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Bullying in Out-of-School Time Programs: Tips for Youth-Serving Professionals and Volunteers

Bullying is unwanted, aggressive behavior among school aged children that involves a real or perceived power imbalance. The behavior is repeated, or has the potential to be repeated, over time. Both kids who are bullied and who bully others may have serious, lasting problems.

In order to be considered bullying, the behavior must be aggressive and include:

- *An Imbalance of Power:* Kids who bully use their power—such as physical strength, access to embarrassing information, or popularity—to control or harm others. Power imbalances can change over time and in different situations, even if they involve the same people.

- *Repetition:* Bullying behaviors happen more than once or have the potential to happen more than once.

Bullying in Out-of-School Time Programs

Out-of-school time programs fill the gap for working parents and communities concerned about how and where youth spend their free time. Professionals and volunteers in this field cover a diverse range of activities and organizations.

- They *assist in extracurricular activities* as coaches in sports and recreation; instructors of dance, art, and music; advisors for academic clubs; and leaders of faith and worship groups.

- They work part-time or full-time to *teach new knowledge and skills* in after-school and tutoring programs; computer labs; homework centers; apprenticeships; entrepreneurial and job training; and in experiences in camping, scouting, and service learning.

- Many are staff, volunteers, and youth leaders with large national and community-based organizations (e.g., Boy Scouts, Girl Scouts, Boys and Girls Clubs, Big Brothers and Big Sisters, 4-H Clubs and YMCAs, along with many others) who enhance *every aspect of children's lives*—academics; social, artistic, and athletic skills; morality; and citizenship.

Because of the diversity of out-of-school time programs, it is difficult to compare or generalize the results. What is clear, however, is that good programs with active youth participation can reduce delinquency and improve social and cognitive skills of children and youth (National Institute on Out-of-School Time, 2003; Miller, 2005).

Students report that most bullying happens at school, but bullying does not stop at the end of the school day. Children and youth are also involved in bullying in out-of-school time programs. Although there is very little research on bullying in these settings, a national study of sixth through tenth graders in the U.S. (Nansel et al., 2003) found that

- Nine percent of boys and 5 percent of girls reported that they had been bullied away from school "sometimes" or "weekly" (compared with 16 percent of boys and 11 percent of girls who reported being bullied at school).

- Children who bully and who are bullied (both in school and away from school) are more likely than other children to be involved in fighting and carry a weapon. In fact, 70 percent of boys and 30–40 percent of girls who were involved in bullying outside of school on a weekly basis reported carrying a weapon in the past month.

Challenges and Opportunities in Out-of-School Time Programs

Out-of-school time settings present some particular challenges and opportunities for preventing and addressing bullying.

Challenges
- Bullying thrives where there is not enough supervision. When adult staff and volunteers supervise large numbers of youth, bullying may go unnoticed.

- Adults who do not interact with children regularly (e.g., meet once or twice a week and for brief periods) are often unfamiliar with the youths' personalities, behavior patterns, and friendships. This can make it difficult for adults to tell the difference among bullying, rough play, and conflicts between youth and to know how and when to intervene.

- Staff with extended-day programs may find that bullying during the school day carries over into before- and after-school activities.

Opportunities
- *Some children learn best from less structured, hands-on experiences* and without the pressure and competition typical in the classroom setting. Out-of-school time programs can easily integrate lessons that build self-control, confidence, and even resilience to bullying.

- *Children usually bully peers who are their same age or younger.* In out-of-school time settings that include children of different ages, younger children may be at risk for being bullied. This offers an opportunity to call upon older adolescents to mentor or protect younger children or others who may be particularly vulnerable to bullying.

- *Children and youth who are bullied at school* can benefit greatly from taking part in activities that allow them to pursue their interests and discover their talents and develop friendships with peers who share these interests. Doing so can increase their self-assurance and

self-esteem. Children who are bullied also may benefit from having a chance to make friends with peers other than their classmates. Sometimes it can be a relief for these children to interact with peers who don't go to their school and who don't view them as a victim of bullying.

• *Children and youth who bully others in school* tend to spend time with peers who support their bullying and who have positive attitudes toward violence. They, too, may benefit from community programs that separate them from their classmates. In closely supervised and structured settings, it is possible to challenge children who bully to use their social skills in constructive and appropriate ways.

How can youth-serving professionals and volunteers prevent bullying?

1. Support comprehensive bullying prevention in schools and communities.

Out-of-school time programs are well-placed to raise awareness about bullying and to form local coalitions to reduce and prevent bullying. Most youth organizations have long-standing alliances that bring together the critical partners: children, parents, schools, churches, businesses, and community leaders.

2. Create safe environments that are free from hostility and intimidation.

Adults must be committed to creating environments where children and youth feel safe and cared for by adults.

• *Learn about bullying*, its warning signs, and effects, and *investigate thoroughly if you suspect bullying*.

• *Establish clear rules about bullying behavior* in your out-of-school time setting and continually *reinforce the message that bullying is not acceptable behavior*.

• *Closely supervise* children and youth in your care and *interrupt bullying whenever it occurs*. Arrange special interventions to protect children who are bullied as well as interventions for children who bully. Follow up to monitor the results.

• *Provide support to parents.* Dispel myths about bullying and inform parents about ways to protect their children.

3. Encourage young people to speak out.

Solutions lie in defining new roles for youth and adults in the early detection and prevention of bullying.

• *Engage children and youth in discussions and other activities* that explore the problem of bullying. Teach children and youth that they all have roles to play in bullying prevention.

- *Encourage interested children and youth to take leadership roles in preventing bullying* in their schools and communities. Students may participate on anti-bullying committees to assess and plan bullying prevention strategies, plan and conduct bullying prevention projects, inform school personnel and parent/community groups about bullying in personal testimonies, lead discussion groups with teens and tweens (children aged 9 through 13) about how they can help prevent and stop bullying, and become a mentor to younger children.

References and Resources

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