchers classify bullying behaviors into four categories: physical, verbal, relational and cyberbullying. Physical bullying includes any type of physical assault on the target such as hitting, spitting, pushing or kicking. It can also involve taking or damaging another student’s property.

Verbal bullying includes verbal statements such as name-calling, teasing or making threats. Relational bullying includes indirect attempts to damage the target’s reputation by spreading rumors, ignoring the target or telling others not to be friends with the target. Finally, cyberbullying utilizes electronic media such as email, social media or texting to intentionally harm another student.

In addition to being able to identify bullying, it is important for counselors to understand the potential short-term and long-term ramifications associated with bullying. These negative ramifications can occur for all individuals involved in bullying, including students who bully, students who are targets and students who are bystanders. For example, students who bully others are more likely to have issues related to substance use in adolescence and other problems later in life related to criminal behavior, violence and disruptive behaviors. On the other hand, students who are targets of bullying can experience negative emotional states, increased rates of suicidal ideation and suicide attempts, and problems related to academic performance and school attendance.

The negative consequences of bullying are far-reaching, however, and go beyond those students who are directly involved either as bullies or targets. Students who observe bullying as bystanders also experience problems themselves, including emotional distress and substance use. In fact, in some instances, bystanders report greater problems than do the students who are directly involved. Therefore, it is important for counselors to be able to identify bullying in its various forms and be aware of how participating in or observing bullying can clinically manifest in the lives of clients.

How School Counselors Can Make a Difference

Comprehensive, schoolwide intervention programs are considered a standard for practice in bullying intervention. However, meta-analyses and outcome studies evaluating the efficacy of comprehensive, schoolwide interventions show that the results, though generally favorable, remain mixed overall. Furthermore, these programs can be difficult to implement because of their related cost and required time allocation. Thus, school counselors can benefit from programs that are more accessible in terms of cost and time allocation, while establishing school counselors as leaders in program implementation.

A local school counselor reached out to me in 2013 as the faculty adviser for the Boise State University Counselors for Social Justice student group to help implement a bullying intervention program that would not place a high demand on her school in terms of time or financial resources. Along with two counselor education students, we worked together to adapt the bystander intervention component of Bully-Proofing (is this the same as the Bully-Proofing Your School comprehensive school safety program? Yes, it is the same) to develop the STAC training and strategies.

STAC stands for stealing the show, turning it over, accompanying others and coaching compassion. It is a brief intervention that can be easily implemented in schools and that establishes school counselors as leaders in implementation. The purpose of STAC is to train students as “defenders” to intervene when they observe bullying at school.

Our team conducted preliminary research indicating that the STAC program is effective in teaching elementary and middle/junior high school students bystander intervention strategies they can use as “defenders.” Specifically, after the training, students reported an increased ability to identify different types of bullying behavior, knowledge of the STAC strategies and general confidence intervening in bullying situations. Furthermore, in a randomized controlled study conducted with elementary school students, we found an increase in self-esteem among sixth-grade students trained to act as “defenders” relative to a wait-list control group.

The STAC Training

The first step in implementing STAC is for school counselors to select students who belong to different peer groups to be trained as advocates. The school counselor can provide the training, or he or she can partner with a local counselor education program to provide the training. The training can be part of a service-learning project in a school counseling course, part of an internship experience or a service project conducted by a student organization such as a local branch of Counselors for Social Justice.

The training lasts 90 minutes and includes didactic, experiential and concluding components. The didactic component involves an audiovisual presentation that discusses the definition of bullying, the different types of bullying behaviors (physical, verbal, relational and cyberbullying), the roles associated with bullying (bully, target and bystander), the negative consequences associated with bullying and the STAC strategies. Trainers incorporate several hands-on activities throughout the presentation to maintain the students’ attention.

The experiential component of the training includes student participation in set role-plays. Trainers divide students into small groups based on grade level and invite them to act out a bully situation and practice using the STAC strategies. School counselors can develop role-plays that are applicable to their respective school settings, thus equipping students to intervene as “defenders” in scenarios that are relevant and meaningful. The training concludes with all students coming together and sharing their favorite STAC strategy, signing a poster board that says “the end of bullying begins with me” and receiving a certificate of participation.

After the training, the school counselor provides support to students trained as “defenders” through brief follow-up meetings. If counseling students provide the training, they can return to the school once or twice each month to meet with students in small groups (based on grade level) for 20 minutes.

The goal of the small group meetings is to check in with the students and brainstorm how they can become more effective “defenders.” The meetings also allow school counselors to develop greater awareness of bullying at their schools from a student perspective and be aware of safety issues for students trained as “defenders.”

STAC Strategies

The first strategy students learn is “stealing the show.” This involves using humor to turn students’ attention away from the bullying situation. “Defenders” can implement this strategy in a manner that seems natural to them and that is in line with their personalities. Students report that this intervention feels authentic to them and they do not feel like they stand out in the peer group.

An example of “stealing the show”: A fourth-grade boy is teasing another child by making fun of his name in front of a group of students. A “defender” intervenes by making an appropriate and funny joke. Everyone’s attention, including the student who was teasing his peer, turns away from the target. Everyone laughs at the joke.

The second strategy is “turning it over,” which involves informing an adult about the situation and asking for help. During the training, students identify safe adults at school who can help. Students are taught to always “turn it over” if they observe physical bullying, or if they are unsure of how to intervene. Students are also taught to print out a hard copy of a post or other electronic evidence that suggests cyberbullying and bring it to a safe adult at school to document the incident.

An example of “turning it over”: An eight-grade student trained as a “defender” sees a demeaning posting on social media about a classmate. The “defender” prints out the posting and brings it to school the next day to show the school counselor. The school counselor can document the incident or take appropriate action that is in line with the school’s policy on bullying.

The third strategy is “accompanying others.” This involves the “defender” reaching out to the student who was targeted to communicate that what happened is not acceptable, that the student is not alone and that the student “defender” cares about him or her. This strategy can be implemented subtly by spending time with the student who was bullied and inviting him or her to participate in a shared activity such as playing basketball or going for a walk. The “defender” can also implement this strategy more directly by offering support and helping the student to process his or her feelings about being bullied.

An example of “accompanying others”: During recess, a “defender” observes a group of girls intentionally leave a fifth-grader out of a game by walking away and laughing. The “defender” approaches the girl who was left out and invites her to hang out. The “defender” then lets her know that what the other girls did to her was not OK.

The last strategy is “coaching compassion.” This involves gently confronting the bully either during or after the incident and communicating that his or her behavior is not acceptable. Additionally, the “defender” encourages the student who did the bullying to consider what it would feel like to be the target in the situation. The aim is to foster empathy toward the target.

“Defenders” are encouraged to consider this strategy particularly when they already have a relationship with the student who is doing the bullying or if the student who is doing the bullying is in a lower grade level and the “defender” thinks he or she can gain the student’s respect.

An example of “coaching compassion”: A “defender” is having lunch in the school cafeteria with a friend. The friend intentionally trips another student who walks by and then laughs at the student. After the incident, the “defender” talks with his friend and asks him what he thinks it would feel like to be in the target’s shoes. The “defender” also shares a story about when another student intentionally embarrassed him and how that negatively impacted him.

Addressing Bullying Isn’t Just for School Counselors

School counselors are well-positioned to address bullying at school by providing intervention strategies and support for students. However, all counselors can play an important role in addressing the problem.

Counselors can begin by engaging in self-exploration and becoming aware of their own attitudes and reactions to bullying. Research findings indicate that there is a discrepancy between students’ and adults’ perceptions of bullying at school, with students perceiving bullying to be a more significant problem than do school personnel. Considering that 1 in 4 students report being bullied, and whereas almost all students are bystanders to bullying at some point in their educational experience, it is likely that most counselors have had personal experiences with bullying, whether as a bully, a target or a bystander. This personal experience can influence their approach to addressing the problem, including the possibility of minimizing bullying behaviors.

Another strategy for counselors to follow is to reject the idea that negative, aggressive behaviors are developmentally appropriate or “just kids being kids.” This leads to a third strategy, which is for counselors to help educate school personnel that bullying is a legitimate issue that requires attention and intervention. Counselors can extend this effort further by advocating for funding at the state level or through the school board to provide an effective intervention such as a comprehensive, schoolwide program.

Outside of the school setting, counselors can also address bullying by being aware of how it can negatively affect their clients throughout the life span. For example, when working with children and adolescents, counselors can intentionally assess their clients’ participation in bullying, while being aware that being a bully, target or bystander can be associated with clients’ presenting problems. Questions assessing participation in bullying can be an ongoing part of working with these clients. Furthermore, counselors can educate parents and caregivers to also ask their children about involvement with bullying at school.

Upon learning that clients are currently participating in or affected by bullying, counselors can assist them in developing alternative behaviors. For example, counselors can help clients who bully to develop skills to engage in prosocial behaviors aimed at establishing themselves within their peer groups. Counselors can work with clients who are targets of bullying to develop positive coping skills, reach out to others and stand up for themselves in a safe and effective manner. Counselors can empower clients who are bystanders of bullying to use the STAC strategies to intervene effectively.

If bullying is not addressed with clients when they are children or adolescents, it can have a residual effect later in life. Therefore, when working with adult clients, counselors can incorporate issues related to bullying in case conceptualization and treatment planning.

Conclusion

Bullying is a pervasive problem affecting youth today with associated short- and long-term negative consequences. Although comprehensive, schoolwide interventions are considered a best practice, they can be difficult to implement because of the associated cost and required time commitment from school staff.

The STAC strategies are a promising approach that provides school counselors with a brief program in which they can be leaders in implementation. The program’s goal is to train students to intervene as “defenders” when they observe bullying at school.

Although school counselors are well-positioned to address bullying, all counselors have an important role to play. Counselors can implement intervention strategies in their clinical practices and get involved with advocacy.

Knowledge Share articles are developed from sessions presented at American Counseling Association conferences.

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