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## BULLYING/CYBERBULLYING

### Keys for Bullying and Suicide Prevention in Schools

*Source: Dr. Scott Poland*

The suicide of the 7th grader sent shock waves through the middle school but after a few months it seemed almost all students and staff had moved on with their lives. The principal had heard through the grapevine that the parents blamed the school but had no idea that the school was going to be sued. The law suit filed specifically named the principal, a coach and a teacher that the parents believed had failed to stop the bullying of their child at school. The parents claimed that they had told the school of their concerns about their child being victimized and that nothing was done.

The emerging phenomenon bullycide, we are hearing about more frequently from the media as numerous stories have directly linked being the victim of bullying with suicide. Dan Olweus, one of the international pioneers in bullying prevention stresses that a person is bullied when they are exposed repeatedly to negative actions on the part of one or more persons. The bullying maybe be physical or verbal and the pattern is repeated over time and involves an imbalance of power. The following are some of the questions being debated in legal cases where parents have sued schools believing that bullying at school was a casual factor in the death of their child. Is the bullying the cause of the suicide or a precipitating event that caused the student with mental health problems to act on their suicidal thoughts? What responsibility do parents have to better monitor the mood state of their child and obtain recommended mental health treatment for their child? Did parents thoroughly document their concerns about the bullying at their child's school with administrators, request conferences and interventions to stop the bullying? Were those well documented concerns then ignored by school officials?

National figures indicate that 25% of students are bullied but thankfully few students who are the victims of bullying die by suicide. Although bullying is associated with suicide and increases other suicide risk factors such as depression and isolation, it may be oversimplifying to say bullying caused a suicide.

A note here about the media's usage of the term "bullycide." Some suicide prevention experts say the term can elevate risk of contagion by suggesting that suicide is a usual response to bullying, or implies that bullying is the sole cause of suicide. Other experts add that there is no scientific evidence that bullying causes depression or suicide. They also point out that the term is confusing as it has also been used in the literature to describe the very rare cases where the victim of bullying has murdered the bully. An excellent guide for Talking about suicide and LGBT populations, is available at [talkingabout@lgbtmap.org](mailto:talkingabout@lgbtmap.org)

It is important that schools administrators across the nation taking proactive steps to increase their knowledge and to implement bullying and suicide prevention programs. The American Association of Suicidology has developed a school suicide prevention accreditation credential and NASP has conducted webinars about bullying prevention and suicide prevention. FASP has also had numerous initiatives to prevent bullying and school psychologists serve as an invaluable

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resource for schools as we are familiar with many prevention resources and can serve on county wide school task forces to implement both bullying prevention and suicide prevention programs.

School personnel have generally been found by the courts not to be liable unless they have acted with malice or showed deliberate indifference to the bullying. One attorney recently defined deliberate indifference as school staff who just didn't give a damn. I am currently involved in several cases where schools are being sued following the suicide of a student and helped successfully defend school personnel in several legal cases that have been settled including *Jasperson v. Anoka Hennepin*, which resolved in favor of the school system in the state of Minnesota Court of Appeals. These cases call into question the training provided to faculty and staff on bullying and suicide prevention, the policies developed and implemented, and the provision of consequences for the bully and support for the victim.

There is no question that many schools throughout the nation are increasingly making bullying prevention a priority and legislation has been passed in 45 states requiring schools to increase bullying prevention efforts. The Office of Civil Rights has also sent several letters to schools since the fall of 2010 to clarify the need for schools to investigate harassment and bullying, take action to stop it and address its effects, revise policies and re-train students, faculty, staff and parents. Recently national leaders and even President Obama have called for bullying to stop. The following are recommendations that educators can implement to improve their prevention efforts.

### **Bullying Prevention**

- Implement a school-wide program where all staff cooperates towards the common goal of reducing bullying.
- Survey students to determine the extent and nature of the problem and to solicit student recommendations to reduce bullying.
- Recognize that lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender youth are often the target of bullying and increase support for those students. Excellent resources are available from the Gay Lesbian Straight Education Network at [www.glsen.org](http://www.glsen.org)
- Implement programs designed to reach bystanders and to gain a commitment from them to take action to stop the bullying instead of standing by and allowing bullying to take place.
- Hold parent meetings and provide training, especially on reducing cyber bullying.
- Teach staff to recognize bullying and to take immediate action to stop bullying when it occurs. Ensure that staff members do not try to make the bully and victim work it out. Ideally bully and victim should be separated and the bully given consequences and the victim given support.
- Staff needs to let the bully know that they and other staff will be watching and consequences will increase in severity if the bullying continues.
- The victim needs to know the importance of letting staff know if bullying continues
- Increase staff supervision in areas where bullying occurs the most.
- For more in-depth instructions, review evidenced-based bullying prevention programs listed on the U.S. Department of Education website at [www.stopbullying.gov](http://www.stopbullying.gov)

### **Suicide Prevention**

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- Provide annual training for all school staff on the warning signs of suicide and how to get help and increase support for suicidal students.
  - Ensure that your school has a comprehensive suicide prevention policy that specifies annual training for all staff on the warning signs of suicide and the importance of working as a team and not keeping a secret about suicidal behavior. The plan should also provide training on suicide assessment for key school support personnel including counselors, social workers and school psychologists. Policies should be developed to ensure that suicidal students are properly supervised and that their parents are notified that their child is suicidal. Schools also need to be familiar with community resources and any specific interventions available in their state such as for example the Baker Act in Florida for involuntary hospitalization.
  - Provide mental health presentations for parents that include suicide prevention information.
  - Create a prevention task force that involves both school staff and community resources and agencies.
  - Implement depression screening programs and follow program recommendations and school policies for securing supervision and support for students who are identified as depressed and/or suicidal
  - Designate a suicide prevention expert at your school and get them credentialed in school suicide prevention from the American Association of Suicidology [www.suicidology.org](http://www.suicidology.org)

I am pleased that there is now a national focus on bullying prevention in schools and particularly like the motto stop bullying now. The group of students in schools that are most in need of staff support and programs to stop bullying are the Lesbian, Gay, Bi-sexual and Transgender students as they are most often the target of the bullying. I have for many years advocated for suicide prevention program in schools as well and hope that our national leaders will make it as much of a priority as bullying prevention.

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