



ResearchLink

Bullying and the Role of Parents



“It’s almost like it is part of that culture of middle school, that bullying piece. Not that it’s right or wrong, but it’s been around. It’s an issue that has always been prevalent.”

– Tucson School Administrator

Bullying is an epidemic in schools and has been receiving national attention. Aggression can appear as early as preschool and can lead to negative adjustment such as depression, externalizing disorders (i.e violent behaviors), social anxiety, and so forth. Bullying is a specific form of aggression that includes the repetition of the intent to harm over time, a power difference and normally a dyadic relationship (i.e. the same two children are constantly engaging in a bully-victim relationship).

Bullying can include a wide range of acts. Physical acts include hitting, kicking, and name-calling. Relational acts can include exclusion, rumor spreading, and other forms of social attacks.

Most attention focuses on bullied children (“victims”) or those who are bullies. Less attention has been focused on parents’ experiences. We talked with parents in Tucson to understand their perspectives. Parents involved in this study reported many forms of bullying in their children’s school life, as well as racial and discriminatory slurs, derogatory comments about family members, and even death threats. Cyberbullying was also mentioned, and is a growing concern given the dramatic pace of technological change. In most cases, bullying occurred when the victim was already on the lower end of the social status chain, in other words they were considered “nerdy,” “too quiet,” or had just transferred to that school.

About the project

A total of eight parents and one school administrator from Tucson were interviewed about children’s experiences with bullying, as well as asked how the experiences impacted the family and what they felt needed to be done about it. Five mothers and three fathers were interviewed, representing six different youth. The children being discussed ranged from fifth to twelfth grade. This project was advertised at different city events and through word of mouth. The parents

originally contacted the Fund for Civility, Respect and Understanding in order to agree to participate. Interviews were conducted at participants’ homes or at select locations. Parents were asked:

- Their child’s experience with bullying
- How the bullying impacted them and their families
- What was done and what they felt needed to be done in order to address bullying



Bullying and the Role of Parents

The role of parents

“As a parent you feel like you have failed your child in some way – it is devastating.”

– Parent of a bullied middle school youth

Though research has shown that parents are one of the most important influences in a child’s life, little research has been done on how a child’s victimization influences the parents and families.

“I knew that something was wrong, and I asked him everyday, but he didn’t want to tell me.”

– Parent of a bullied middle school youth



The parents reported that they feel that their children are reluctant to tell them about bullying at school. This could be because the child is embarrassed or the child does not want their parent to intervene because they are afraid that intervention will make it worse. In one case, the child’s aggressors directly insulted family members; the child did not want to involve their family in the situation by sharing with their parents. Parents reported that this is especially hard – knowing that their child is upset about something and not knowing exactly what it is.

“The school administration did a wonderful job handling it, I know that is not always the case, so we appreciated it.”

– Parent of a bullied high school student

When children do chose to share, the parents we spoke to intervened in several ways:

1. In one case a mother reported that as soon as her son was assertive and told his bully to stop, the problem was resolved.
2. Some chose to call the parents of the bully, but in those cases this strategy did not seem successful in ending the bullying: the parents of the bully were more confrontational than helpful.
3. Others met with school administrators; those who did reported that this was sometimes successful. School administrations caution parents to remember that there are two children (aggressor and victim) involved and the school must take care of both. A very common method in Tucson school districts is to hear the situation from both students before action is taken.
4. In extreme cases, parents have contacted law enforcement. Those that have report that law enforcement has a very fast response time and very open communication lines.

All of the parents we spoke with also encouraged open lines of communication all around – from school to child, child to parent, school to parent.



Effects on child and family, as reported by parents

- Worry
- Helplessness
- Stress
- Loss of Appetite
- Skipping School
- School Transfer
- Aggression towards Siblings
- Depression



Arizona Anti-Bullying Laws and Policy Information

In 2005 Arizona passed state law HB 2368. This law states the following (www.bullypolice.org/az_law.html):

“Requires school district governing boards to adopt and enforce procedures that prohibit the harassment, bullying and intimidation of pupils on school grounds, school property, school buses, school bus stops and at school sponsored events and activities. The procedures must contain the following:

- A confidential process that allows pupils to report incidents of harassment, intimidation or bullying to school officials.
 - A procedure for the parents or guardians of pupils to submit written reports concerning harassment, intimidation or bullying to school officials.
 - A requirement that school district employees report suspected harassment, intimidation or bullying.
 - A formal process for the documentation and investigation of reported incidents of harassment, intimidation or bullying.
 - A formal process for an investigation of suspected incidents of harassment, intimidation or bullying.
 - Disciplinary procedures for students admitting to, or who are found guilty of, committing harassment, intimidation or bullying.
- A procedure that provides consequences for submitting false reports of harassment, intimidation or bullying.
 - Adds the school district and school district employees to those groups that are immune from civil liability for the consequences of adoption and implementation of policies and procedures regarding school district governing board requirements under Section 15-341, subsection A and the discretionary powers of school district governing boards under Section 15-342, unless guilty of gross negligence or intentional misconduct.
 - Makes technical and conforming changes.”

Despite this, Arizona does not provide a model policy for the schools. There has also been concern over the implementation of this law, some concerned that schools are not creating these policies in a timely matter. Another concern is that the law covers harassment and intimidation but there are no clauses for specific groups (i.e. minority groups).

Recommendations

- Parents feel that the first prevention effort to bullying is to have a self-confident child that is taught that bullying is not okay and not their fault.
- Parents should understand the signs that their child may be being bullied. These include but are not limited to: coming home with bruises, cuts, ripped clothing, missing belongings, etc.; refusing to go to school in the morning or complaining of having frequent stomachaches, headaches or other illnesses that require parents to keep the child home; showing a sudden loss of interest in school and schoolwork; appear depressed, moody.
- The child being bullied should tell the bully to stop and cease to initiate further contact with them.
- Parents and students should familiarize themselves with school policies.
- Schools need to provide parents and students with information about bullying and policies regarding bullying. This can be done through websites, meetings, handbooks, etc.
- Encourage children to defend those that are being bullied – defending has been found to be one of the most effective bully prevention strategies.

About the Fund for Civility, Respect and Understanding Anti-Bullying Task Force

The Anti-Bullying Task Force includes concerned community members who work in a variety of school districts and local social service organizations. Our members include counselors from nearly all our neighboring school districts, specifically ASDB and TUSD, as well as staff members of Wingspan, Our Family Services, the Southern Arizona Center Against Sexual Assault, the Pima County Attorney's Office and the Community Partnership of Southern Arizona. We typically meet on the third Thursday of each month.

If you are interested in attending our meetings, visit www.endofbullying.com



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Additional resources:

www.endofbullying.com
www.endbullying.gov

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