

Olweus Bullying Prevention Program: Update from U.S. Director



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Tom Lickona: How does the Olweus program define bullying?

Sue Limber: Our survey states that a student is being bullied when one or more students: "(1) say mean and hurtful things or make fun of someone; (2) completely ignore or exclude someone; (3) hit, kick, push, shove, or lock someone in a room; (4) tell lies or spread false rumors about a person, or send mean notes and try to make other students dislike that person; or (5) do other hurtful things."

TL: According to your studies of U.S. schools, what percent of students say they've been bullied 2 to 3 times a month or more?

SL: Baseline Olweus surveys, completed by 524,054 students in grades 3-12 from 1,593 schools in 45 different states, find that:

- 17% said that they **had been bullied 2-3 times a month or more**. This included 23% of elementary students, 17% of middle school students, and 11% of high school students.

- 10% of all students (grades 3-12) said they **bullied others** 2-3 times a month or more.

- Girls' bullying peaks in 8th grade, when 10% say they bullied others 2-3 times a month or more. Girls' bullying then declines steadily through 12th-grade. Boys' bullying increases until grade 8, when 14% of boys say they bullied others 2-3 times a month or more, and stays fairly steady through 12th-grade.

TL: What else does your survey assess?

SL: We ask students where the bullying occurred, by whom, whether and whom they told, and how they usually react if they see or learn that a student their age is being bullied. More than half of students either say they try to help in some way or at least feel that they *should* help. Schools can build on that feeling of obligation by teaching them how to translate empathy into effective action.

TL: What do you recommend students do when they see someone being bullied?

SL: If they are comfortable doing so, they

should calmly tell the child who is bullying to stop—that what they're doing "isn't cool." They shouldn't get into a physical altercation. If they witness the bullying at school, they should tell their teacher, school counselor, principal or other adult they trust. They also can show kindness to students who have been bullied—by saving them a seat on the bus or in the cafeteria, telling them that no one deserves to be bullied, including them in activities, or simply listening to them.

TL: What are the characteristics of the typical school bully and typical victim?

SL: There's no single profile, but youth who frequently bully often have dominant personalities, positive attitudes towards violence, difficulty following rules, little empathy for their victims, skill at talking themselves out of difficult situations, and a kind of "top-dog" popularity among peers, even if they're not particularly well-liked.

Children who are bullied are much more likely than non-bullied peers to be anxious and withdrawn, depressed, and have low self-esteem. Students who bully and are also victims of bullying often show many of the characteristics of children who bully and characteristics of children who are bullied.

Reducing bullying requires a comprehensive effort.

TL: What can schools do to help bullies stop bullying and victims be less vulnerable?

SL: Reducing bullying requires a comprehensive effort involving all adults and students in the school. Much effort should be placed on prevention through building a culture of community and respect; setting clear rules for behavior; and giving students knowledge, skills, and resources to prevent and address bullying. When bullying occurs, there should be non-hostile but consistent consequences for youth who bully and support to help them change their behavior. Kids who are bullied need support and protection to ensure that the bullying doesn't continue.

TL: How successful has the Olweus program been in reducing bullying?

SL: Most recently, we've conducted a study of more than 18,000 students in Pennsylvania schools, elementary through high school.

After 2 years of program implementation, there was a 22% reduction in students' reports of being *verbally* bullied and a 23% reduction in reports of being *physically* bullied. We strongly encourage schools to repeat our survey annually to see what progress they are making and where there's a need for further improvement.

TL: What affects a school's success in using the Olweus program to reduce bullying?

SL: Clear school rules about bullying and class meeting time both appear to be especially important. Weekly class meetings are important for discussing and role-playing what bystanders can do.

TL: How has your program changed as a result of your experience with schools?

SL: Feedback from teachers and students has helped us refine our training, consultation, and supportive materials. Our class meeting manuals and videos, for example, were developed in response to some teachers saying, "I need extra help in this area."

TL: If a school wishes to use your program, what options do they have?

SL: Schools can purchase print and video materials including a schoolwide guide and teacher guide. But we strongly recommend, for fidelity of implementation, that they also receive training and ongoing consultation.

Schools can opt to hire a certified trainer to provide a 2-day training for their school's coordinating team and monthly phone or in-person consultation for that team. Alternatively, a district can have one of its own staff become a certified, in-house trainer. That person receives an initial 3-day training and a 2-day training later in the year, as well as ongoing consultation with us.

TL: Where can readers find your research?

SL: Two recent articles are: Limber, S.P. (2011). Development, evaluation, and future directions of the Olweus Bullying Prevention Program. *Journal of School Violence*, 10, 71-87.

Olweus, D. & Limber, S. P. (2010). Bullying in school: Evaluation and dissemination of the Olweus Bullying Prevention Program. *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*, 80, 124-134.

TL: Are there other bullying prevention programs with research support?

SL: Because the Olweus program began in the 1980s, it is the most researched, but web sites such as www.stopbullying.gov provide information on other programs and their research base. ■