Alternatives to Zero Tolerance: Non-punitive Approaches to Bullying Intervention

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Overview

- Critical review of punishment as a bullying reduction strategy
- Non-punitive strategies
  - Brief Solution-Focused Counseling for individuals
  - Support Group Approach
  - Method of Shared Concern
  - Restorative Justice

Punitive Responses

- New study found that 31% of Texas students were suspended or expelled at least once during grades 7 – 12 (average was 4 times). These actions were linked to lower graduation rates and to later criminal activity. Minority students disproportionately received the more severe punishments (Schwartz, 2011).
- The effects of "zero tolerance" policies are questionable at best (Boccanfuso & Kuhfeld, 2011; Casella, 2003; Nelson, 2008; Skiba, 2000, 2004).
- Punishment may work in the short-term, but is unlikely to produce lasting change in attitude or behavior.
- The student learns what NOT to do, but does not get information about appropriate behavior.
- The effectiveness of punishment varies with the aversiveness of punishment and likelihood of being caught if behavior is repeated.

- Punishments in school tend to be generic (e.g., detention, suspension, etc.) so offender is not necessarily made aware of extent of harm caused.
- The punished child may be angry and resentful, and seek to retaliate.
- The bully's reaction to being punished depends on his/her respect for the punisher. Some bullies do not respect their teachers.
- Approval by peers often outweighs the punitive action by the school.

- The punished bully may become more secretive about the behavior.
- The context or situation in which the behavior occurs is usually considered irrelevant.
- A student who is suspended or expelled loses the opportunity for positive socialization.
- Data do not show significant reductions in number of offenses following implementation of zero tolerance policies.

Responding to skeptics

- Develop a collaborative goal of STOPPING THE BULLYING and, when possible, REPAIRING RELATIONSHIPS.
- Express confidence in the approach and your ability to achieve the goals.
- Point out that punishment (sanctions, consequences) have not been effective.

Non-punitive Strategies

- Brief Solution-Focused Counseling for Individuals
  - Useful in low-severity incidents
- Support Group Approach (Sue Young, Robinson & Maines)
  - Most suitable with elementary/middle school students
- Method of Shared Concern (Anatol Pikas, Ken Rigby)
  - Most suitable for middle and secondary students
  - Useful when bullying is a group activity
- Restorative Justice
  - Focus is on making amends and repairing relationships
  - Can be formal or informal

Incident Severity	Method	Group Sessions	Participant Criteria	Outcome
Very High	Sanctions	None	Offense is legally actionable	Offender is punished
Moderate to High	Restorative Justice	Multiple	Harm to target is severe, parents need to be involved	Amends are made, relationships are restored, bullying stops.
Moderate	Method of Shared Concern	Multiple	Target's functioning is affected in multiple areas (attendance, school engagement, etc.)	Bullying stops and does not re-occur.
Low/Moderate	Support Group	Multiple	Target shows distress, feels isolated	Bullying behavior stops. Social support for target increases, self-esteem of supporters increases.
Low	Individual BSFC	None	Target shows little distress	Bullying behavior ceases. Self-efficacy of target increases.

Brief Solution-Focused Counseling for Bullies and Victims

- Sue Young's approach (Young & Holdorf, 2003) is an excellent guideline to follow.
- Assumptions:
  - Clients have the internal strengths and resources to change school problems.
  - Focusing on past successes and exceptions leads to solutions
  - Focusing on future possibilities and solutions enhances change.
  - Small changes lead to larger ones.

Techniques

- Scaling
- Pre-suppositional language
- Seeking exceptions to the problem
- Miracle question
- Strengths-focused

Steps in BSFC

- 1. Build rapport and cooperation
  - Define problem
  - Express confidence in ability to help
- 2. Scaling
  - Generate solutions
  - Focus on exceptions to the problem
  - Use “miracle question”
- 3. Compliment strengths
- 4. Follow-up

Advantages of Support Group Method

- No sanctions means no one is unfairly punished. The absence of assigning blame reduces defensiveness on the part of bullies and bystanders.
- The absence of punishment reduces the fear of retaliation on the part of the victims.
- Educators can show parents that they are intervening.
- Children are involved in a positive approach to helping others.
- It is effective in many cases.

Steps in Support Group Approach

- Interview victim
  - Express confidence in your ability to help
  - Get names of bullies and defenders
  - Get permission to convene the group
- Convene Group (6 – 8 students, victim not included) and explain purpose
  - “I need your help, and I know you can help.”
  - “Student X is unhappy at school. I need your help to make things better.

- Elicit empathy from members of group
- Gather information
  - Tell students they see X more than you do, and may have information about what is causing the unhappiness. Do not allow names to be used.
- Solicit suggestions (from everyone if possible)
- Close session
- Follow up with victim and group

Method of Shared Concern

- This method assumes that a great deal of bullying involves **groups of students** – it is best to work with those involved in a case of bullying **first as individuals** and later as a group.
- It is a multi-stage process involving a series of meetings culminating in a final occasion at which the bullies and the victim are expected to resolve their differences.
- It requires that practitioners are carefully trained and that they select cases that are appropriate – typically medium level severity cases with group involvement; but not mild cases involving two individuals, nor very severe cases for which legal or criminal proceedings are demanded.

Comparing Support Group and MSC Approaches

- Permission from victim?
- Individual meetings?
- Written agreements?

Steps in MSC

- Identify the problem, including who is involved. Do NOT gather information from the victim, but by observation and reports.
  - This protects the victim from being viewed as "telling."
- Each individual is seen individually in turn, starting with the ringleader.
  - After inviting the student to be seated, the interviewer waits for eye contact before beginning.
  - Facilitator expresses concern for victim, student is asked what he/she knows about situation, is asked what he/she can do to help. Facilitator praises constructive suggestions, makes suggestions if necessary, and schedules next meeting.

- Repeat interview with all bullies.
- Meet with victim.
  - Express concern
  - Explain you have talked to each bully and obtained an agreement from them to cooperate.
  - Inquire about possible provocation by the victim.
  - Schedule next meeting.
- Continue meeting with each bully individually until situation improves due to their actions.
- Then meet with them as a group.
- Hold meeting with bullies and victim in which all agree to good behavior.
- Gain agreement (written) on how each person will behave towards others in future.

Restorative Justice

- Basic Premises:
  - Bullying harms relationships, and the response should help **restore those relationships**.
  - Bullying values dominance; restorative justice values mutual support and human dignity.
  - The aim of interventions is to “put things right,” or “repair the harm.”
  - **The goal is not to assign blame but to help everyone involved find a mutually acceptable way forward**.
  - The aim of restorative justice is to integrate children who bully and children who are bullied into the school community so they can be cooperative members of the school community.

Restorative Justice: A New Paradigm

- **RETRIBUTIVE JUSTICE**
- Bullying defined as breaking rules
- Focus on establishing blame/guilt
- Adversarial relationship – authority decides penalty
- Imposition of negative consequence to punish and deter/prevent
- Attention to rules
- School community is represented by the authority
- Accountability defined in terms of receiving punishment

- **RESTORATIVE JUSTICE**
- Bullying defined as harm done to someone
- Focus on problem solving
- Dialogue and negotiation – everyone involved in cooperating and communicating
- Restitution as a means of restoring both parties, reconciliation is goal while acknowledging responsibility
- Attention to relationships
- School community involved in facilitating restoration
- Accountability defined as understanding impact of actions, taking responsibility and suggesting ways to restore harm

Thank you for your attention

and

your open minds!

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