

Counseling Group Curriculum for Parents on Bullying

John Lamanna, M. Ann Shillingford, Mary-Frances Parrish, and Rebecca Sheffield

College of William and Mary

Abstract

This article discusses the impact of bullying on K-12 students and the importance of collaborative partnerships between home and school in decreasing the dramatic effects of student bullying behaviors. The authors present a six-week, research-based, small group curriculum specifically developed for professional school counselors to support parents of middle school children who have been bullied.

Counseling Group Curriculum for Parents on Bullying

Bullying is a highly prevalent and harmful problem in schools today (Nansel et al., 2001). Estimates of bullying in the U.S. have ranged from 10-25%; however, as many as 70% of students may be impacted by bullying in school (Canter, 2005; Haynie et al., 2001). Bullying, which is characterized by repeated physical or psychological harm and an imbalance of power, can be further distinguished by form (physical or verbal) and type (direct or indirect) (Raskauskas & Stoltz, 2007). Physical bullying, for example, may involve hitting, kicking, pushing, or shoving, while verbal bullying includes teasing or name-calling. These are both examples of direct bullying, whereas indirect bullying, also known as relational aggression, is characterized by psychological attacks, such as the use of rumors or social exclusion (Espelage & Swearer, 2003; Olweus, 2001). In addition, cyberbullying, the act of using technologies such as e-mail, cell phones, or text messaging, is a direct or indirect form of bullying that has recently shown similar prevalence rates, especially in middle schools (Chibbaro, 2007; Raskauskas & Stoltz, 2007).

Bullying has far-reaching implications for children's social and emotional adjustment, both for the bully and the one being bullied. For example, being a bully has been associated with substance abuse, academic and adjustment problems, externalizing problems, and future delinquency and antisocial behavior (Perren & Hornung, 2005). Being the victim of bullying has been related to a variety of internalizing problems, such as anxiety and depression, as well as academic problems and suicide (Nansel et al., 2001). In addition, the prevalence of students who are identifying themselves as both bullies and victims has been documented in recent studies

(Raskauskas & Stoltz, 2007). These youth, who may initially face aggression from others and respond with retaliatory behaviors, face outcomes that are associated with both antisocial behavior and social and emotional difficulties (Glover, Gough, Johnson, & Cartwright, 2000; Olweus, 2001).

Schools across America have begun to develop and implement empirically-based anti-bullying programs to intervene and prevent bullying behaviors (Brock, Lazarus, & Jimerson, 2002). Examples of research-based programs include Bully Busters (Newman, Horne, & Bartolomucci, 2000), Bully Prevention Program (Olweus & Limber, 1999), and Bully Proofing Your School (Garrity, Jens, Porter, Sager, & Short-Camilli, 2004). Programs such as these have demonstrated effectiveness by reducing bullying by up to 50% (Olweus, 1997; Smith, Cousins, & Stewart, 2005). Components of empirically-based anti-bullying programs typically include universal interventions to promote respect and responsibility, early interventions to promote skill acquisition and application, and individual interventions to provide more intensive support for bullies and victims (Olweus, 1997). Activities associated with school-wide anti-bullying programs may include classroom lessons on conflict resolution or peer mediation, increased adult supervision in school hallways, stairwells, cafeterias, and locker rooms, and school assemblies to gather community support.

To combat victimization, prevention and intervention strategies should include parents and community partners (Omizo, Omizo, Baxa, & Miyose, 2006). Parents especially should be shown how to model and reinforce the values of anti-bullying programs outside of school and also learn new approaches to discipline and communication with their children (Chibbaro, 2007). Research has shown that the home

environment can influence the development of both bullying and victimization. For example, Perry, Hodges, and Egan (2001) summarized research on the parent-child relationship and bullying victimization, indicating that insecure parental attachments and intrusive and overprotective parenting may interfere with children's individuation, self-confidence, and a sense of agency necessary to prevent victimization. Research by Christie-Mizell (2003) reported an association between arguments among parents and bullying behavior that was mediated by children's self-concept, suggesting that children's bullying behavior is related to the impact of parental behaviors on the child's self-concept. Finally, Glover et al. (2000) reported associations between bullying and negative attitudes at home, inferring that children with low self-esteem are more likely to experience poor parental support and to feel isolated or influenced by others when dealing with bullying situations. Thus, parental involvement and intervention may complement school-wide anti-bullying programs by promoting a consistent, supportive environment for children to develop and mature.

This article introduces a small group counseling curriculum designed to incorporate the empirical research on bullying intervention and prevention in order to support parents of middle-school students who are victims of bullying in their school. The American School Counselor Association (ASCA; 2000) suggested that counselors provide support programs for both students and their families for matters that may be impacting students' academic as well as social development. Furthermore, ASCA (2006) recommends that school counselors offer parent education training as part of the comprehensive school counseling program's prevention, identification, and intervention program. The purpose of this curriculum is to supplement the widespread use of

empirically-based anti-bullying programs in middle schools by educating and supporting parents of victims of bullying. This curriculum will also allow school counselors to empower parents as to (a) the dangers of bullying and cyberbullying, (b) developing awareness of the schools' bullying prevention programs, and (c) understand that the home environment can also prevent bullying and support their child's social-emotional development.

Group Curriculum Development

The following section describes aspects for consideration when developing and implementing the group curriculum and includes: (a) administrative support, (b) parental membership, and (c) six clearly developed lessons for curriculum implementation.

Administrative Support

The group curriculum presented in this manual is intended to complement the three-tiered model of anti-bullying programs used around the world, which is based largely on the work of Dan Olweus (1997) and supported in the literature on best practices in schools (Walker & Shinn, 2002). The curriculum is designed specifically to appeal to middle-school administration and staff as an effort to increase parental and community support for the school's anti-bullying program. The middle-school population was chosen as the emphasis for this curriculum due to research demonstrating that bullying behavior peaks between sixth and eighth grade (Nansel et al., 2001). Furthermore, the curriculum should be implemented in a school where anti-bullying programs are already being implemented and supported by administrators.

Parental Membership

As with any small counseling group, consideration must be made for group members. Exploration of parents' perceptions of bullying for this program should be highly considered. For example, during the advertising and screening process, parents may be presented with the following two statements in order to gauge reactivity and potential bias, as well as amenability to change: (1) research shows that there is a subgroup of adolescents today that are both victims of bullying and perpetrators of bullying behavior (Raskauskas & Stoltz, 2007), and (2) research shows that aspects of the home environment (e.g., discipline, communication, and interaction patterns among family members) may impact the development of both adolescent bullying and victimization (Christie-Mizell, 2003; Perry et al., 2001). The purpose of these statements will be to assess the parent's willingness to consider systemic causes of bullying behavior, which ultimately suggests whether the parent agrees that system changes are required in order to prevent bullying behaviors.

Group Lessons

This six-week program will be geared toward providing a safe place for parents to share their experiences and to gain information to help them deal with the issues of bullying in their children's schools. Meetings may last for one and a half hours, and should take into consideration parents' schedules and childcare issues. Also, even with adult groups, confidentiality and risks and benefits to group process should be discussed (Corey, Corey, & Corey, 2006). A well-developed six-week curriculum follows which will provide counselors with the tools to easily replicate with their parent population.

Week 1 – Welcome and Set Goals

This initial meeting is geared towards developing trust among group members as well as identifying and clarifying goals (Corey et al., 2006). Here are a few recommended activities:

- Welcome and use of an ice breaker for getting to know group members (i.e., ask each member to respond to “Something unique about my family is...”).
- Have members discuss and agree on “rules of the group.” To include, being on time, not interrupting members, etc. (This may also be a good opportunity to review the informed consent).
- Discuss confidentiality and explain how essential it is to the group members feelings of trust.
- Agree on goals and expectations, and go over necessity of group (Raskauskas & Stoltz, 2007).
- “Share your story” (i.e., how each member relates to the topic of bullying, past interventions used).
- Close with assignment. The first assignment for the group is having each member explore his/her experiences with bullies. What experiences with bullies have group members experienced in school, and how did they handle it? How do members think bullying may be different for their children in these times of internet and cell phone usage?

Week 2 – Get the Facts and Share Experiences

This meeting should be geared towards establishing a sense of safety as well as building connections among the adults (Corey et al., 2006).

- Welcome and “check in” with members
- As an opener, discuss what bullying is with the group (Espelage & Swearer, 2003).
- Give statistics on bullies in schools and discuss information on cyberbullying (Nansel et al., 2001; Raskauskas & Stoltz, 2007). Factors of internet bullying can be especially harmful since victims may never know the identity of their bully, and the bullying can go on 24 hours a day as opposed to traditional bullying that was over when a child got home from school. Home was considered a safe place away from bullies before the internet and cell phones became so prevalent. (Raskauskas & Stoltz, 2007).
- Discuss harmful myths that are prevalent in society concerning bullying which contribute to lack of adult intervention (McNamee & Mercurio, 2008).
- Share assignment from last session (members’ own experiences with bullying and tactics used). Did they work? How do the members feel about their own experiences in relation to their children’s current experiences with bullies?
- Close with supportive comments on participation and checking in with members
- Assignment for this session is to come back with questions for school administrators that are scheduled to speak to the group at the next meeting.

Week 3 – Skills and Strategies

At this juncture the group leader(s) should assist members in recognizing forms of defensiveness, recognizing the value of dealing with conflicts in the here and now, and provide a model for members by tactfully and directly dealing with challenges (Corey et.al., 2006).

- Welcome and check in with members.
- Ask if anyone has anything they would like to discuss. This includes thoughts or feelings from the last session, or things that have occurred during the week that are relevant to the discussion.
- Introduce skills on dealing with bullies. Research shows that prevention and modification of bullying is linked to an increase in self-image in adolescents (Christie-Mizell, 2003). Share methods of active listening and creating a positive environment where children feel “heard.” Children who feel supported by parents often report higher levels of self-esteem and lower incidents of bullying (Glover et al., 2000). Discuss ways to more effectively communicate with children to help them feel valued and supported. Stress the importance of creating a relationship with children in which they feel safe to report bullying activity. Stress the importance of encouragement rather than disagreement with children about how to handle bullies. Share ways to help children form alliances with friendly children, and assist them in seeking help from an available adult (Olweus, 1997).
- Present “Strategies for Reducing & Managing Electronic Bullying” (Raskauskas & Stoltz, 2007). Discuss methods of creating a safe online environment, creating ground rules for internet use, and monitoring children while online. Talk about ways to respond to and/or report aggressive text messages.
- Have an administrator within the local school system as a guest speaker to briefly discuss policies in place for dealing with bullies at the school level. Follow up with a question and answer session.
- Close by checking in with members

There is a great deal to cover in the next meeting. The authors feel it is important to experience some role-playing to help members try out their ideas of dealing with bullies (Kipper, 1996). Be prepared to allow the members to experience emotion and give feedback to other members. Keep the feedback positive and remember to pay attention to members as they participate in the role-play.

Week 4 – Role Playing and How to Handle the Situation

At this meeting, the hope would be to enhance the level of cohesiveness among group members so that each may be able to support each other towards meeting their goals. The group leader should also be focused on assisting members in conceptualizing the impact of bullying and what it means for their child(ren).

- Welcome and check in with members
- The group facilitator(s) present a role play in which one takes the part of “parent” and the other takes the part of the “child.” The parent demonstrates active listening skills and effective communication with the child about a difficult bullying situation. The parents are asked to break up into dyads. Each dyad is asked to come up with a relevant scenario and asked to role play it with each other. (This generates some good ideas of various ways in which one might handle the situation). Ask the members to give positive feedback to other members on how the situations were handled. Did they learn anything? If so, what? What feelings did it bring up? Allow time for sharing after this exercise.
- If time allows, ask parents to rate how effective they feel they currently communicate with their children. How might parents improve communication with their children?

- As always, be aware of emotions with each member. Be prepared to respond accordingly to any member exhibiting verbal or nonverbal signs of emotion.
- Discuss feelings of helplessness concerning children having to handle bullying situations while they are away from parents (i.e., at school, camp, and playground). Be prepared to respond to all who may be emotional.
- Close with positive examples of how children can learn from the parents' role-playing exercise.
- Homework: ask each member to think of a technique they could use to teach their children to more effectively communicate with others. Ask them to bring it in to discuss group in the next session.
- Check in with members.

Week 5 – Review and Develop Contracts

The group leader should be preparing group members for termination.

Reflections should also be on concrete strategies to support students who are being bullied as well as support for parents in communicating with their children in the future.

- Welcome and check in with members.
- Review techniques and interventions learned in session and discuss the techniques that the members came up with as homework to use with their children. Allow members to give each other feedback.
- Remind group of last meeting. Explore feelings among the group about closing. Ask the group how they would feel if this were the last session and about what they have accomplished so far. This is to encourage people to think about how they want to use the remainder of their group time (Corey et al., 2006).

- Use remaining time for group members to develop a contract for plans after sessions have terminated. Contracts are promises that a member makes to him/her self by him/her self. Group leaders should help members make sure that their contracts are not too simple or not too unreasonable. Offer members the chance to share their contract with the group. Discussing their contracts with the group can give them useful information for improving their contract and help them set realistic goals. Have members select at least one member in the group to report their progress with their contract to. Having someone to report their progress to will increase the likelihood of members sticking to their goals after the session has ended (Corey et al., 2006).
- Homework: Bring any unresolved issues to discuss in the final group.
- Close with positive reminders. Remind members of the importance of parental involvement (Olweus, 1997).

Week 6 – Review and Discuss

The group leader now ensures that parents are prepared to carry what they have learned in group to their real life family situations. Most specifically is understanding how parents will choose to apply the skills they have learned in their daily family life (Corey et al., 2006).

- Welcome and check in with members.
- Have members fill out an evaluation questionnaire.
- Discuss:
 - ✓ Any concerns about the contracts made during the last meeting
 - ✓ Plans for maintaining goals after group

- ✓ Any unresolved issues
- ✓ Experience using techniques outside of group
- Ask group members to give a "snapshot" of a moment that was significant to them during the time spent in group. Have group members give specific information about how the group process has affected them.
- Close with reminder of confidentiality. It is still very important to keep confidentiality even after group has dissolved. Also remind members that groups are a process and that they should not expect great changes from just one group. Even though group has ended, members will have to keep working towards change (Corey et al., 2006).

A follow-up session should be scheduled for prior to the end of the school year.

Knowing that they will report on what has occurred between last session and the follow-up session, members are more likely to work towards accomplishing their goals (Corey et al., 2006).

Follow-up Session

Corey and colleagues surmised that it is best practice to follow-up with group members in order to determine how they have accomplished their identified goals. With this particular parent population, it would be important for group leaders to determine not only how the parents were able to meet their goals but also how their children may have been impacted by their interventions and support.

- Welcome and check in with members.
- Discuss what has occurred between the last session and now. The counselor should make sure to address each member. Questions may include:

- ✓ How have members progressed on the goals in their contracts?
- ✓ How have members used their experience in group since last session?
- ✓ How are their children doing in school? Any changes?
- Offer members times to sign up for individual appointments after session and also let members know that they can receive individual counseling if they have any concerns they would like to discuss further.

Discussion

While no all-encompassing immediate strategy exists to eradicate bullying behavior (Davidson & Demaray, 2005), it is a serious crisis that warrants further investigation. In order for any anti-bullying group curriculum to be effective, a comprehensive effort must be made to incorporate everyone involved, including: parents, teachers, school administrators, siblings, victims, and bullies themselves. This group curriculum should be viewed as one component of a larger effort to address all aspects of society that may have an impact on peer victimization.

A particular challenge to the group lies in the pervading attitudes in society. In order to move further in the right direction, several long standing myths must be discredited, including the notion that adults should not get involved because being bullied is a normal part of adolescence, or that allowing a child to handle the situation without intervention builds character (McNamee & Mercurio, 2008).

Another consideration is the diversity of parents within the group. This curriculum may be difficult to replicate in areas that are more culturally diverse. Research shows that cultural minorities are more likely to be victimized, often suffering name-calling and social exclusion based on perceptions of their differences (Monks, Ortega-Ruiz, &

Rodriguez-Hidalgo, 2008). Further in-depth research is necessary to more specifically address this growing problem.

Furthermore, ASCA (2006) recommends that school counselors maintain program accountability aligned with the regulations of the No Child Left Behind Act (2001). Therefore, to evaluate the effectiveness of the parents group curriculum, members may be given pre and post questionnaires rating potential changes in the perceptions of bullying as well as changes in their children's behavior, academic performance, and level of communication with parents.

Summary

Research consistently shows that bullying behavior often creates an unsafe environment for children, and raises barriers to social, emotional, and academic growth. Longitudinal studies often reveal that victims of childhood bullying continue to endure damaging social and sexual problems later in life, including a higher risk of suicidal behavior (Carney & Nottis, 2008). While the vast majority of bully intervention programs currently in use focus on victims and bullies, there is evidence that points to a deeper level of attention and intervention needed from adults. More specifically, whether or not a child is a victim of bullying often is directly linked to the parent-child relationship (Perry et al., 2001). Additionally, there is evidence to suggest that parents and children who enjoy deeper communication and less parental conflict often have higher self-concept and reduced likelihood of being victimized by peers (Christie-Mizell, 2003). The present group curriculum focused specifically on working with parents as a means to improve quality of life for children who have experienced being bullied. Substantial data exists to

support the urgent need for comprehensive interventions that are more effective at reducing the incidence of victimization in schools.

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Biographical Statements

John Lamanna is a doctoral student in the Counselor Education program at the College of William & Mary in Williamsburg, VA. Through his employment as a licensed school psychologist, he has extensive knowledge of the school counseling profession. Presently, his interests lie in the application of attachment theory and cognitive developmental theory on the development of empathy and dissociation in youth.

M. Ann Shillingford, Ph.D. is an Assistant Professor in the Counselor Education department at The College of William & Mary in Williamsburg, VA. She has several years of experience as a professional school counselor in both the elementary and middle school setting. She is especially interested in the leadership practices of school counselors as empowerment for systemic changes within the profession.

Mary-Frances Parrish is a master's level student in the Counselor Education program at the College of William and Mary in Williamsburg, VA. She is currently pursuing a specialization in marriage and family counseling.

Rebecca Sheffield is a master's level student in the Counselor Education program at the College of William and Mary in Williamsburg, VA. She is currently pursuing a specialization in marriage and family counseling.