Bullying and Anti-bullying Strategies

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There is a normalcy in the interaction between two people and to a certain extent kidding and teasing may be acceptable. Even certain amount of conflict and harassment may not be harmful for majority of us. However, there are times when this line is crossed and the interaction becomes painful and even scary for the weaker of the two.

The word ‘bully’ was used for the first time in 1530. It was used for the sweet heart regardless of the sex. The meaning underwent a change and it has been used for the harassment of the weak since 1700. It is necessary to realize the seriousness and to understated issue we call bullying.

What do we mean, when we say bullying? Despite the fact that in UK by law, all state (not private) schools must have a behaviour policy in place that includes measures to prevent all forms of bullying among pupils, there is no legal definition of bullying. Simply, it is the repeated infliction of harm on younger, smaller, or less powerful peers rather it is a type of aggression in which

1. The behavior is intended to harm or disturb,
2. The behavior occurs repeatedly over time,
3. There is an imbalance of power, with a more powerful person or group attacking a less powerful one.

Although bullying may be visible or invisible but the impact may be simple fear or abhor like the tip of iceberg with underlying serious issues. This phenomenon is indeed prevalent globally, yet majority of research on bullying has been conducted in Europe and Australia showing considerable variability among countries in the prevalence of bullying. The lowest prevalence was observed among girls in Sweden (6.3%) while the highest among boys in Lithuania (41.4%). In an international survey of adolescent health-related behavior: the percentage of students who reported being bullied at least once during the current term ranged from a low of 15% to 20% in some countries to a high level of 70% in others.

Of particular concern is frequent bullying, typically defined as bullying that occurs once a week or more. The prevalence of frequent bullying reported internationally ranges from a low of 1.9% among Irish sample to a high level of 19% in a Malta study. Bullying can be in many forms. It can be physical, psychological or social like labeling someone shorter, darker or maybe a limping child is ridiculed on his physical shortcoming. Similarly a child who is not so intelligent or quick to respond faces constant teasing.

Another form of bullying that is on escalation in this electronic era is cyber-bullying. This can be in the form of emails, text messages and is now even happening on the social media e.g. WhatsApp.

In bullying it is seen that direct physical aggression is more common among boys, while indirect forms are more common among girls. Similarly, in a study of several middle schools in Rome, the most common types of bullying reported by boys were threats, physical harm, rejection, and name-calling. The most common forms for girls were name-calling, teasing, rumors, rejection, and taking of personal belongings.

Bullied persons are both physically and verbally abused. They have their lunch boxes snatched, pushed in the corridor, catcalled at or simply given derogatory names.

The vulnerable targets of bullying are those of a younger age, ethnic minorities, immigrants, persons belonging to lower socio-economic strata, sufferers of mental retardation, specific learning disabilities like dyslexia or autism, the mentally ill and the physically handicapped.

It is worth noting here that the smell of a diabetic foot is well tolerated by our society but persons having mental illness are shunned away.

The consequences of bullying are life-long. It can lead to disastrous changes in the victim in the form of depression, obsession, and various forms of anxiety, low self-esteem and lack of confidence. Bullying during developmental age is now recognized as a matter of great concern since it affects not only the well-being but can be one of the serious causes of poor performance in academic career besides serious psychiatric consequences including suicide.

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Let me share an experience here. A well-motivated student came all the way from Canada to Pakistan to pursue medical studies in a Private Medical college. Sadly he became a victim of bullying and by second year of his studies he lost the war to bullying, left his studies and had suicidal tendency as reported.

Hence it is now understood that prevention of this situations is important. Schools/institutions should have a policy regarding bullying and they should involve all parents in it. Parents of both the perpetrators and victims of bullying should cooperate with the school administration for the prevention of the problem. Also anti-bullying programs are effective in reducing bullying. Successful programs work, in part, by mobilizing the large number of bystanders to make bullying less acceptable. Bullying at school is addressed through increased adult supervision before school, during lunch and recess, and after school; and through the development of classroom discussions to reduce the social acceptability of bullying among the majority of children, depriving the bully of an appreciative audience. A number of tools for families “How to Address Bullying” if your child has bullied others or being the victim of bullying have been developed by Bright Future Organization.

Un-fortunately as yet no legislation is there for the prevention of bullying in our country. In the section 52(5) of Sindh mental health Act however, protection is given to the mentally ill. The section states that calling a sufferer of mental illness as insane or doing physical harm to them can be punished with a fine of Rs.50000 (Approximate US $ 500) or imprisonment of 6 months or both.

Similar legislation regarding bullying and stalking with simple reporting system should be there. But before embarking on the legislation a number of strategies can be useful to prevent and combat this phenomenon such as awareness program to develop empathy, good communication & relationship at schools/institutions, among colleagues, neighbors etc. The role of media will be useful in this regard as evident from a movie on Dyslexia in local language.

As per religious perspective, bullying is detested by all the religions especially in Islam as per Quran & Hadees (Hadith). The Quran says, “O you who have believed, let not a people ridicule [another] people; perhaps they may be better than them; nor let women ridicule [other] women; perhaps they may be better than them. And do not insult one another and do not call each other by [offensive] nicknames. Wretched is the name of disobedience after [one's] faith. And whoever does not repent - then it is those who are the wrongdoers.”

References