

Bullying and Seventh-day Adventist Schools

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What is bullying? Does bullying happen in our Seventh-day Adventist schools? These were two of the questions posed at recent teacher inservice meetings held for Seventh-day Adventist teachers and administrators in British Columbia.



The most widely accepted definition of bullying comes from the work of leading Norwegian researcher, Dr. Dan Olweus. “Bullying . . . is a pattern of repeated aggressive behaviour, with negative intent, directed from one child to another where there is a power imbalance” (Olweus 1993).

This aggressive behaviour is not just “kids being kids”. Bullying behaviour is intentional and repeated. Bullying often starts out in seemingly playful ways, consisting of pranks, jokes, and some “roughhousing.” The incidents soon become more hurtful, degenerating into name-calling, ridicule, personal attacks, and public embarrassment. Rough and tumble “play” gives way to punching, kicking, restraining, and beatings (Ross 1998).

Boys and girls are involved in bullying at about the same rate, although the type of bullying usually differs. Both girls and boys tend to bully in ways that harm what each gender group values most. Boys tend to value physical dominance, so when they bully, it usually takes a physical form – kicking, hitting, pushing, shoving and threatening. Girls tend to place more value on relationships, so when they bully, it usually is in the form of social alienation, spreading of rumours, withdrawing of friendship and ignoring. Girls are also becoming more physical when they bully. Dr. Sibylle Artz at the University of Victoria has been studying this increased physical aggression in girls and has concluded that “. . . They have seen that power resides for the most part in physical force, that right is tied to might, and that rules have their source in those who have the power to impose them” (Artz 1998).

Teachers and administrators are generally unaware of the extent of bullying among children. Although most teachers report that they intervene in bullying problems, research has shown that students believe that only 25% of reported cases are acted upon (Charach, Pepler, and Ziegler 1995). A larger problem is the issue of reporting. Studies in the U.K. found that children were unlikely to report bullying incidents to their teachers or supervising adults. Children fear reprisals and often feel pressure to cope with their own experiences and “not bother the teacher now”. Children may also feel that adults are unable to protect them from future bullying (Garofalo, Siegel and Laub 1987).

Teachers at the inservice meetings agreed that bullying is becoming a larger issue in the Seventh-day

Adventist educational system. Parents and teachers have spoken to me about the increased anxiety among some students when they don't easily fit the expectations of the dominant peer group. Some parents have chosen to withdraw their children from school rather than have them subjected to recurring problems that the school seemed powerless to control. These types of perceptions are very damaging to the growth of our schools, but they can be reversed.

School based interventions do work and the parents must be working in conjunction with the school in order for a bullying-prevention program to be effective. A successful bullying-prevention program should be multifaceted, addressing school-wide codes of conduct, with links to the curriculum (i.e., classroom instruction in managing emotions, impulse control, and problem solving with specific instruction in how to respond to bullying situations). There should also be specific guidelines for adult intervention in bullying situations. Processes must be in place to support children who are bullied.

To implement an effective school-wide bullying-prevention program, the school constituency must first realize the seriousness of the issue and encourage collective responsibility in addressing the problem. The school must secure the support of the parents and the "caring majority" of students to counterbalance peer power relationships (Garrity et al. 1994).

The British Columbia Ministry of Education has recently released a program guide entitled *Focus on Bullying: A Prevention Program for Elementary School Communities*. This binder is filled with valuable resources and has been sent to all the schools in British Columbia. The purpose of *Focus on Bullying* is to assist schools in developing and implementing a detailed action plan that strengthens the physical, social, and psychological safety of schools and reduces the incidence of bullying. Our Seventh-day Adventist teachers are committed to ensuring that all students are treated in a loving, Christ-like manner, free from aggressive peer interaction. The active involvement of all church members working together with the staff and parents of the school in developing a bullying-prevention program is something that all Seventh-day Adventist school communities may wish to consider.

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