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Statement of the Problem

Relational bullying, also known as social or indirect bullying, is a common form of harassment used by middle school students. It is defined by actions that exclude others from friend groups, hurt peers' reputations, and harm friendships and relationships. Like all types of bullying, it involves aggressive actions, an imbalance of power, and repetition. According to the U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, specific examples of relational bullying include, "leaving someone out on purpose, telling other children not to be friends with someone, spreading rumors about someone, and embarrassing someone in public" (U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, n.d.).

Shullsburg Middle School, like many other schools across the country, struggles with the issue of relational bullying. Though it has a bullying incident report form on its school website and various other strategies to deal with this problem, its administrators have requested additional information from UW-Platteville students. It is our goal to equip them with more knowledge and resources to effectively prevent and stop incidents of relational bullying. In addition, we hope to make the community more aware and prepared to deal with bullying, as opposed to the current view that "boys will be boys" and that "girls are catty".

Literature Review

In a summary of the National Crime and Victimization Survey, DeVoe (2005) explains that 19% of 6th graders, 17% of 7th graders, and 12% of 8th graders self-reported being victims of

indirect, or relational, bullying. Girls are best known for this type of bullying. It is often hard to spot relational bullying because it is subtle and often occurs within a group of friends. Victims will be extremely hesitant to speak up or report indirect bullying because they fear being lonely more than enduring another day of taunting or isolation (Deverich, n.d.). Usually relational bullying begins as a power imbalance. The bully might be more physically developed or attractive, more popular, more athletic, or even more intelligent. They take advantage of this imbalance of power and use it to isolate the victim, while also securing their status within the group of friends. (U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, n.d., *Risk factors*)

Relational bullying can occur on many venues. It happens at school, on the bus, at slumber parties, over the phone, and, new to this generation, over the internet. Relational bullying can happen at nearly any time, leaving victims in a continuous state of vulnerability. As the statistics above suggest, indirect bullying is most common in 6th grade students. As the children grow older, the self-reporting of bullying decrease. By the time these young adolescents graduate high school, there will be comparatively few cases of relational bullying. Unfortunately, indirect bullying still presents a real problem in middle schools. (DeVoe, 2005)

While every situation of bullying is different, victims of indirect bullying usually share some common characteristics. They are typically younger than their assailants, may be of a minority race, and usually stand out in some noticeable aspect (Devoe, 2005). The U.S. Department of Health & Human Services (n.d. *Risk Factors*) lists some examples of being “different” that might trigger a bully’s attacks.. Being overweight, underweight, weak, not trendy, or excelling or doing poorly in school are all reasons a victim might be chosen. Weak social skills, such as having a low self-esteem, struggling with depression, having few friends,

or acting annoying for attention might also entice a bully (U.S. Department of Health & Human Services).

There are also similarities in the characteristics of bullies. Children become bullies for usually one of two reasons. Either they have social power and are concerned about securing their popularity or they are isolated, depressed, and have a low self-esteem. Whichever category the bully falls into, he or she may also have these common characteristics: aggressive behaviors, issues at home, disregard for rules, lack of respect for others, positive opinion of violence, and association with other bullies. Bullying usually doesn't stem from a desire to be purely mean. Rather, it usually is a result of internal or external issues unrelated to the bullying situation. (U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, n.d., *Risk factors*)

At *Band Back Together*, an open forum where users can post testimonials of their emotional experiences of abuse, bullying, and depression, blogger Maloqu (2012) shares her personal story of being a bully in middle school. She was an abused girl, suffering from depression, inadequacy, and had power and control issues. She dealt with these violent emotions by controlling others with "words and lies and rumors." Looking back at her former self, she said, "I felt powerless and damaged, so I wanted others to feel my pain." (Maloqu, 2012) Maloqu used her internal struggle with her home life as an excuse to lash out at her peers. By putting others down, she was no longer alone in her misery.

According to Deverich (n.d), a research assistant at Brigham Young University, the most common source of these learned bullying behaviors is the family. Some common bullying behaviors of parents include gossiping about the neighbors, avoiding acquaintances they find strange, acting "two-faced," or giving conditional love. When children observe their parents and

other adult family members acting like this, they are taught that these behaviors are acceptable. They then apply the same type of actions to their friend groups. (Deverich, n.d.)

Deverich says that the second most common source from which young adolescents learn bullying behaviors is their peers. A child might see his classmate bullying other kids and realize that it is a successful, albeit unfortunate, way to secure one's social standing. Also, since relational bullying is so discreet and seldom reported, the bullies rarely get in trouble for it. This child might then be led to believe that adults have no qualms about this sort of behavior. He might conclude that gossiping and conditional friendships are socially accepted behaviors that will boost one's popularity, and then join in the hurtful behavior. (Deverich, n.d.)

Sadly, there is yet another reason why young adolescents will engage in indirect bullying. When a victim of bullying reaches her breaking point and lashes out at the attacker, thereby becoming a bully herself, it is known as reactive relational bullying (DeVoe, 2005). This is the case of an anonymous 6th grade girl, who also posted her story on *Band Back Together*. She was excluded from her group of "friends", the common subject of gossip, and socially isolated from her peers at lunch and recess. She could not handle the harassment any longer, but instead of going to a trusted adult, she turned on her attackers. She became a bully herself, lashing out with words and lies. However, she couldn't bear the guilt of hurting others like she had been hurt; it, along with the relentless attacks, drove her to attempt suicide. (Conversation, 2012)

There are many effects associated with relational bullying including, but not limited to, those that are psychological, social, and academic. For example, victims and bullies may suffer from anxiety and depression as Maloqu did, in addition to becoming socially withdrawn. Since

victims may attempt to avoid bullying incidences, attendance in classes may decrease resulting in a decline in grades.

Early adolescents and adolescents are at a very sensitive time in their development. As a result, the effects of bullying can be even more pronounced during these pivotal developmental years. According to Owens, Slee, and Shute (2000), girls experience more indirect bullying than boys. In general, victims of bullying, both overt and indirect or relational, “rate more poorly psychologically than their peers” (Owens, Slee, & Shute, 2000). In addition, victims of relational bullying suffer from other psychological effects including feelings of “embarrassment, anger, worry, fear, humiliation, loneliness, self-consciousness, betrayal, and sadness” (Owens, Slee, Shute, 2000).

From these feelings, social anxiety may develop as a student becomes unsure of how they will be treated by their peers. The victims may also develop low self-esteem after they begin to internalize the idea that maybe there is something wrong with them. From this decreased self-esteem, depression may also occur which is a very serious result of bullying. However, as indicated by Craig, this depression is most likely a result of perpetual victimization and is not directly related to bullying and victimization (Craig, 1998). Regardless, depression is a serious issue that may lead to suicidal thoughts and, possibly, attempts if not dealt with.

The effects of being a victim continue into adulthood; according to Owens, Slee, and Shute (2000) young adults who had been victims of bullying during middle and high school were more likely to have higher rates of depression and lower self-esteem than other young adults their age. Others that had been bullied in eighth grade developed a higher likelihood to complain of headaches, stomach aches, and pains by junior year of high school. However, an interesting,

but troubling thing to note about the bully is that they feel little or no guilt and anxiety about the bullying act which, according to Craig (1998) is consistent with antisocial personalities.

It would appear that girls not only experience more indirect bullying than boys but also suffer more. This is not to say that boys do not suffer from relational bullying, however, research indicates that girls tend to experience it more often than boys. Girls can feel that the bullying will never end which may lead to suicide considerations if coupled with depression. Some girls are confused as to why they are a target in the first place. An extended discussion of the adolescent girls' reactions to indirect bullying is provided by Owens, Slee, and Shute (2000), however the following is a condensed version:

- Hide feelings from bully/bullies
- Wish to leave the school where bullying is occurring
- Use “catastrophizing self-talk” in which they begin to think the bullies are right and begin internalizing those negative ideas
- Use same tactics against the initial aggressors
- Approach bully in one on one situations

Bullying has effects on the social aspects of a student's life. Relational bullying typically occurs within friend groups, unlike overt bullying which occurs outside of the friend group (Grotmeter & Crick, 1996). There are a number of social reasons why relational bullying is used by adolescents.

Of the many reasons, social status is one of them. According to a number of authors, students with a high social status, but not necessarily particularly likable or kind, are relationally aggressive. They tend to use relational bullying to control others, establish dominance, and get

they want. As a result, the bullies tend to be on the top of the social hierarchy with their victims being at the bottom. The victims, being less socially accepted or possibly even shunned, as a result suffer from the above discussed psychological effects of bullying without support. (Cillessen & Mayeux, 2004) (Prinstein & Cillessen, 2003) (Prinstein, Boergers, Vernberg 2001)

While high social status was achieved by relationally aggressive bullies, they are “significantly more disliked” (Crick & Grotpeter, 1995). Crick & Grotpeter (1995) also stated that social maladjustments were also related to relational aggression. One article suggests that relational bullying is more commonly used by girls than boys. However, it is suggested by Cillessen & Mayeux (2004), that the goal of attaining “perceived popularity” was a driving force behind the use of relational bullying. The authors continue to state that girls tend to seek perceived popularity. (Cillessen & Mayeux, 2004)

Since victims tend to be less likely to have friends due to lack of acceptability by the rest of the peer group to befriend these students, they are alone. As a result, victims that have been bullied to the point of exclusion are continuous targets for bullying since they lack a social support system within the school (Wang, Iannotti, & Nansel, 2009). Some victims of relational bullying may attempt to leave the friend group in order to make the bullying stop. If they are not accepted by another group, they may attempt to rejoin the initial friend group. (Owens, Slee, Shute, 2000)

For bullies that have high social status, their academic work suffers. These aggressive students have an increased tendency to skip class. In addition, if they were perceived as “tough” then these students seemed to feel that doing well in school went against the social status they had attained. These popular students were described as “unengaged from the school

environment” by Schwartz, Garman, Nakamoto, & McKay (2006). (Schwartz, Garman, Nakamoto, & McKay, 2006)

Next we will discuss the strategies that can be applied to relational bullying. First with the school wide policies and then with parenting strategies. According to a study conducted by the University of Montreal, University of Quebec at Montreal and Laval University (2005), “80% of a child’s Relationally Aggressive behavior is due to environmental factors, such as poor parenting and negative peer influence”(Randall, 2008) . Our strategies will focus on parenting techniques and changing the school environment. The first strategy is called Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports.

Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (PBIS)

PBIS is a school wide model that focuses on behavior replacement. PBIS includes teachers, administrators, coaches, and parents. PBIS has a three tier system of integration, new schools start on tier one and progress to tier three. The benefit of PBIS found in an accumulation of study’s found these results:

- PBIS has shown that it is an effective strategy in promoting positive behavior in students and schools.
- This type of model decreases the need for more punitive actions.
- Schools report increased time engaged in academic activities and improved academic performance.
- PBIS can lead to dramatic improvements that have long-term effects on lifestyle, communication skills, and problem behaviors.
- Schools that employ system-wide interventions for problem behavior prevention indicate reductions in office discipline referrals of 20-60%.

- A review of research on PBIS effectiveness showed that there was over a 90% reduction in problem behavior in over half of the studies; the problem behavior stopped completely in over 26% of the studies. (Randall, 2008)

PBIS is a relatively new strategy for conquering bullying, but seems to be gaining a lot of steam. Illinois appears to be one of the states to test the program and now about 1,600 school districts are currently implementing some form of PBIS. Data from Illinois schools can be found here

(<http://pbis.org/common/pbisresources/publications/FY12%20Short%20Rpt%20092512bcm.pdf>)

and here

(<http://pbis.org/common/pbisresources/publications/PBIS%20FY12%20Annual%20Progress%20Report%202.8.13tb.pdf>). PBIS also has a Wisconsin branch

(<http://www.wisconsinpbisnetwork.org/home.html>) and is currently implemented in just over 1,000 schools.

Second Step

Second Step is a classroom-based program that has been found to improve children's social competence and to decrease levels of physical aggression and antisocial behaviors. But since its creation several specific lessons targeting relational aggression have been added to the curriculum. Second Step is a widely used program with all the program information available through Community of Children (<http://www.cfchildren.org/>).

Study results: students in intervention Group 1 remained relatively stable in their attitudes about social exclusion from pre- to post-intervention, whereas students in the control group showed an increase in their endorsement of social exclusion ($d = 0.37$). Students in intervention Group 2 experienced improved attitudes related to social exclusion ($d = 0.73$), physical aggression ($d =$

0.50), and verbal derogation ($d = 0.60$) as compared to control youth whose attitudes remained stable. (Wang, Iannotti, & Nansel, 2009)

Advantages to Second Step other than its effectiveness are that it requires no outside of district training or conferences. Teachers could be trained during in-services by the “facilitator”. The most common method of payment seems to be by using Title 1 to gain funding for the program.

The only discussed downside to the program seems to be some question marks about the validity of the studies on Second Step. These include some methodology issues and a relatively small sample size.

Friend to Friend (F2F)

F2F focuses on the late elementary and early middle school age group. F2F focuses on problem solving skills, and behavior modification through in the classroom lessons and has also show positive results when studied: Results suggest that relationally aggressive girls who were randomized to F2F had extremely large improvements in teacher-reported peer likeability ($d = 1.73$), large decreases in relational aggression ($d = 0.74$), and moderate reductions in physical aggression ($d = 0.43$), hostile attributions ($d = 0.61$), and loneliness ($d = 0.45$) as compared to relationally aggressive girls in the control condition. (Wang, Iannotti, & Nansel, 2009)

A Strength of F2F is that the program and materials were developed using a participatory action research framework through feedback from urban girls, parents, teachers, and community members. F2F was also found to be very culturally sensitive by both parents and teachers and was overall well received.

Unfortunately while F2F has shown to be effective I was unable to find a source for the program or any organization website. Another downside is that F2F was specifically designed for

urban and primarily African-American schools and has not yet been studying in a broader school setting. (Wang, Iannotti, & Nansel, 2009)

I Can Problem Solve (ICPS)

ICPS is designed for the elementary school ages but teaches the skills necessary for desired behavior in the older grades. ICPS has been in use since 1971, when it was first developed under the name Interpersonal Cognitive Problem Solving; the name I Can Problem Solve was adopted in 1992. Adaptations of ICPS have expanded the target age all the way to 12 or through 6th grade. The National Institute of Health describes the strengths of ICPS as:

Strengths of the ICPS Program include its long history of use within varied schools and school districts, especially for preschoolers and kindergarteners. In addition, the program is manualized and trainings are available for purchase (<http://www.researchpress.com/product/item/4628/>). Although the program does not appear to have problem-solving components specific to relational aggression, results suggest that the general problem-solving skill set taught by the program may be reasonably effective in reducing relational aggression. (Wang, Iannotti, & Nansel, 2009)

Three books based on ICPS have been developed for parents to use at home: "Raising a Thinking Child," "Raising a Thinking Preteen," and "Thinking Parent, Thinking Child." A workbook, also entitled "Raising a Thinking Child," is available in both English and Spanish and can be used as a stand-alone resource or in conjunction with the parenting books.

The negatives of ICPS are that the program isn't for the desired age group of this research and ICPS requires a lot of time: ICPS consists of three age-specific programs: preschool (containing 59 lessons), kindergarten and primary school (83 lessons), and intermediate elementary school (77 lessons). ICPS lessons are 20 minutes in duration and taught three to five

times per week over the course of the academic year. In addition to the lessons, ICPS offers suggestions for integrating problem-solving principles into day-to-day classroom happenings, a technique called "ICPS dialoguing. (Wang, Iannotti, & Nansel, 2009)

With the long required time of the program teachers must be dedicated to the program for it to work efficiently. But overall studies (<http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/7113996>) show that ICPS is effective during the program and for multiple years after completion of the program. Other similar elementary level programs include Walk Away, Ignore, Talk, Seek Help (WITS), and Making Choices: Social Problem Skills for Children (MC). (Wang, Iannotti, & Nansel, 2009)

Parenting Strategies

The following parenting strategies should not be done in isolation but are all aspects of the same strategy of broadening socialization and skill building. The hardest part of all these strategies is that they will work best if used proactively and not reactively. Parenting strategies should not be overlooked or slighted because relational bullying tends to happen at school. Learning doesn't start or end with school as we all know.

Multiple Social Circles

One way to curb the effects of relational bullying is to encourage children to have multiple social circles. This can be accomplished by participating in non-scholastic focused extracurriculars. This strategy helps children break free from a relational bullying situation because he/she will have other friend groups to lean on. Multiple social circles prove an extended support system for children suffering from any kind of bullying. (Deverich, Nelson, & Duncan)

Talk To Your Child About Bullying

Have active conversations on the effects of bullying and who bullying affects. Try to relate to your child's feelings by sharing your personal stories with bullying, whether positive or negative. Develop a plan for your child to deal with bullying, report bullying, and prevent bullying. Actively listen to your child and don't necessarily try to fix their problems. Along with talking to your child about bullying, another aspect that could fit into this conversation is empathy. Teaching your child how to think from another person's perspective can really aid in preventing relational bullying. (Deverich, Nelson, & Duncan)

Developing A Strong Sense of Self

Self-confidence solves a lot of problems. We don't need research to tell us feeling good about yourself yields better results in the classroom and life. Developing a strong sense of self is very critical for the average middle school student who is in the process of becoming an individual and starting down the path to adulthood. (Deverich, Nelson, & Duncan)

Conclusions

Relational bullying is a very common problem in our middle schools. It occurs because of a power imbalance between the bully and the victim. Since relational bullying is indirect, and often occurs within groups of friends, it can be difficult to detect. Its effects are very real, though. Relational bullying can have many far-reaching consequences, particularly psychological effects for the victim. Fortunately, there are many strategies that schools can implement to prevent and stop relational bullying.

Recommendations

I would recommend any school to implement the Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (PBIS) system. PBIS has a significant amount of data from multiple states backing up the effectiveness of the program which is unique among the discussed school wide strategies. Another positive for the PBIS system is that the organization has a Wisconsin branch which will provide any new school with the tools necessary to start the program. PBIS also is a teachers, administrators and parents wide system that keeps everyone aware and involved. To supplement the PBIS system I would recommend the I Can Problem Solve (ICPS) system for the elementary grades. ICPS does require a lot of time commitment from the teachers but with its proven longevity of positive effects years after completion of the program ICPS seems like the perfect feeder system into PBIS.

For parenting strategies I would suggest all the strategies be used that were discussed in this paper, certainly none in isolation. If the school district is looking for a way to have an open discussion and informational meeting about bullying with the parents of the community I would suggest this powerpoint by Connie Gray as a good starting point. This powerpoint provides a lot of very good information on relational bullying and techniques for teachers and parents.

[http://corinnegray.webs.com/585%20Powerpoint%20Workshop%20Relational%20Aggression.p
df](http://corinnegray.webs.com/585%20Powerpoint%20Workshop%20Relational%20Aggression.pdf)

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