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James Alan Fox on criminal behavior and the justice system

BULLYING

Why anti-bullying programs fail

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With the start of the school year fast approaching, millions upon millions of students are soaking up the last few days of summer. For some, however, a return to school means having to face once again harassment in the hallway and bullying on the bus.

Although the Internet may have broadened the scope, harassing behavior -- from teasing to intimidation, from shoving to fighting -- has been a problem for decades, if not centuries, likely for as long as there have been schools. Previously dismissed as normal and relatively harmless child's play -- boys being boys, □ girls being catty □ -- in recent years bullying has taken on an entirely different meaning. Not only do victims tend to experience higher rates of illness and depression, but, some have resorted to suicide or murder as a last resort relief from constant harassment.

The suicide last January by 15-year-old Phoebe Prince, a high school student in South Hadley, Massachusetts, is but one of many episodes of senseless tragedy apparently precipitated by bullying and harassment. Eric Mohat of Mentor, Ohio, was harassed so mercilessly that when a one of his tormentors said out loud in class, Why don't you go home and shoot yourself, no one will miss you, □ he did just that. And Luke Woodham who killed two classmates and wounded seven others in Pearl, Mississippi, wrote in what was meant as a suicide note, I am not insane! I am angry. I kill because people like me are mistreated every day. I do this to show society push us and we will push back. I have suffered all my life. No one ever truly loved me."

For too many years, schools often responded to reports of bullying by placing the blame on the shoulders of victims, implicitly assuming that they were somehow responsible for their own victimization, if only because they failed to stand up for themselves. In cases where a student had to be transferred from one class or homeroom to another to prevent further harassment, it was usually the victim and not the bully who was displaced.

In the past couple of decades, however, school administrators have come to take -- or have been compelled by law to take -- a more progressive and enlightened view of the causes of and solutions to bullying. Rather than focusing just on the victims and offenders, schools have had far greater success by addressing the broader school climate.

Despite the range of promising tools for bullying suppression, there are significant hurdles to their successful application in school settings. Most of all, the school climate must be amenable to changing norms surrounding intimidation and aggression. Intolerance for acts of bullying must be the perspective widely embraced and shared by both faculty and students, not something merely imposed upon students by administrative decree.

Unfortunately, even when students and teachers appear, at least superficially, solidly unified against bullying, certain deeply-rooted prejudices that favor bullies over victims remain somewhat resistant to change. A study of perceptions and attitudes among middle school students and teachers in Pennsylvania found relatively weak confidence in the utility of anti-bullying curricula and role-playing strategies. Rather, both groups seemed to prefer an approach that encourages victims to be more assertive and to stand up for themselves. Apparently, the long-standing, "blame the victim" viewpoint suggesting that victims are in some way responsible for their mistreatment remains somewhat impenetrable.

Notwithstanding the widespread adoption of various school-based anti-bullying curricula, the empirical evidence with regard to their preventive value is somewhat disappointing. An analysis of anti-bullying interventions implemented over a 25-year time period, from 1980 to 2004, concluded that the effectiveness of bullying prevention programs was modest at best, and mostly impacted knowledge and attitudes rather than actual bullying behavior.

Regardless of the approach to prevention and enforcement, it remains extremely difficult to convince bullies that their actions are disadvantageous for themselves, besides being injurious to the targets of their abuse. Even with threats of punishment, some students see bullying as a positive thing -- for themselves, that is.

All too often, bullies gain from their use of power over weaker classmates. Not only do they come away with their victim's lunch money or property, but they are typically admired for their supremacy. Researchers at the University of Virginia found that bullies are, based on peer nominations, overwhelmingly considered to be the more popular students in class.

The problem of bullying and its solution goes way beyond the schoolyard. In our competitive society -- in sports, in corporate America and especially in politics -- we admire aggressors and pity pushovers. Sure, schools need to change, but so does society in general.