Solving the
Bullying Problem
in Adventist Schools

A ccording to the National Association of School Psychologists, "bullying is why more than 160,000 children skip school every day" in America.[1] Bullying, in the form of harassment, persecution, and physical violence, is a destructive force and a serious problem for children.

In the past, bullying was brushed off as a normal part of childhood, a rite of passage, or "kids being kids." The consequences of bullying were considered minor, the worst being a bloody nose or black eye. However, times are changing. The consequences of bullying are no longer minor. Children are being shot and killed. At Santana High School in Santee (a suburb of San Diego, California) on March 5, 2001, Charles Williams, a high school freshman, killed two students and wounded 13 others during a shooting spree at the school. Classmates told authorities that Williams was often bullied and teased by his peers.[2]

The widespread media coverage of this event and others make it hard to ignore how serious the problem has become, with similar school shootings being reported nationally and internationally, starting with Columbine High School in Colorado. Without exception, in each case, the perpetrators attributed their actions to repeated bullying by peers. They simply reached their breaking point. But the question is: How many more youngsters are reaching their breaking point? What are the signs to which we should be alert and responsive?

Do Adventist schools have these problems, too?

Picture
Removed

By Katrina Ball, Patti Herring, and Gary Hopkins

In the past, bullying was brushed off as a normal part of childhood, a rite of passage, or "kids being kids."

We may think that our relatively small school size, classroom size, and geographical location (outside the turbulent inner cities), not to mention the fact that we are Christians, protect our schools from acts of violence. However, research has shown that the problem of bullying is not limited to large inner-city public schools. Smaller schools and private schools[3] in rural settings actually have higher rates of bullying than urban or suburban schools![4] The devil is active everywhere—including Adventist schools. Since Christians are his greatest challenge, why would he leave us alone? So we must be on guard to keep our schools from becoming a part of these disturbing statistics.

Although much bullying goes unreported, it is estimated that on the average, a bullying incident occurs approximately every seven minutes, regardless of class or school size.[5] It seems likely that Adventist schools are not immune to such problems, but may in fact be at high risk for bullying and school violence.

The Problem

In 2001, Nansel and colleagues[6] conducted the first nationwide study in the United States measuring bullying and its effect on American youth. They surveyed nearly 16,000 students in public and private schools across the country. About 19 percent reported that they had bullied other students either occasionally or frequently during the current school year. Seventeen percent said they had been the victims of repeated bullying, and six percent of the students reported both bullying others and

---

What Parents and Teachers Can Do to Prevent Bullying

• "All children should be given regular opportunities to discuss bullying and ways to deal with bullies. In role-playing exercises, for example, children can practice saying 'Leave me alone' and walking away.

• "Children can be taught simple measures to lessen the likelihood of becoming the target of a bully. Looking people in the eye, speaking up, and standing straight are just a few behaviors that communicate self-confidence.

• "Children who tend to be loners (potential targets of bullies) can be paired up with socially competent 'models.' Some children need a little help learning how to make friends.

• "Because bullies are most likely to strike during unsupervised times such as recess, children should be provided with as much structured activity as possible."[8]

---

having been the victim of bullying. The researchers concluded that nearly one in three U.S. middle school and high school students have either been a bully or the victim of a bully, with boys being more likely than girls to be bullies or victims.

In addition, Nansel et al. found that students who were bullied were more likely to report difficulty in making friends, having poor relationships with classmates, and experiencing feelings of loneliness. Students who bullied others were more likely to report having academic problems and engaging in smoking and/or drinking behaviors. A large majority (two-thirds) of bullies in 37 schools reported feeling persecuted and threatened.[9] Nansel et al found evidence that childhood bullies are at high risk for engaging in criminal behavior in adulthood.[10]

Bullying is not a problem only in the U.S., but in other countries as well. England, Japan, Ireland, Australia, Canada and the Netherlands report high rates of bullying. In four K-12

Facts About Bullying

• Bullies are usually physically larger or stronger than their victims.

• Rural schools appear to have higher rates of bullying than urban or suburban schools.

• The amount of bullying that occurs in a classroom is the same regardless of class or school size.

• Both girls and boys engage in bullying, although girls use less visible tactics than boys. Boys are more physically aggressive, while girls resort to social aggression (i.e., exclusion or starting rumors).

• Nearly twice as much bullying goes on in grades two to four as in grades six to eight.

• Verbal abuse increases with age, while physical abuse decreases as children get older.

• Children often do not report bullying, making it difficult for teachers and parents to detect.[7]

Picture
Removed

Toronto (Canada) schools with 1,041 students, 12 to 15 percent of students reported having been bullied once or twice over the past school term, and seven to nine percent reported being the perpetuator more than once or twice during the school term.[11] A 20-year study in Norway found that one in seven students were either bullied or had been the victim of a bully.[12] Another international study reported that from 15 percent to 70 percent of students had been bullied during the current school term.[13]

Recognizing Bullying Behavior

The National Institute of Child Health and Human Development defines bullying as "the physical or psychological harassment of one child by another who is viewed as stronger or more powerful."[14] Bullying can take the form of hitting, name-calling, gossiping, shunning, ignoring, exclusion, stealing personal belongings, or threatening another student.[15] Bullies typically are very confident, aggressive, and strong and attack weaker, less confident, and more timid children. Older kids often bully younger ones. Probably because of their insecurities about their surroundings, new students and immigrants are frequently the targets of bullies.[16]

The following case study illustrates the pain and conflicts that bullying can cause for children, particularly those who make

Smaller schools and private schools in rural settings actually have higher rates of bullying than urban or suburban schools.

easy targets because they are smaller or different from other students. Mark's case also clearly offers signs to which teachers should be alert and responsive.

Mark's parents were worried. Their 14-year-old son, who recently had entered a new school, was a small, clumsy child who was poor at games and had odd mannerisms. He was unable to enunciate words clearly or quickly and became flustered when provoked. He had problems making friends.

After a few months in his new school, he became known as Mark the Martian because of his mannerisms. He was unable to ignore the taunting, which included being kicked, punched, and tripped by classmates. The problem was especially pronounced on the playground. He became so tense that he reacted volatilely and dramatically, earning the reputation among staff of being aggressive.

His reactions encouraged the bullies to continue. No single incident was severe, but the cumulative effect was devastating. Mark did not approach school staff, and they never saw any of the bullies' attacks. They did see Mark's aggressive reactions and did not have a sympathetic attitude toward him.

The bullying finally came to light when it was discovered that Mark was walking around town all day in winter weather rather than going to school.[18]

Experts report that even when bullying is reported, it is not always taken seriously because many people believe that children should learn to stand up for themselves or fight back.[19]

How should Adventist teachers and educational administrators react to bullying? Can they prevent bigger and stronger students from harassing the smaller, weaker ones? Can they help victims to behave in more appropriate ways, so as to prevent bullying? What measures should be taken to punish bullying?

Children should be taught to be slow to anger as God instructed Moses in Numbers 14:18 and forgiving, keeping in mind that God forgives us again and again. This does not mean that children should allow themselves to be abused or not respond to their attacker. They can learn to apply the Bible text that says: "A gentle answer turns away wrath, but harsh words stir up anger" (Proverbs 15:1). The *Life Application Study Bible* comments on this text: "Have you ever tried to argue in a whisper? It is equally hard to argue with someone who insists on answering gently. On the other hand, a rising voice and harsh words almost always trigger an angry response. To turn away wrath and seek peace, choose gentle words."[20]

Reaction-Based Solutions

Anti-bullying policies. Establishing school policies relating to bullying is an important first step to managing this problem. This can help deter bullies and protect their potential victims. School policies should describe in specific terms what kinds of behaviors are acceptable and which ones are not, making it clear that the school will not tolerate any acts of unkindness, harass-

---

Empowering Children Against Teasing

• **Ignoring teasing.** Children can learn to ignore the individual(s) teasing them and act as if the behavior has no effect on them. The bully wants to elicit some response and to gain attention (either positive or negative). Lack of response helps deter further teasing.

• **The "I Message."** This is an effective strategy for children to use in a structured or supervised environment, like the classroom. Children are encouraged to express how they feel when being teased and to say that they would like the teasing to stop. This assertive approach encourages children to articulate their feelings to others.

• **Visualization.** The old saying, "I'm rubber, you're glue. Anything you say bounces off of me and sticks to you," is a wonderful illustration of how visualization can be used to stop teasing. Visualization helps children feel they are being "shielded" against the teasing and allows them to reject what was said. The teasing "bounces off" of them and "sticks" to the teaser instead.

• **Reframing.** Children can learn to change a negative comment into a compliment. For example, a child may tease another child about her clothing. If the response by the child being teased is, "Thanks for noticing my outfit," the teaser will be puzzled and unable to respond further.

• **"So?"** Saying "So?" is a simple and effective response that children can give to being teased. This conveys to the teaser that the behavior didn't affect the subject in any way.[17]

ment, or intimidation. Adventist schools should lead in setting and implementing these standards.

At minimum, an anti-bullying policy should include the following:

1. A statement promoting positive interpersonal relationships among all members of the school community and specifying that bullying and harassment are unacceptable.

2. A clear definition of bullying, giving examples for clarification.

3. Specifics on how the school plans to deal with bullying behavior and addressing the victim's problems. Escalating penalties for repeat offenders should include suspension and/or expulsion, depending on the seriousness of the infraction.

4. A statement encouraging both students and parents to speak out when they feel bullying is occurring.[21]

Teasing is one of the most common weapons used by bullies. By ridiculing a vulnerable student, the perpetrator gains a sense of power over the victim. Teasing seems to be one of the first tactics used by bullies. The school's anti-bullying guidelines thus should address teasing specifically. Sometimes, schools think their rules need to deal only with physical harassment, but prolonged teasing can cause as severe emotional distress as physical violence. Enforcement should be initiated early in elementary school and continued throughout high school.

Action-Based Solutions

Establishing clear guidelines, policies, and disciplinary actions are important. However, taking a reactive stance may actually exacerbate the problem, producing tragic results such as the recent school shootings. The Christ-centered emphasis in our schools is a protective factor, and the Holy Spirit's presence

Picture
Removed

The researchers concluded that nearly one in three U.S. middle school and high school students have either been a bully or the victim of a bully, with boys being more likely than girls to be bullies or victims.

is the driving force in our operations. But we must not lose sight of the fact that the Christian message is one of *action rather than reaction.* Because we live in an evil world, plagued by sin, we must take a proactive approach to prevent school violence and bullying *before* it occurs.

The school as a community: Young people's sense of responsibility toward others is largely influenced by their perception of themselves, of others, and of the community. Children need to feel that they fit into the world around them and that they are accepted and cared about. Teachers and administrators have an important role to play in helping to create this type of environment. When students perceive their school as a caring community, this can stimulate academic achievement and may help prevent school violence and bullying.

Roberts and colleagues sought to determine whether grade school students sensed that their school was a functional community in which students and teachers (1) cared about and supported each other; (2) actively participated in activities and decisions relating to school, (3) felt a sense of belonging and identification within the school group, and (4) shared goals and values.[22] When students viewed their class as a family, felt they could talk to their teachers about things that bothered them, and participated in classroom decision-making, they liked school more, were more academically motivated, performed better on mathematics and reading achievement tests, enjoyed helping others learn, and had higher educational expectations. They also felt more concern for others, had higher self-esteem, and resolved conflicts better.[23] Schaps and Lewis' study of school as community produced similar conclusions.[24] Further investigation by Battistich and Horn demonstrated that students who perceive school as a community engage in less disruptive behavior, take less drugs, and are less delinquent.[25]

Positive affirmation: As stated earlier, teasing and taunting behavior have become the norm rather than the exception in many schools. Parents and teachers have traditionally viewed teasing, name-calling, and bullying as a normal part of growing up. Even teachers who deplore this sort of behavior are overwhelmed by the awesome task of trying to control it in their classrooms and playgrounds. But bullying can be counteracted by positively affirming students who befriend those who are isolated and unpopular and defending those who are victimized.

Teachers, coaches, and administrators have a role to play in positively reinforcing students who demonstrate compassion to those around them. Positive affirmation is a simple technique that can be used immediately and often by any teacher. It requires only that the teacher verbally recognize and reward special acts of kindness in the classroom. This will encourage children, particularly those in early elementary school, to make a habit of this type of behavior.[26]

Peer Involvement: A more proactive approach is to encourage and develop peer counseling. This approach focuses on changing the social context in which bullying occurs, rather than concentrating on the bully or the victim. Exposure to other people's pain helps students learn to face their struggles together. Children who have been bullied are more likely to seek help from their fellow classmates than from teachers.

Teachers can facilitate peer cooperation in several ways: First, they must be willing to confront the issue of bullying directly with students. They can share stories or examples of how the "group" was able to rescue a victim from the injustice of a bully. Next, teachers can lead in a discussion about the types of actions students can take as a group to assist a person being victimized by a bully.

Finally, teachers can help alter the social environment by instituting a "buddy system" in the classroom. This can be accomplished in a number of ways. For example, the teacher might randomly assign students to one of two groups in which they are allowed 30-minute "buddy breaks." During these breaks, the students use role-playing for problem solving. This will broaden the social support system within the classroom and help the group discover ways of rescuing victims, thus preventing future victimization.

Mentoring: Mentoring is another proactive solution that helps empower students prone to victimization. Mentoring works well in smaller schools with multigrade classrooms, where older students are readily available to help the younger children. Students in the upper grades can adopt younger ones, working with them throughout the year. Activities could include a monthly lunch hour when older and younger students meet together to chat and share their concerns. At that time, they could also plan other activities. This makes younger and older students more aware of each other's needs and further strengthens the social system within the school community. Mentoring particularly benefits the younger children, who feel reassured that they have someone to call on if needed.

Extracurricular activities: Most schools already schedule activities that could double as anti-bullying interventions. For example, band and orchestra are great activities to develop friendships. Participation in these activities can counteract the feelings of loneliness and isolation that are common among many victims. When vulnerable students are empowered with confidence-building skills, they are less likely to allow themselves to be victimized. Sports teams, drama groups, clubs, and debate teams are other activities that can build self-confidence.

One drawback to the activities just mentioned is that children's participation in them may require previously developed skills. Therefore, sensitive students who are at higher risk for victimization may be excluded. One excellent extracurricular activity that is beneficial and requires no special knowledge or skills (and thus has the potential for involving all students) is *a community outreach program*. This type of program serves as a win-win for all students, no matter what their background or skill level. Having students work together in the community can help empower young lives in countless ways. Indeed, *"The best*

Bullying is not a problem only in the U.S., but in other countries as well.

way to help yourself is to help others." As they help others, students gain a sense of camaraderie and become aware of the need to rely on others for support and guidance. They gain a sense of satisfaction from assisting others, and this increases their sense of satisfaction and confidence, making them feel better about themselves and better able to relate positively to others.

In summary: The focus of an action-based anti-bullying program should be to affirm positive behavior, teach coping skills, and include unpopular and isolated students. This will promote a stronger sense of community within the student body. Peer involvement and mentoring are important ways to strengthen the school's social network.

Involving caring adults from constituent churches and the community in mentoring and interacting with students on a consistent basis will also help young people feel part of a caring community. This will help prevent bullying and enhance stu-

dents' self-esteem.

Targeting extra-curricular activities to help potential victims of bullying can enable such students to develop confidence and make friends. This will not only diminish the incidence of bullying and some of its frightening consequences, but will also enhance the well-being of the entire student body.

Conclusion

Clearly, ignoring bullying has serious, even deadly consequences. We must start now to address it more vigorously in our schools. The tragedies at Columbine, Santee, Littleton, and Jonesboro have made America and the entire world aware that harassment at school must be confronted and can no longer be tolerated or dismissed as "kids being kids." These horrific acts of school violence can have a positive effect if we use them as a platform for social change. They are a grim reminder that acts of harassment, bullying, bigotry, and racism can no longer be ignored.

Bullying is even more obnoxious of a problem in the church school environment than in public institutions, as it undermines everything that Christians are supposed to stand for as models of Christ's love for even "the least of these my brethren." Bullying directly undermines Christ's second greatest commandment, "Love your neighbor as yourself" (Matthew 22:37-40), by deliberately bringing harm to the well-being of another person. With this in mind, Adventist educators must consider all forms of bullying intolerable and inappropriate behavior, and take steps to both prevent it and deal with it when it occurs.

So, teachers, be alert—look out for those shy and sensitive students who may need your encouragement and sensitivity. They need you to help them learn how to lower their risk of victimization. And don't forget the bullies—they, too, are crying out for your help! ✑

Katrina Ball is a Master of Public Health student in the Department of International Health at the School of Public Health at Loma Linda University in Loma Linda, California. **Patti Herring, Ph.D., R.N.,** *is Director of the Office of Public Health Practice and Education at the Loma Linda University School of Public Health.* **Gary L. Hopkins** *has just been appointed Assistant Professor in the Department of Health Promotion and Education at the School of Public Health at Loma Linda University.*

Pictures Removed

Internet Resources:

Anti-Bullying Network
http://www.antibullying.net/
Information and Resources to Combat Bullying
http://www.bbc.co.uk/schools/bullying/
Bullying at School: Information
http://www.scre.ac.uk/bully/
General Information Source on Bullying
http://www.antibully.org/

Bullies typically are very confident, aggressive, and strong and attack weaker, less confident, and more timid children.

REFERENCES

1. Nadya Labi, Rita Healy, Marc Hequet, and Collette McKenna-Parker, "Let Bullies Beware," *Time* 157:13 (April 2, 2001), p. 46.

2. Anne McDermott, "An Angry Young Man," *The Associated Press.* Cable News Network LP, LLLP (March 2001).

3. Tonya R. Nansel, Mary Overpeck, Ramani S. Oilla, W. June Ruan, Bruce Simmons-Morton, and Peter Scheidt, "Bullying Behaviors Among U.S. Youth: Prevalence and Association with Psychosocial Adjustment," *Journal of the American Medical Association* 285:16 (April 25, 2001), pp. 2094-2100.

4. Jerome Kagan and Susan B. Gall, eds., *Gale Encyclopedia of Childhood & Adolescence* (Detroit, New York, Toronto, London: Harvard University, 1998), p. 124.

5. Ibid.

6. Nansel, et al., "Bullying Behaviors Among U.S. Youth."

7. Kagan and Gall, *Gale Encyclopedia.*

8. Ibid.

9. Labi, et al., "Let Bullies Beware."

10. Nansel, et al., "Bullying Behaviors Among U.S. Youth."

11. Martie Sudermann, Peter G. Jaffe, and Elaine Schiek, *Bullying: Information for Parents and Teachers* (London, Ont.: London Family Court Clinic., 1996).

12. Dan Olweus, *Bullying at School, What We Know and What We Can Do* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993), cited in Nansel, et al., "Bullying Behaviors Among U.S. Youth."

13. S. Austin and S. Joseph, "Assessment of Bully/Victim Problems in 8 to 11 Year Olds," *British Journal of Educational Psychology* 66 (1996), pp. 447-456; and R. Forero, L. McLellan, C. Rissel, and A. Bauman, "Bullying Behaviour and Psychosocial Health Among School Students in New South Wales, Australia: Cross Sectional Survey," *British Medical Journal* 319 (1999), pp. 344-348; cited in Nansel, et al., "Bullying Behaviors Among U.S. Youth."

14. National Institute of Child Health and Human Development Report (2001), cited by Susan Okie in the *Washington Post* (April 25, 2001).

15. Nansel, et al., "Bullying Behaviors Among U.S. Youth."

16. Suderman, et al., *Bullying: Information for Parents and Teachers.*

17. J. S. Freedman, "Easing the Teasing: How Parents Can Help Their Children," *Early Childhood* (Spring 1999), pp. 1, 4.

18. V. E. Besag, *Bullies and Victims in Schools. A Guide to Understanding and Management* (Buckingham, England: Open University Press, 1989), cited in Gwen Glew, Fred Rivara, and Chris Feudtner, "Bullying: Children Hurting Children," *Pediatrics Review* 21 (2000), p. 183.

19. Kagan and Gall, *Gale Encyclopedia.*

20. *Life Application Study Bible* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Tyndale House, 1997), on Proverbs 15:1.

21. Ken Rigby, "What Schools Can Do About Bullying," *The Professional Reading Guide for Educational Administrators* 17:1 (November 1995), pp. 1-5.

22. W. Roberts, Allen Horn, and Victor Battistich, "Assessing Students' and Teachers' Sense of the School as a Caring Community." Presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association, April 18-22, 1995, in San Francisco, California. Cited in Victor Battistich and Allen Horn, "The Relationship Between Students' Sense of Their School as a Community and Their Involvement in Problem Behaviors," *American Journal of Public Health* 87:12 (December 1997), n.p.

23. Ibid.

24. Eric Schaps and Catherine Lewis, "Building Classroom Communities," *Thrust for Educational Leadership* 27:1 (1997), pp. 14-19.

25. Victor Battistich and Allen Horn, "The Relationship Between Students' Sense of Their School as a Community and Their Involvement in Problem Behaviors," *American Journal of Public Health* 87:12 (December 1997).

26. Suderman, et al., *Bullying: Information for Parents and Teachers.*