



**National Community of Practice
on Collaborative School Behavioral Health**



Bullying in Public and Charter Schools

Philip J. Lazarus, PhD

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Below is the transcript from the teleconference sponsored on Monday, February 14, 2011 by the National Practice Group on Connecting School Mental Health with Juvenile Justice and Dropout Prevention. This practice group is committed to working across stakeholder groups to advance knowledge and best practices related to effectively linking school mental health with juvenile justice and dropout prevention. For youth to be successful, effective coordination and communication across systems is needed, and resources and best practice guidelines related to this work need to be readily available.

Key priority areas of the practice group include advancing effective strategies for:

- Reducing truancy, unnecessary suspensions and expulsions, dropout, and delinquency;
- Building school and community capacity to meet the needs of youth and their families;
- Promoting successful transitions between systems;
- Encouraging relevant professional development for school and juvenile justice staff;
- Advancing school connectedness and family partnership; and
- Promoting best practices in diversion and early intervention for youth who are in the juvenile justice system or who are at risk of placement in juvenile detention.

To learn more about this practice group and the National Community of Practice on Collaborative School Behavioral Health, visit www.sharedwork.org and sign up for our Listserv, SMH_JJ/DOP@yahoogroups.com.

The transcript below presents the discussion between Dr. Philip Lazarus and Judith Storandt, Practice Group Facilitator and National Disability Rights Network staff attorney. Dr. Lazarus is an associate professor and director of the School Psychology Training Program at Florida International University. He is president of the National Association of School Psychologists (an association of more than 25,000 professionals). He is a graduate of Tulane University, the University of Miami, and the University of Florida. Questions presented to Dr. Lazarus included questions sent to Ms. Storandt before and during the teleconference from practice group leaders and members from across the country.

Judith Storandt:

Hello, everybody and Happy Valentine's Day. I'm Judith Storandt representing the Practice Group on Connecting School Mental Health with Juvenile Justice and Dropout Prevention. Our practice group is sponsoring this teleconference on bullying in schools. The focus is on students in middle schools and high schools. Today's speaker is Professor Philip Lazarus.



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Dr. Lazarus:

I am most pleased to be with you and all of the participants this afternoon. Judith, as the staff attorney for the National Disability Rights Network, you certainly know that youngsters who have disabilities—whether it is an emotional disability, a learning disability, a mental disability, or a physical disability—are much more apt to be bullied and harassed than other students are.

Judith Storandt:

Thank you so much. I think it might be helpful to first talk about how widespread bullying is. It seems like we're hearing about it in the news a lot these days.

Dr. Lazarus:

Yes, bullying does seem to be most widespread. The [2009 Youth Risk Behavior Survey \(YRBS\)](#) indicated that 20% of students nationwide had experienced some form of bullying on school property during the 12 months before the survey. Obviously, it's a serious problem for many youth.

Judith Storandt:

How do we define bullying? Is bullying different from just teasing and taunting or what is the definition of bullying?

Dr. Lazarus:

Well the classic definition of bullying came out in the early 1990s by Dan Olweus, a Scandinavian researcher. He looked in terms of bullying that occurs when a person is exposed repeatedly and over time to negative actions on the part of one or more persons. When he wrote the definition that we currently use, that was way before we had all of this technology in which youngsters have been cyberbullied, especially within the past half dozen years.

When we define bullying we look in terms of an imbalance of power. It could be physical, intellectual, or emotional power. It happens repeatedly over time and it is intentional. That is, the bully is not joking around or just acting silly, but he or she has the intention to hurt or intimidate the person being targeted. And there are unequal levels of emotion. That is, the target will display emotional distress and the perpetrator will usually display little emotion. So it is not as if friends are bullying and picking on each other. But one really suffers as a result of being bullied.

And I try to refer to children as "targets" instead of "victims." I also try to use the term "witnesses" rather than "bystanders." I prefer the term witness because witness is a much more active word. Often it propels the individual to make a decision as to whether or not to intervene in a particular situation.

Judith Storandt:

What are some of the consequences of bullying on children who are targets?

Dr. Lazarus:

One of the consequences of bullying is that targets tend to avoid going to school. They have difficulty concentrating on school tasks. Their grades will suffer. Often they feel a diminished



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sense of self worth. And because of that, it makes it difficult for them to reach their academic or social potential. Often they feel “less than” and they feel beaten down in some ways. Some other consequences of being bullied are that targeted children may lose their appetite, feel nervous, experience headaches, feel nauseous, and have sleep disruptions. Or in some situations they may experience depression and loneliness. A lot of youngsters that are severely victimized have experienced suicidal ideations and have made suicide attempts. And unfortunately, we have a number of cases, that we see each and every year, of youngsters that have taken their own lives as a result of being harassed and victimized by peers. So we have a lot of tragic situations as a consequence of bullying.

Judith Storandt:

And those are the ones we read about in the newspaper.

Dr. Lazarus:

Right, we certainly read a lot about these tragic victims in the newspaper. We’ve read about a lot of different types of cases.

Judith Storandt:

Well, is bullying increasing or are we just more aware of it?

Dr. Lazarus:

I believe it is hard to know what is going on. I think we’re becoming more aware of bullying; we’re defining it more clearly, and we understand it better. And for the last number of decades, it’s probably hard to tell if it really has increased. I think that we are a less civil society than we were 30 or 40 years ago.

But the one thing that has significantly increased is cyberbullying. And that has spread because 10 years ago we never had cyberbullying. That makes it more difficult because a youngster can be bullied within the privacy of his or her own home. And cyberbullying can actually happen 24/7. And so to answer that, yes, I think in that aspect bullying has increased, unfortunately. Youngsters have limited defenses against cyberbullying. They can get bullied within the confines of their homes, they can get bullied on their cell phones, they can get bullied on the Internet, and they can get bullied in chat rooms. And so it’s much harder to escape. And we also have a lot more anonymity in cyberbullying because before, in order to get bullied, you’d need to see the perpetrator that is engaging in these actions. And now it could be someone who is doing it totally anonymously on the Internet and it could be spread throughout the entire school in 2 minutes. And it can travel in a nanosecond from state to state to state—so there can be no escape.

Judith Storandt:

Well when I was in school it was really the rumor mill that was really so devastating. But today cyberbullying has taken that to the Nth degree. What are some of the myths about bullying that people have?



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Dr. Lazarus:

Yes. Judith, cyberbullying is like the rumor mill on steroids. When you're looking at particular myths, we might think that children who are bullying are youngsters who are loners. But that is not true. What we actually find is that bullies appear to report having even easier times making friends than do victims. Often, bullies have better social skills than youngsters who are the targets.

Another myth that I hear a lot of times is that youngsters that engage in bullying have low self-esteem. But actually we've done a lot of research on that particular area and we've found that children who do engage in bullying often have above average self-esteem. That is, that they're not necessarily doing it because they have a weak sense of self, but often they might mirror it from their family. Bullies happen to have a lot less empathy, but in most instances their self-esteem doesn't seem to be a problem.

Another thing I hear is that "being bullied really toughens up a student and prepares him to be a man." But actually it leaves the student much more vulnerable academically, socially, and emotionally. And I've talked to individuals who have had their careers ended before it began because they dropped out of school when they were being bullied. I'm now at a national bullying conference here in Orlando, Florida. And the keynote speaker, Kevin Jennings, who is the Assistant Deputy Secretary for the Office of Safe and Drug Free Schools at the U.S. Department of Education, told the audience that he was bullied a great deal when he was in school. And he was just telling a story today about how he refused to go to school and he planned on dropping out. But his mom was very strict and said "We're going to find out what is actually going on." He was telling her that he was being harassed and bullied. His mother ended up going to the school and they changed schools. And so rather than dropping out of school, Kevin Jennings ended up graduating from Harvard. But a lot of youngsters aren't that fortunate.

Another myth is that most students learn to deal with bullies on their own; it's a rite of passage. But the truth is that students need help from adults. Students I see that are bullied are typically a lot weaker than their peers and are more vulnerable. Especially right now students are very anxious and life isn't easy. They have a lot of responsibilities and stressful academic demands as a result of high-stakes testing. But one of their responsibilities is *not* to ensure that the school is safe. Adults need to make it perfectly clear that bullying is not acceptable and that adults will intervene in the school. So it's the adults that need to make it safe in the school.

The other myth I often hear is "we don't have bullying in our school." And I've talked to principals about this. Unfortunately, bullying occurs in every school. And we know that bullying often occurs under the radar and most students rarely report that they've been bullied. So those are some of the most common myths that I seem to hear as it relates to bullies.

Judith Storandt:

So what, in your experience, seems to work the best with bullies? Or what doesn't work?



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Dr. Lazarus:

One of the things that I've found is that being aggressive with bullies doesn't seem to be helpful. Using assertive techniques rather than aggression is recommended.

What seems to work with bullies is being confronted by a group of peers that support the target and will not tolerate bullying. If bullies are actually confronted by witnesses who say "This is not okay, this is not acceptable, we will not allow this in our school," often the bullies will say "Okay" and will actually stop. Most instances this doesn't happen, but if they are confronted they may stop.

Another strategy that seems to work for bullies is that they need to be taught specific skills and correct their errors in thinking about life. What we seem to find is that traditional therapy is not recommended for bullies because just having them talk and express their feelings, et cetera, doesn't seem to be effective. They need to be shown the right way to respond, the right way to act, and you need to take a no-nonsense, no compromise approach.

The other thing that I think is helpful is to use prosocial consequences. Bullies might have to apologize and make the situation right. So if they did something to actually hurt somebody, they need to have a consequence that will mitigate any kind of physical or emotional damage that has occurred.

It is best not to have a long discussion with bullies, because otherwise you're going to get into an argument. "This is unacceptable, this is not okay, and this is your consequence."

It is helpful in working with bullies to try to have the bully identify the target's feelings. Sometimes bullies don't really understand the target's feelings, but the adult can have them identify the target's feelings and help them empathize with the person that has been targeted.

Bullies often have a strong need for power. So you might look in terms of how to take that energy and that need for power and channel it in a prosocial way. Youngsters that engage in bullying find it very reinforcing, so we need to find others ways to reinforce an individual who is engaging in bullying.

Judith Storandt:

Why do kids engage in bullying? What makes it so reinforcing for them?

Dr. Lazarus:

For them it is cool. They want to join in with the "in" crowd. Or they may want to do it just to increase their social status. Or they may want to do it to gain attention and popularity. Or just to get a kick, to gain power, or to maybe act out their problems at home. What they've learned in the home or in the community, they may model that behavior.

And one of the sad things about bullying that I see is that when a child is being bullied, he's being bullied in three different ways. Let me try to explain what I mean by that. The first way, the child is being bullied by others. The second way, because that youngster has been the target



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of individuals that are bullying, other youngsters tend to shy away from the boy or girl because they don't want to be a target themselves. If they get too close to the target they're afraid "I'm going to be the next person to get picked on." And so it makes them less able to maintain a set of friends. And the third way a child gets bullied is they start saying negative things about themselves. So if they are getting harassed, taunted, and picked on, they might say, "There is something wrong with me, maybe the kids are right, I feel terrible. I feel depressed. I feel worthless." Even one act of bullying can be magnified in these three different ways.

Judith Storandt:

Can you talk about why students who are targeted by bullies frequently don't tell anybody?

Dr. Lazarus:

Students who have been targeted often don't want to tell others. And one of the reasons they may not want to tell others is because they've seen that it doesn't necessarily help them. A lot of adults will tell them to ignore it. Don't pay attention to it; don't deal with it. So they may not wish to tell.

Another reason that youngsters often don't tell is because they don't want to be seen as being a "rat." They don't want to get that type of reputation. Or they think that if they tell they'll get picked on even more, that it'll make life a lot worse for them. Sometimes they feel ashamed. It's kind of embarrassing to talk about being bullied. And they don't feel anyone can help them, that the bully is maybe too powerful. It can be that sense of shame that they want to keep a secret. And they just feel humiliated. And often bullies show contempt for other youngsters and targets may internalize this contempt. I think that helps explain why targets often remain silent.

Judith Storandt:

Then what can schools do? Because of those dynamics that targets often hesitate to tell, how can schools create an environment where they can learn about these incidents so they can implement some interventions?

Dr. Lazarus:

This is an important question. A lot of schools need to look into adopting a program to help prevent bullying from occurring. Some of the programs that I think are the most helpful try to convert a silent majority of students into a caring majority of students that will not tolerate bullying. Students are told to stand up to the bullies with the promise of adult support.

Effective programs emphasize strength in numbers, and through discussion students are taught how to support each other. And they practice caring behaviors. A lot of youngsters don't know if it's a good idea to stand up to a bully and they don't know how to do it. So they don't necessarily have permission to do it and, even if they wanted to, they don't necessarily have the skills to do so. So we should use a skill oriented program in which you teach youngsters skills they can use to assert themselves and stand up to bullies.

Another important part of a good program is celebrating acts of kindness. Maybe every Friday you have a day in which kids are celebrated, not for terrorizing youngsters, but for being heroic



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and for being defenders of youngsters. Another part of the program is that students should let adults know when bullying occurs, and adults are given specific skills in terms of how to intervene.

Judith Storandt:

Could you give some examples of that?

Dr. Lazarus:

Sure. In terms of intervening, say it's a mild case: a youngster pushes somebody else. The adults say "This behavior is not acceptable. We do not do these things in our school. I am not going to tolerate this type of behavior." The first time might just be a warning and "I do not want to ever see this type of behavior occur again. It is not acceptable in our classroom." And then you can develop consequences if that type of behavior occurs again. It just has to be a very clear message given that this is not the way we act in schools. We want to look in terms of developing a supportive, caring, and nurturing environment.

Judith Storandt:

What about the parents? What are the best practices for parents to support and protect their own children when they believe they're being bullied at school?

Dr. Lazarus:

If parents believe that their child is being harassed, bullied, or taunted in school, I think the first thing they have to do is sit down with their child or adolescent and discuss it. Get as much information as they possibly can. And then the parents may have a discussion with their son or their daughter, and help their child figure out what they can do to mitigate this problem, or to avoid it, or how they can respond back.

In mild cases, you can teach the youngster specific skills. Maybe just being assertive, or using a sense of humor will help. If the youngster is getting harassed walking down the hall, make sure they have a friend with them—this will decrease their chances of getting bullied.

They can teach skills to their child. The child will feel more empowered if they have the skills to handle the issue on their own. One of the first messages that can be given is that "I have confidence in you, I believe that you may be able to handle this on your own, and let's come up with some specific skills and strategies that you can use to deal with it."

If the harassment or taunting is very severe, and it looks like no matter how skilled that youngster is in terms of being able to respond to the bullying and harassment, then it may be helpful for the parent to approach the school and let the school become aware of what is happening. And then have a serious discussion with the principal or assistant principal and the counselor and let them become aware of the situation and ask the school what they plan on doing about it.

In the state of Florida, we have the Stand Up for All Students Act, and it was based on the tragic suicide of Jeffery Johnston. Jeffrey Johnston was harassed and as a result of this extreme



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bullying committed suicide. And Ms. Johnston, Jeffrey's mother, and a public school teacher, in response to her grief and in an effort to help prevent this from happening to other children, helped craft an antibullying law; it took about 4 or 5 years for it to actually happen, in the state of Florida.

In this act, there are a lot of consequences for a bully if a child is being bullied or harassed. Schools are mandated to take action. They're directed to work with students, parents, teachers, administrators, and local law enforcement on developing an antibullying policy. They have to report all instances of bullying and harassment and notify the parents of the bully and the parents of the target. And they have to follow up with both the targets and perpetrators for counseling. They have to investigate bullying and harassment, they have to report it, and they have to keep statistics on bullying and harassment in the school's report of data concerning school safety and discipline.

A lot of states have strong antibullying policies, but some states do not. If states have strong antibullying policies, then the school is liable to follow the rules and procedures. But I think the first thing parents need to do is have a good conversation with their youngster and find out exactly what is happening and see if their child can solve the problem on his or her own.

Let me respond to something that parents can actually do, or children can do if they're being cyberbullied. They can teach their youngsters not to respond to offensive e-mails, messages, or postings. And they can encourage their children to notify adults immediately if they become targets of cyberbullying.

One of the things that is taught on cyberbullying.org, an antibullying website, is if you're targeted by a cyberbully, the first thing is don't do anything right away. Take five minutes to calm down. The second thing is block the cyberbully or limit all communications to those on your buddy list, and also tell a trusted adult.

Parents and children don't have to face this issue on their own. If cyberbullying does occur, what the parents can do is keep a record of all kinds of e-mails and messages in case they need proof. They can contact the school if the perpetrator is another student. They can contact the parents of the perpetrator and share the evidence. But they should do this most cautiously, and probably only if they know the parents of the perpetrator and believe that the parents will be receptive. When talking to parents of the perpetrator, ask that they ensure that the cyberbullying stops and that any negative posted materials be removed. Parents can call law enforcement and inform Internet service providers, if necessary. So these are some things parents can do if their child is being cyberbullied.

Judith Storandt:

You said that adults should deal with bullies using assertive and not aggressive techniques. Can you explain the difference between the techniques using examples?



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Dr. Lazarus:

If a child is being taunted by another youngster, the youngster can say “I don’t like it when someone speaks to me like that. That’s not okay. Don’t do that anymore.” That’s being assertive. Being aggressive would be if a student is being taunted, bullied, or picked on, if they say “Well you’re a jerk” or use a four letter word, or try to punch the bully out. That would be an aggressive approach. So you would teach the youngster to look the other kid in the eye, if they can, and tell them this is not acceptable, “I don’t like it, it’s not okay.” That’s one of the things they can do by being assertive, without being aggressive. And give an honest statement “I don’t like it when this happens,” and then you can give a request, “Don’t do that anymore.”

Judith Storandt:

When you’re aware of an inappropriate interaction and you’re there and you are able to intervene in an appropriate, assertive way, do you recommend that you ask them to role play and do it over at that moment?

Dr. Lazarus:

Yes. What you can do if you have a sixth grade youngster who is being harassed or taunted, and the youngster doesn’t know how to respond, then you as a parent can help the youngster come up with a script, or a path of action that might be helpful. And then you can model a good way to do it. And then you can have the youngster model the appropriate behavior until the youngster gets better and better in asserting him or herself. And so let the youngster practice it.

If the targeted child gets visibly upset, that is reinforcing to the person doing the taunting or teasing. So if somebody says to a youngster, “That’s an ugly shirt,” the youngster can use humor without getting upset. The child can be taught to use humor and say, “If you think this shirt is ugly, I’ve got three shirts at home that are even uglier than this.” So there are just all different kinds of ways that youngsters can respond. If the target gets very emotional, then that’s a real payoff for the bully.

In some ways, it’s like a lion that will find the weakest animals in the herd and then attack. So it’s not unusual that the youngster that has the least amount of social or physical skills is the one who gets targeted. Often the bully will go around, being selective, and figure out, “Who can I get today” and if the targeted youngsters don’t have the skills to respond, they can be repeatedly victimized. The parents might have to work a lot with their child practicing skills. Or perhaps the youngster can be referred to a counselor or school psychologist to help teach the youngster more assertive skills.

Judith Storandt:

Well this is very helpful information. Do you have any closing remarks you’d like to share?

Dr. Lazarus:

I think when we look at bullying we shouldn’t put all our emphasis on the bully. We should focus our attention on the witnesses and getting the witnesses to intervene in an appropriate way. And if they move together as a strong force and students get involved then much of the bullying



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can stop. And when the bullying stops, students feel safe. It's hard for a student to learn if they don't feel safe.

So I'd like to leave the audience with different quotes. One is a quote from Elie Wiesel, who is a Holocaust survivor. When he was asked what the most important commandment of the Bible was, he responded this way: "Thou shall not stand idly by. The opposite of love is not hate but indifference. Indifference creates evil. Hatred is evil itself. Indifference is what allows evil to be strong, what gives it power."

Some of you have read *Black Beauty* when you were youngsters. And this is a quote by a man named Wright, from Anna Sewell's *Black Beauty*. He said, "My doctrine is this, that if we see cruelty or wrong that we have the power to stop, and do nothing, we make ourselves sharers in the guilt."

And so what I see is that it is not about the bully, it's about changing the culture of the school. It is about changing the attitude of the teachers in the school and the staff. It's not about the bully; it is about converting witnesses into a caring majority who will not tolerate bullying going on in schools.

One last quote: This is by Martin Luther King. "It's not the malicious acts that will do us in, but the appalling silence and indifference of good people."

Judith Storandt:

Absolutely! And so we all have to work to be more aware and figure out appropriate ways to break that silence. On behalf of everyone and the practice group on Connecting School Mental Health with Juvenile Justice and Dropout Prevention, we thank you for taking the time to share with us today.

Conclusion of Call