Why Psychology is Failing to Solve the Problem of Bullying

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Abstract: Reducing bullying among students has become a major goal of schools in the modern world, yet little progress is being made and bullying is said to be a growing problem. Several metanalyses of the research on school anti-bullying programs have shown that these programs have little benefit and often make the problem worse. The purpose of this article is to explain the reason for the unimpressive results of our anti-bullying efforts: we have been taking a legal/law enforcement approach to the problem rather than a scientific/psychological approach.

April 20, 2010 marked the 11th anniversary of the Columbine shooting, the event that woke our nation to the problem of bullying. Since then, almost all of our 50 states have passed school anti-bullying laws, holding schools responsible for getting rid of bullying. The US Dept. of Education has recently declared that schools funding will be cut if they don't address every complaint of bullying. This development has been a great boon for school mental health professionals, whose positions are often the first to be cut when school funds are limited. The schools now need us more than ever to help eliminate bullying.

But this blessing for our positions comes with a problem of its own. How are we to accomplish this needed reduction in bullying? The research shows that most anti-bullying programs are not particularly effective (Smith, et.al, 2004; Vreeman, R., Carroll, A. 2007; Merrell, K. W. & Isava, D. M. 2008). Of course some individual schools have experienced marked improvements in bullying thanks to anti-bully interventions, but the overall picture is glum. If anything, bullying seems to become a more serious problem in every country that embarks on an official anti-bully campaign.

In the Dec. 2004 issue of the School Psychology Review, a team of researchers led Canadian School Psychologist David Smith published a study on whole school anti-bully programs (Smith, J., Schneider, B, Smith, P., Ananiadou, K., 2004). They had conducted a metanalysis of the published research on whole-school anti-bully programs to see how they're working. They discovered that 86% of the published studies showed that the anti-bully programs had no benefit or made the problem even worse. Only 14% of the published studies showed that the program produced a minor reduction in bullying. Not one program produced a major reduction. Subsequent metanalyses by Vreeman and Carroll (2007) and Merrell and Isava (2008) have had similar lackluster findings.

Furthermore, while we occasionally read articles about the success of some schools or programs in reducing bullying, no one seems to be eager to announce to the public when their anti-bullying initiatives are failing. Thanks to my website and my seminars on bullying, I get to hear from school mental health professionals and educators throughout

the country. Many of them inform me that their schools' anti-bullying programs seem to be causing an increase in bullying and are making their jobs unpleasant.

Why are our anti-bully efforts having such unimpressive results? Is there hope of finding approaches that can reliably reduce bullying in schools? A clue to the answers can be found in the June 2009 Communique. In the *President's Message* column, National Association of School Psychologists (NASP) President Ralph Cash wrote regarding RTI and the future of school psychology, "...the real future of school psychology lies in maintaining the emphasis on being psychologists" (Nash, 2009).

This same statement could be made regarding bullying. If we want to succeed in tackling the problem of bullying, we need to be psychologists.

Allow me to explain.

How Columbine changed the nature of our profession

The Columbine massacre was the most horrific event in modern school history until that time. The most terrible and obvious harm was the death and injury of so many people in the school. But it has also harmed schools, including school mental health professionals, in a way that is largely unrecognized.

In a sense, Columbine was the education world's 9-11. 9-11 made our country painfully aware of our vulnerability to terrorist attack. When it feels vulnerable, our government spares little in money and manpower. It has spent trillions of dollars and thousands of lives in the effort to make us safe from terrorism. It is arguable whether these efforts have made us any safer.

Similarly, 4.20.99 heightened our awareness of schools' vulnerability to random shootings by students. Additionally, it made us aware of the plight of victims of bullying. Columbine, and most of the random school shootings that preceded it, were committed by students who saw themselves as victims of bullying by their peers. There are children being bullied in virtually every classroom in every school, though few of them ever commit serious acts of violence. These millions of children, too, deserve to be spared the misery of being bullied.

While it would be difficult to convince our government to allocate billions of dollars for programs to promote mental health, it is much easier to obtain massive funding for school safety, for no one wants to see another school shooting, and no parent wants their child to be bullied in school. In response to Columbine, our government has made protecting our children from physical and emotional harm a top priority, and the resulting influx of funding for school safety has breathed new purpose and life into school mental health professions.

In support of the mandate to make schools safe, our leading psychological organizations declare that children have a right to go to school without being bullied, and advocate for

the passage of anti-bully laws, which turn bullying into a crime and hold schools legally responsible for the bullying among students. We have obligated ourselves to protect students from bullies by intensifying our vigilance in school hallways, bathrooms and playgrounds, and by instructing students to inform on their peers so that we can investigate, judge and punish ('administer consequences" to) bullies.

Because Columbine made school safety our top priority, psychology has been transformed from being primarily a discipline of science into a discipline within the field of law enforcement. In fact, there is little difference between the anti-bully lessons taught in school by police officers and those taught by us.

But which one of us studied psychology in order to become a security guard, detective, judge or disciplinarian? Most of us find these roles unappealing. Furthermore, this is a waste of our talents. A security guard tends to be cheaper and far more intimidating than a mental health professional.

There are two general approaches to solving social problems. One of them is the legal approach. The other is the scientific approach. There is a profound difference between the two.

The legal approach

In the legal approach, certain behaviors are declared to be crimes. The population is forbidden from engaging in these behaviors or they will be punished. Law enforcement officers are employed to protect people from the illegal behaviors, and victims are asked to report incidents to the authorities, who then apprehend, interrogate, judge and punish perpetrators. Victims are deemed to be innocent and perpetrators guilty.

The determination to criminalize behaviors is not based upon scientific research but on the decision of legislators, often succumbing to the lobbying efforts of special interest groups. Once they become law, rules must be obeyed even if they cause more harm than good.

The scientific approach

The second approach to social problems is scientific, the one that is supposed to define the practice of psychology.

The scientific approach is to understand objective reality, figure out how things work, and make changes wherever viable. The primary tool of scientists is logic, not emotion. We learn to take a non-judgmental approach to the subjects we study. If there is a universal phenomenon, we understand that it must have a purpose. We don't decide that the phenomenon is unacceptable and must be eradicated because we find it personally distasteful. We understand that when we intervene in a system, there are going to be unintended negative consequences. We do not assume that because our intentions are good, our proposed interventions will have only positive results; we consider the negative

effects as well. When research fails to support our hypothesis, we reject the hypothesis. If research shows that an intervention fails or makes the situation worse, we recommend that the intervention be abandoned.

The field of bullying is a legal approach

While bullying has become a domain of psychological study, our very conceptualization of the phenomenon (Olweus, 1993; Sassau, Elinoff, Bray, & Kehle, 2004) is a fundamentally legal one. The basic assumption is that children have a right to go to school without being bullied. We declare that bullying is not to be tolerated and must be eradicated. We consider bullies to be the guilty perpetrators and victims to be the innocent party. We have made it our professional function to protect innocent victims and to apprehend, prosecute, and punish and/or rehabilitate malicious bullies. We refer people for help to BullyPolice.org, an organization that calls bullies 'terrorists' on their homepage and pressures state legislatures to adopt tough anti-bully laws.

Our professional organizations insist that we use interventions that are scientifically validated. Laws are extremely powerful interventions with serious repercussions. Once passed, a law is not easily revoked, and must be obeyed even if it causes more harm than good. Anyone who violates the law can face the full force of the legal system. Being a defendant in criminal proceeding can ruin a person and even their family. Yet we advocate for the passage of anti-bullying laws without any validation, scientific or otherwise, that such laws actually reduce bullying, and with no apparent concern for the misery caused to people who will get charged with bullying offenses. Furthermore, school anti-bully laws hold the schools legally responsible for the bullying that goes on between students. Thus, it is the school that gets sued by parents when their children are bullied. As school mental health professionals, we are supposed to serve the interests of the school as a whole. Yet the laws we lobby for make schools liable to lawsuits when our anti-bully interventions fail to resolve a bullying problem. Since the research shows that our anti-bully programs cannot come close to guaranteeing that bullying will be eliminated, anti-bully laws make the schools that pay our salaries sitting ducks for disgruntled parents armed with lawyers.

The legal system is necessary for dealing with crimes–acts such as theft, rape, murder and arson. But most of the acts that we label 'bullying' are not criminal. They are the everyday mean behaviors that occur in virtually every social group, such as insults, criticisms, rumors, social exclusion, and non-injurious physical aggression. In fact, most of these so-called bullying behaviors are protected by the First Amendment. Furthermore, developmental psychologists insist that children need to experience these kinds of unpleasant behaviors in order to develop the maturity and competence to deal with the inevitable hardships of life (Guldberg, 2009). A NASP publication informs us, "Studies show that victims have a higher prevalence of overprotective parents or school personnel; as a result, they often fail to develop their own coping skills" (Cohn & Canter, 2003). Yet we advocate for school environments that completely protect children from bullying, as though that will produce children who can cope with bullying.

Rather than eliminating bullying behaviors, anti-bullying laws create a new class of criminal. In a NASP publication, Sassau et.al. (2004) inform us that:

> The prevalence of bullying is staggering. Estimates of the prevalence of bullying have ranged from a reported 10% of children who were said to have been the victims of severe acts of bullying to 75% of children who reported being bullied at least once during the academic year.

Not to be outdone, the American Psychological Association reports on their website that 90% of school children are victims of bullying (http://www.apa.org/ppo/issues/bullying.html)

Anti-bully laws therefore turn the "staggering" number of children who bully other children into de facto criminals.

Government statistics show that violent crime has been declining in schools in recent years, but that bullying has been increasing (http://youthviolence.edschool.virginia.edu/violence-in-schools/national-statistics.html). Law enforcement may indeed be effective in reducing violent crime, but it is counterproductive in dealing with the routine nasty behaviors that social creatures engage in. If the legal system could create social harmony, we wouldn't need psychology. We would simply pass laws forbidding all negative behavior and thereby create Utopia.

Why a legal approach to bullying is counterproductive

The January/February 2009 NASP Communique carried an excellent article by Evenson, Justinger, Pelischek and Schulz on the zero-tolerance approach to school discipline and how it causes more harm than good. Earlier, a task force created by the American Psychological Association on zero-tolerance had come to the same damning conclusions (Skiba, 2008). Yet these very same psychological organizations support anti-bully laws, which are the ultimate in zero-tolerance. If zero-tolerance is counterproductive for dealing with general school infractions, can zero-tolerance possibly be effective when applied to the behaviors we label 'bullying'?

There are several reasons why the orthodox, legalistic approach to bullying is ineffective and even intensifies the problem:

1. We are teaching students that bullying damages kids forever and should not be tolerated. Some new versions of the old "sticks and stones slogan" conclude with "and words can hurt forever" (Garbarino & deLara, 2002); "and words can really hurt me" (Conoley, 2008); and, "but words can kill me" (Merkwan, 2009).

These new 'sticks and stones' slogans may inspire some children to refrain from bullying others, but may also make them hypersensitive when they are on the receiving end of bullying. Whereas previously a child might have brushed off verbal attacks with, "That's no big deal. I can handle it. It's only words," an anti-bullying indoctrinated child is far

more likely to think, "Oh, no! I am being bullied! That is terrible! Words kill!" By getting upset, the child is reinforcing the bullying behavior. Also, the greater the victim's fear, the more the bully will attack. So by encouraging children to think of words as terribly dangerous, we are unwittingly increasing the frequency and intensity of bullying incidents.

2. We instruct kids to report their bullies to the school authorities who will investigate and punish. Doing so is guaranteed to earn them the wrath of their alleged bullies. In fact, being 'squealed on' is the primary reason that the alleged bullies despise their victims. Thus, we take the very act that makes kids hate each other most intensely and encourage them to do it even more. Then we wonder why bullying is becoming an escalating problem.

3. When we conduct investigations into bullying incidents, we would like the alleged bullies to admit their guilt. But this process rarely goes smoothly. No one, including mature adults, likes to think of themselves as the bad guys. The natural thing for people to do when accused of wrongdoing is to defend themselves and blame the other party. We then find ourselves in the frustrating position of judge, trying to determine which child is innocent and which is guilty.

If, as the result of our adjudication, we determine that one party is the bully and impose punishment, that child will get angry with their victim for getting them in trouble. So they are more likely to seek revenge and do something even worse to their victim. Then we must intervene again, either to avoid it happening or deal with the fallout. As with multiple offenders, the more the alleged bullies get accused and punished, the angrier, more aggressive, or more devious they become. This causes the sequence of accusations, investigations and punishments to continually repeat itself.

4. When we punish students for bullying, they get angry with us as well. Though we are paid to serve all students, we are likely to turn the accused bullies against us and against the school, driving them to become more anti-social.

5. By taking the side of the victims against bullies, we are rewarding kids for thinking and acting like victims. They discover that the more upset they become, the harder we fight for them, so it really pays to get upset. The more upset they get, the more they will get bullied. Furthermore, they discover there is no need for them to learn how to handle problems on their own because others will do it for them.

6. When a school informs the parents of the bullying incident, each set of parents is likely to take their own child's side. So, what begins as a problem between students escalates into a feud between families, with the school administration having to act as judge. If the administration fails to make both sides happy, the disgruntled parents may take the matter to the district office and even to the courts. The higher up the administrative ladder the case goes, the more intense the hostilities become. Even if the district wins the case in court, it will have cost many thousands of dollars in legal fees and wasted hours of

valuable administrators' time. If the district loses the case, it will cost hundreds of thousands–or even millions–of taxpayer dollars in payment to the victim.

By the way, the same process goes on at home. Most experts on sibling rivalry explain that when parents try to protect their children from each other, and judge and punish them for the way they treat each other, it makes the kids fight more frequently and intensively (Dreikurs, 1964; Corsini and Painter, 1975; Wolf, 2003; Faber and Mazlish, 1987). (If you're not sure about this, play policeman and judge between your own kids at home and see what happens! Oh! You already do this? And they fight all the time?) Can we expect that the same interventions that make matters worse at home will make things better in school?

A scientific approach to bullying

If we were to take an impartial scientific approach to bullying, it would take on a profoundly different character. The following are some of the changes we would see.

1. We would cease using the term 'bully.'

'Bully' is not a scientifically objective diagnosis but a subjective insult. Just as we would never refer scientifically to people as jerks, losers, fools, wimps or punks, it is inappropriate for scientists to refer to people as bullies, either. Bullying behavior is more accurately referred to by the non-judgmental terms 'dominance behavior' or 'aggressive behavior.'

The theoretical definition of 'bully'–someone who repeatedly and intentionally hurts other people who are less powerful than him/herself (Olweus, 1993)–in actuality refers to a psychopath, or 'anti-social personality disorder,' and a cowardly one at that, for s/he picks on people weaker than him/herself. In children, we would likely diagnose them with 'conduct disorder.' According to SAMHSA's Mental Health Information Center, "Conduct disorder affects 1 to 4 percent of 9- to 17-year-olds, depending on exactly how the disorder is defined." Most people with this disorder are quite fearless and will attack people stronger than themselves. A fraction, therefore, of psychopathic or conduct disordered people are cowards who prey on people weaker than themselves. Were we to research kids who fit the scientific diagnosis of a (cowardly) psychopath or conduct disorder, we would certainly find far fewer fitting that diagnosis than we currently find being 'bullies,' as most of the kids who are accused of bullying behavior are not psychopaths, cowardly or otherwise. They are simply less-than-saintly kids who get accused of committing the types of mean behaviors characteristic of ordinary mortals, including us adults.

2. We would stop insisting that bullying is 'abnormal.'

When both research and plain experience indicate that bullying is a highly prevalent phenomenon that happens in virtually every classroom in every school, bullying must

obviously be quite normal. Social groups in which bullying never happens would, in fact, be considered the abnormal condition. Simple contemplation of reality would make it clear that aside from Heaven, there are few places in which everyone is happy with the way they are treated by everyone else.

Bullying occurs in social groups in nature, both human and non-human, as well as in civilized human society. It takes place not only among kids in school but among the staff as well, including school mental health professionals. Bullying happens between nations, within government, in the workplace, in sports, in religious and civic organizations, and most of all right at home. In fact, even psychological organizations that promote anti-bully policies sometimes bully each other. For example, NASP has for years has been fighting hard to defend itself from the efforts of the more powerful American Psychological Association to limit the functions NASP certified psychologists can legally perform.

The metanalyses mentioned earlier make it clear how difficult it is to reduce bullying. Some researchers have suggested that when more overt forms of bullying are reduced, children don't simply give up their meanness but replace it with more covert forms of bullying or 'relational aggression' (Crothers, Blasik, Camic, Greisler, & Keener, 2008)

Furthermore, we would recognize that the 'bullies' are not 'them' but 'us.' According to the definition of bullying created by Olweus and universally repeated in the field of bullying, any behavior that can cause physical or emotional pain is bullying. Not only is it 'bullying' to try to coerce someone to do something they don't want to do, but "refusing to comply with someone else's wishes" is also bullying (Olweus, 1993, page 9). By the standards we are applying to kids in school, virtually all of us are bullies. Unless you are an angel or an absolute saint, you are a bully. Is it any wonder that we find that so many children are bullies? If we were to realize that the bullies are us, how many of us would be eager to call for anti-bully campaigns or laws?

3. We would consider the possibility that bullying may have a positive biological purpose.

Since bullying is apparently a universal social phenomenon, we must consider the possibility that it has a positive biological purpose, as implied by the more objective term, 'dominance behavior.' When scientists study animals in nature, the positive biological purpose of dominance behavior is apparent. They would never suggest that it should be eradicated because creatures on the bottom rungs of the dominance hierarchy are miserable. There is no social organization or relationship without imbalances of power. A scientific approach to bullying among humans would shun simplistic declarations that we must get rid of imbalances of power because they are unfair, and start examining the positive function this may be performing.

4. We would consider negative effects of anti-bully interventions and reject interventions that fail or that cause more harm than good.

When we conduct scientific research on interventions, we need to consider negative effects as well as positive, and we need to accept the results of our research. Scientists understand that there are likely to be unintended negative consequences to interventions. We don't assume that whatever we do is going to have only positive results.

Strangely, when it comes to the scientific research on bullying, one would be hard-pressed to find a single study that considers the harm that may be caused by anti-bully programs. In fact, when researchers find negative effects, they tend to excuse them away, as though they are flukes. When researchers find that anti-bully programs produced no reduction in bullying or even an increase, they tend to recommend continued use of the programs (Smith, et. al., 2004) or to declare them a success (Fonagy, 2009). When they find that teachers who do more to stop bullying in their classes face more bullying than teachers who do less, they insist that teachers need to do *more* to make bullying stop (Olweus, 1993).

5. We may conclude that the more serious problem is victims.

The anti-bully field sees bullies as the problem and victims as innocents who bear no responsibility for the situation. This is a result of the legalistic approach which has made it taboo to 'blame victims'. So we blame bullies instead. However, blaming is not a psychological function but a legalistic one. Science is not about blaming but about understanding. Scientists understand that everything affects everything else, and that actions have equal and opposite reactions. Psychologists understand that our behavior, both active and passive, influences the way others treat us. It is unscientific to declare that victims have nothing to do with being bullied.

As scientific psychologists fighting bullying, we are striving to make society safer. If we examine the people who commit the worst acts of violence, we will discover that they are not people who think and feel like bullies but by people who think and feel like victims. Though bullying experts routinely call anger, hatred and revenge 'bullying,' these are actually victim feelings and behaviors. When we get angry at people, it is because we feel victimized by them. When we hate people, it is because we feel victimized by them. When we want revenge against people, it is because we feel victimized by them.

An objective scientific approach would therefore require us to recognize victims, not bullies, as the people who are most dangerous to themselves and to others. To make society safer, it would make more sense to teach people not to think like victims rather than not to think like bullies. Unfortunately, our sympathy for victims and revulsion towards bullies apparently prevents us from taking a truly scientific approach to aggression among children. When we say that bullies are the problem, it is because we are thinking with a legalistic rather than scientific mindset.

Basics of mental health sciences

We are school mental health professionals. If we wish to have effective approaches to dealing with bullying, they should be consistent with well-established principles of the

our professions. If our conceptualization of the problem and the solutions we implement contradict those basic principles, how can we expect to be successful in helping people?

The following are some of the fundamental principles that I have learned in my thirty years of studying and practicing the helping professions and I believe are widely accepted by virtually all mainstream systems of counseling and psychotherapy.

1. Do not judge your clients.

When we judge our clients, we have a hard time understanding, empathizing with, and helping them. The very act of calling students 'bullies' is a negative moral judgment that prevents us from understanding and empathizing with them. We should be dedicated to representing the welfare of all students, but how can we represent those we are condemning as bullies?

2. Don't take sides.

When we take sides between people, hostilities usually escalate as each side tries to convince us that they are right and the other is wrong. Those of us who study marriage counseling learn not to take sides or the couple is likely never to come back to see us. In group counseling, attempts to judge between the members are likely to provoke vicious arguing, and the group experience will be catastrophic.

Yet the key premise of the anti-bully field is that we must side with victims against bullies. School mental health professionals who follow this course discover their job is not easy, as we try to figure out who is the real bully and who is the real victim. At best, we can make one side happy. The 'guilty' side is likely to hate the 'innocent' victim, and us as well.

3. Clients need to take responsibility for their problems.

People who feel miserable and fail to solve their problems tend to have an external locus of control. They blame others for their problems and tend to believe that what happens to them is not in their control. People who are happy and successful, in contrast, tend to have an internal locus of control. They take responsibility for their own lives and problems. (Taking responsibility does not necessarily mean that you created the problem in the first place, only that you are the one in the position to solve it. If you own a house and it snows, it is your responsibility to shovel it, even though you did not make it snow.)

To help clients improve their mental health, we need to increase their internal locus of control. However, the anti-bully doctrine holds that the problem is not in the victim's control, but that it is the fault of the bullies, that society must protect victims from bullies, and that the bullies must change. This promotes an unhealthy external locus of control.

Very few people come for help complaining that they are bullies. Virtually everyone seeking help insists he/she is a victim. If the problem is the bully, it means it is not the

person coming to us for help. But how can we help clients if, whenever they come to us for help, it becomes our job to make other people change?

4. Resilience requires experience of adversity.

We know that to grow up healthy, children need to develop resilience. Resilience, in fact, was the theme of the 2008 NASP Convention. Ironically, we have made it our mission to create a completely safe school environment–in which it is *impossible* to develop resilience. The goal of creating a completely safe school environment is a legal one. The psychological goal is to have children learn to deal with adversity, not to be sheltered from it.

5. Teach clients to handle problems by themselves.

Our job as mental health professionals is not to protect our clients. By protecting them, we are actually hurting them. We make them dependent upon us and prevent them from learning to solve their problems by themselves.

To develop self-confidence and self-esteem, children need to learn to handle problems by themselves. But how can we expect children acquire these traits when we instruct them, "If you're being bullied, you can't deal with it by yourself. Bullies are too powerful. You need the help of school staff, student bystanders and parents"? Rather than promoting self-reliance, this encourages crippling dependence.

6. Punishment is a poor way to achieve discipline.

Both NASP and the APA discourage punitive approaches to discipline. Yet we insist that there must be punishment of ('consequences' for) bullying and support the passage of anti-bully laws–and the power of law lies in its ability to punish transgressors. When it comes to bullying, we apparently forget that we are psychologists, not prosecutors.

7. Problems are caused by irrational beliefs.

One of the foundations of Cognitive Behavior Therapy and the similar field of Rational Emotive Behavior Therapy is that our problems are caused by irrational beliefs. To promote mental health, we need to promote rational thinking.

I have never encountered a school of psychotherapy or philosophy from anywhere in the world that teaches:

You have a right to live a life in which no one is mean to you. If people are mean to you, please don't think it has anything to do with you or your behavior. It is not your responsibility, but that of society, to stop people from being mean to you. Just tell the legal authorities and they will make people stop being mean to you.

It sure would be wonderful to live a life in which no one upsets us, and we are eager to provide our children with the torment-free environment we ourselves never knew, but the only place we have such a right is in Heaven, and we have to die to get in. Anyone who actually believes the above philosophy is bound to feel tormented throughout life. Promoting such a philosophy creates great business for lawyers and law enforcement agencies but brings misery to the general population.

8. We need to diminish hysteria.

When people act from fear and panic, they are more likely to take actions that are counterproductive to themselves and to others. To enhance mental health, we need to help people see that the world is not as terrifying as they believe. But the anti-bully field is promoting a terrifying view of bullies. Articles and books describing the horrors of bullying are convincing both children and adults that our schools are teeming with cold-hearted, sadistic psychopaths lying in wait to prey on unsuspecting, defenseless children (Coloroso, 2003). Our professional associations inform the public of the "staggering" prevalence of bullying (Sassau, et. al., 2004). Surveys are showing that bullying has surpassed drugs as the number one fear of parents (New Zealand Herald, 2009; The Canadian Press, 2007). Parents in ever-increasing numbers are home schooling their children for fear of bullies (Herald Sun, 2007). Rather than reducing hysteria, our anti-bully campaigns have been doing an admirable job of promoting it.

Why we engage in counter-therapeutic actions

If our anti-bully practices are contrary to the nature of our profession, why do we engage in them? I believe there are two basic reasons.

One, we panicked. Like the rest of the public, psychologists were horrified by Columbine. In a rush to prevent school shootings from ever happening again, we were eager to identify bullies as the source of the problem and to campaign to eradicate them from our schools.

The second reason is that the legal profession has come to dominate the mental health professions. The more laws there are against abuse, harassment and bullying, the more we need to think in legal terms and to avoid lawsuits. Thus we cease thinking of our clients as people who need to learn to solve their own problems and begin thinking of them as victims who need to be protected from abusers and perpetrators and bullies. To demonstrate that we are not negligent in protecting kids from each other, we replace therapy with security. Unwittingly, we have allowed the legal profession to transform us from practitioners of scientific psychology into law enforcement officers.

And thus, we lost our effectiveness.

As long as we treat bullying as a crime rather than a fact of life that we all need to deal with, we will be futilely fighting a losing battle.

Psychology also has the solution to bullying

Fortunately, the solution to bullying does exist, and it is not new. The problem is that few of us know how to teach the solution effectively and reliably.

As one scholarly article says, "Recent research illustrates that much of the historical advice given to victims is actually not very effective in reducing the frequency of bullying" (Conoley, 2008)**.**

Yes, giving advice is not terribly effective in helping victims. As counselors and therapists, though, we should have more powerful techniques than simply giving advice.

An article on bullying (Jeffrey, Miller & Linn, 2001) says,

> In an influential educational psychology text from the 1930's, Wheeler and Perkins offered advice about bullying: Ordinary teasing, especially on the part of boys, is a common expression of aggressiveness. When it is a source of difficulty in school situations, the victims of the teasing can usually be taught to laugh their way to freedom, or effectively to ignore the teaser. It should be explained to them that teasing is done for its effect and lacking its effect, it will cease. (1932, p. 433)

The article then goes on to say,

> Contemporary research findings (Olweus & Limber, 1999; Boulton & Hawker, 1997) indicate that the victims of bullying can rarely be taught to "laugh their way to freedom" from bullying.

The article does not say that "laughing their way to freedom" is not a solution. In fact, it is common knowledge that kids get teased because they get upset, and that if they stop getting upset, the teasing stops. Wheeler and Perkins, the 1930's psychologists cited derogatorily in the article, were correct. The problem is that current bullying experts don't know how to reliably "teach" victims to laugh their way to freedom.

Over the last couple of decades, I have taught hundreds of clients how to stop being bullied, without anyone's help and without getting anyone in trouble. My approach uses basic psychology that we have all learned in school. What makes my technique effective is that the understanding of the cause and of the solution to bullying are incorporated in an elaborate role-playing game. Role-playing is far more effective and fun than simply trying to explain something. If we tell kids they should stop getting upset by their bullies, they feel we are asking them to lose, to let the bullies get away with what they are doing to them. No one wants to be told to lose, so they tend to reject our advice.

The role-playing procedure I have developed makes the experience not merely cognitive but emotional. The clients feel what it is like to both bully and be bullied, and how simple it is to make bullying stop. They discover that rather than lose by not getting upset, they actually win. The great majority of kids 'get it' immediately through this game, and the

bullying usually decreases, or even disappears, within one week. The professionals who have learned to use my techniques are thrilled by their ability to help kids, and they enjoy renewed passion for their jobs. Furthermore, when kids see they can stop their bullies without anyone's help, their self-confidence and self-esteem improve, and they often become more popular as they shed their 'loser' image.

As mentioned earlier, teachers who put more effort into making bullying stop tend to have more bullying in their classes. I also use role-playing to show them how their interventions unwittingly cause an escalation of bullying and emotionally handicap their students in the process. These procedures, like the games I play with kids, are based on the psychological principles I learned decades ago, and make them come alive. But I learned these principles before psychology was converted into a branch of law enforcement that conceives of children in terms of innocent victims versus guilty abusers/perpetrators/bullies.

As mental health professionals, we can play a major role in improving school life for everyone and gain the gratitude of students, parents and staff. But we can only do that by opting for *the psychological over the legal approach to bullying, and returning to the role of the healing professionals that we set out to become.*

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