

Questions still outnumber answers on bullying, says researcher

May 14 2015, by Leslie Reed

A leading researcher says remedies for school bullying remain elusive, although four decades of study have yielded many more clues to its devastation.

"Our interventions, which have mainly focused on punishment, school suspensions and expulsions, have largely been ineffective," said Susan Swearer, an educational psychologist at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln who has been at the forefront of the U.S. research on the topic since the late 1990s.

"Bullying is a peer relationship problem," she said. "It's not once a bully, always a bully; once a victim, always a victim. Kids move in and out of these roles. What we're trying to do as a research field is to move the conversation beyond punishment-based strategies to social justice and more sophisticated strategies."

Though bullying is an ancient behavior, it was little researched before the 1970s when social scientists in northern Europe first began examining the problem. Research in the U.S. began in earnest after the April 20, 1999, shootings at Columbine High School in Colorado, where 15 people died, including the two perpetrators.

Since then, all 50 states have enacted anti-bullying laws, with Montana Gov. Steve Bullock signing the latest into law on April 21. Congress continues to consider a federal law aimed at bullying.

One of the biggest myths the research has dispelled?

"That bullying is a problem between one bully and one victim," she said. "That rarely happens. It's a much more complicated social behavior."

In some cases, bullying victims go on to bully others. Many bullies use aggressive tactics to climb their way up the school's social ladder. Some schools are more prone to bullying behavior, as are some neighborhoods where violence and aggression are the norm.

Some youth experience lifelong mental health consequences from experiencing bullying—whether as a perpetrator, as a victim or even as a bystander.

Swearer began studying bullying in about 1998, when a school counselor who was taking one of her classes asked for help tackling a bullying problem at her school.

Swearer later conducted one of the first longitudinal studies on bullying in the U.S., following a group of Lincoln Public School students for five years. With Shelley Hymel of the University of British Columbia, she co-founded the Bullying Research Network. She is also chair of the Research Advisory Board for Lady Gaga's Born This Way Foundation and she's working with the National Guard to develop anti-bullying messaging and strategies.

Swearer and Hymel recently served as lead scholars for a special issue on bullying for *American Psychologist*, the flagship journal of the American Psychological Association. Inspired by the 2011 U.S. White House Conference on Bullying Prevention, the issue and its five articles are intended to give psychologists the latest information on the status of the field—and hopefully encourage more innovative and translational research to root out bullying.

The issue includes articles on the long-term consequences of being a victim of bullying as a child; a framework for distinguishing bullying from aggression in general; promising prevention approaches; and the law and public policy on bullying.

Swearer and Hymel propose a model for understanding and intervening that recognizes the complicated array of factors that make some youth more vulnerable to bullying.

Some questions and answers about bullying from "Four Decades of Research on School Bullying: an introduction," by Hymel and Swearer, published in the May edition of *American Psychologist*:

- **How is it defined?** Bullying is a subcategory of interpersonal aggression characterized by intentionality, repetition and an imbalance of power. The abuse of power is a primary distinction between bullying and other forms of aggression.
- **How do researchers learn about bullying?** Most rely on reports from victims, perpetrators and other youth. Teacher and parent reports are less reliable since bullying occurs within the youth peer group, frequently in places with little adult supervision.
- **How prevalent is bullying?** Up to one in three students, depending on the study, report being the victim of a bully. As many as one in eight admit bullying others.
- **When does bullying start?** Peer bullying is evident as early as preschool. It peaks during middle school years and declines somewhat by the end of high school.
- **Does bullying stop on its own?** Serial bullies—those named as perpetrators by multiple victims—accounted for nearly 70 percent of victim reports. Most victims report limited incidents of being bullied, but a significant minority endure continued harassment. One study showed that 12 percent of boys and 6

percent of girls were consistently bullied from ages 8 to 16.

- **What behaviors are considered bullying?** Forms of bullying include direct physical harm; verbal taunts and threats; social exclusion, humiliation and rumors; and cyberbullying via text, email and social media. Verbal and social bullying are the most common forms, with more than half of students in grades 4-12 reporting being verbally bullied and more than a third reporting social bullying. According to one study, incidents of cyber bullying nearly doubled from 2000 to 2010, although other forms of bullying declined.
- **Who are bullies?** Both boys and girls can be bullies. Not all studies show sex differences, but some show boys more likely to be involved in physical bullying, while girls have higher rates of social, verbal and [cyber bullying](#). Stereotypes of bullies being socially incompetent youth who rely on physical coercion have diminished. Many [bullies](#) are socially intelligent and enjoy status within their peer group. A growing portion of youth are both perpetrators and victims of bullying.

Provided by University of Nebraska-Lincoln

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