



Cherish Our Children – Stop Violence Now!

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THE PSYCHOSOCIAL IMPACT OF VIOLENCE AGAINST CHILDREN

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A General Discussion of Violence and its Psychosocial Impact on Children

The causal link between violence and its negative consequences on the psychosocial wellbeing of children has been well and truly established (Sebre, Sprugevica, Navotni, & Bonevski, 2004).

Most children struggle to cope psychologically and come to terms with being victims of violence, whether it be physical or psychological. As a result of this emotional and mental disturbance, many child victims of violence display various forms of maladaptive behavior later on in life and also are more likely to develop psychological problems.

For example, child victims of violence are more likely to develop issues with anger later in life (Harper & Arias, 2004). Child victims of violence have a higher risk of developing psychological disorders (Frabotta, 2003) including eating disorders (Hund & Espelage, 2006), depression (Harper & Arias, 2004) and post-traumatic stress disorder (Sebre, Sprugevica, Navotni, & Bonevski, 2004). Research also indicates that victims of violence may develop personality disorders including borderline, masochistic and antisocial tendencies (Haller & Miles, 2004).

Research has also indicated that victims of domestic abuse are more likely to be involved in substance abuse including alcohol abuse (Downs, Capshaw and Rindels, 2004) and the use of illicit drugs (Moran, Vuchinich & Hall, 2004). Victims of violence tend to indulge in sexual relations earlier in life and are more at risk of teenage pregnancies (Hillis, Anda, Dube & Felliti, 2004).

Studies have also shown that child victims of psychological and verbal abuse are more likely to display behavioral problems, disciplinary issues and have problems adapting socially (Moore & Pepler, 2006).

Under the weight of such overwhelming evidence, it appears clear that violence has profound long term effects on children. The psychological scars that result from being victimized run deep and remain for the long term, sometimes permanently impacting on an individual's personality and life choices.

The remaining sections of this paper will focus in particular on violence in schools, specifically, school bullying.



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Defining Bullying

There are several elements that are typically present in the act of bullying. Firstly, there is a power imbalance that favors the bully in comparison to the victim (Rigby, 1996). The power advantage the bully possesses may take the form of physical size and strength, or it could be a numerical advantage, that is, a group bullying an individual. This power advantage could also take the form of intelligence and communication skills, in which case we see the brighter child taking advantage of his superior vocabulary and articulateness to put down another child.

Secondly, bullying involves the intention to cause hurt or harm. Bullying, is typically not accidental but intentional (Sullivan, Cleary & Sullivan, 2005). The bully purposely seeks ways to bring discomfort to his or her target victim. This may be in the form of physical violence or psychological aggression and abuse. Many societies tend to focus on physical bullying while ignoring and downplaying psychological forms of bullying. This is a dangerous and an irresponsible stance to take given that both forms of bullying lead to genuine suffering on the part of the victim.

Forms of Bullying Prevalent Today

Several reports in the local media have raised awareness on the state of aggressive behaviour among school children, both boys and girls, at primary and secondary school levels. Professionals and parents alike have viewed discipline problems among school children as a severe matter that needs to be adequately handled.

Recent violent cases of bullying among school students have also become a cause for concern. One of the more appalling incidents of bullying that stunned the nation was the brutal assault of a 16-year-old student in Seremban by his school seniors, which led to his death. In June 2005, a growing number of bullying cases has been reported. Some of these cases have left the unfortunate victims with physical impairments such as damaged eardrums and spinal injuries.

These cases have raised public concern and earned the indignation of many parties. Among others, the Education Minister has publicly warned bullies that strong action will be meted out against them. The Sultan of Pahang was equally distressed over this matter, causing him to initiate a personal investigation on this phenomenon in Pahang.

In 2004, statistics from the Ministry of Education (MoE) revealed that there were 249 reports on cases of students' indiscipline. In 2005, more than 40 cases have been reported in the first half of the year. While MoE's statistics display that the incidences of bullying and gangsterism in



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schools are decreasing, it is alleged that the reported cases have become increasingly extreme and violent. Hence, the matter remains a critical one that has to be addressed urgently. Datuk Seri Hishammuddin Hussein, the Education Minister, rightly asserts that there is no “acceptable” level of bullying.¹

The Emotional Effects of Bullying

Emotionally, victims of bullying often suffer feelings of great distress and fear whenever they are in school. This makes it difficult for victims to engage in the process of education. The overwhelming fear victims experience can also lead to absenteeism from school in an attempt to escape the bullying.

Victims of bullying often experience self doubt and a drop in self esteem (Glew, Fan, Katon, Rivara, & Kernic, 2005). Many victims blame themselves for the bullying behavior, believing that it is their inherent weakness or incompetence that contributes to them being picked on by the bullies (Sullivan, Cleary & Sullivan, 2004).

Loss of self esteem at this critical stage of life can have serious long term repercussions on the individuals personality and character development. Self perceived weakness and low-worth can become self fulfilling prophecies that are further reinforced by bullying behavior (Sullivan, Cleary & Sullivan, 2004).

Some victims of bullying harbor intense anger and bitterness towards bullies and the social cliques that condone and support bullying behavior. This anger, if unresolved, may lead to victims becoming bullies themselves with younger children, and are classified as bully-victims (Rigby, 1996). Others may express their anger in anti-social behavior like vandalism and theft.

In particularly severe cases of bullying, when a victim has suffered for a prolonged period of time, the anger that has built up, may manifests itself in violent acts of vengeance against the bullies.

There are, of course, tragic cases in which victims of bullying come to the conclusion that the only way to stop their suffering is to end their lives. Research has indicated that there is link between bullying and thoughts of killing self, that is suicide ideation (Rigby, 1996).

¹ The Sun Weekend, July 9-10, 2005, “Getting tough on bullies”



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The Cognitive Effects of Bullying

Cognitively, bullying can encourage a pattern of learnt-helplessness among victims. This is when a victim, having suffered from repeated bullying in spite of their own efforts to escape or stop the suffering, adopt a stance in life in which they perceive themselves to be helpless and unable to change their situation. This sense of helplessness often is then generalized to other areas of their life including their academic work, their relationships with family and their future careers and ambitions. Learnt helplessness is very closely to self-defeatist thought patterns in that they both encourage a passive approach to life's problems and challenges.

Bullying behavior also can affect a child's learning experience. For meaningful education to occur, children must be given an environment that is perceived to be safe, physically, emotionally and intellectually. Only when a child feels safe and secure, will s/he adopt an open attitude to knowledge, only then will s/he be willing to explore and thereby discover, only then will s/he be willing to interact and engage with his/her teachers and peers. When children feels that they are under constant threat of being hurt and humiliated, they cannot fully realize their academic potential.

The Social Effects of Bullying

Socially, children who are victims of bullying tend to be isolated from their peers (Rigby 1996). This could be due to the fact that their low self esteem may lead to a lack of confidence in making friends and socializing. It could also be linked to the fact that other students actively avoid contact with students who are victimized on a frequent basis for fear of becoming victims themselves.

In many cases, children who are bullied may lack the social skills to relate comfortably with other children (Rigby, 1996). Often victims of bullying are socially awkward to begin with, and this unease is made worse when they suffer from bullying. It is a vicious cycle that makes it difficult for victims to break out of and leads to them being deprived of quality peer interactions that are so important in their stage of development (Sullivan, Cleary & Sullivan, 2004).

Long-term effects on bullies

Up to this stage we have focused our discussion of the consequences of bullying on the victims of bullying. It is also important to devote some consideration to the bullies themselves.



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Evidence suggests that children who bully are more likely than those who don't bully to skip school and drop out of school. They are also more likely to smoke, drink alcohol and get into fights. Students (particularly boys) who bully others have a high risk to engage in other delinquent behaviours, such as vandalism, drug abuse, and truancy (Olweus, 1993). Research has further revealed that former school bullies have a fourfold increase in the level of relatively serious, official crime records.

Proposed Action for Bully Prevention

To effectively combat bully behaviour among students, there is indeed a great need to enhance overall school community and parents' capacity to efficiently cope with bully/victim incidences. UNICEF in partnership with the Faculty of Behavioral Science at HELP University College and the Malaysian Ministry of Education has embarked on a project to introduce bullying interventions to schools in Malaysia. This intervention model is based on the Olweus School Intervention Model that has been introduced in various parts of the world.

This intervention meets the following needs:

- timely and effective interventions for victims of bully incidences;
- implementation of anti-bullying policy in schools;
- communicating clearly to students that bullying is not at all a permissible behaviour
- training for students, parents and school staff to effectively deal with bullying behaviour among students; as well as training in areas of problem solving strategies and enhancement of social skills
- provision of accurate information and education for children, school staff, parents, and the public on what bullying is; its causes and effects; as well as steps of prevention and intervention.

This pilot project will be completed at the end of 2007, at which time its efficacy will be evaluated. The hope is that if effective, it will be introduced at a national level to all schools in the country.



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