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Letter to the Editor

Bullying vs. school violence: A response to Williams and Stelko-Pereira (2013)

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In a commentary, "Let's prevent peer victimization, not just bullying," we (Finkelhor, Turner, & Hamby, 2012) proposed abandoning the heavy policy focus on "bullying" for a focus on "peer victimization and aggression" for 2 main reasons. Bullying excludes some serious offenses that all preventionists are concerned about (single serious physical and sexual assaults, for example) and bullying has been a difficult concept to operationalize.

Williams and Stelko-Pereira (2012) have written a rejoinder, "Let's prevent school violence, not just bullying and peer victimization", in which they argue that the key concept should not be "peer victimization" but "school violence" with violence defined broadly according to the WHO standard.

An argument can indeed be made that there should be some special emphasis on school violence, because there is a clearly demarcated institution in which prevention activities occur. But we still see 3 problems with limiting the focus to schools. First, half of peer violence and victimization occurs outside of schools (Turner, Finkelhor, Hamby, Shattuck, & Ormrod, 2011). There is no reason to be less concerned about violence occurring outside of school contexts. Second, without a comprehensive focus, aggression may simply migrate from one venue to another. And third, the distinction between school and non-school victimization is rapidly disappearing. When intimidating or harassing communication occurs over cell phones or in social networking venues between classmates is this "school" violence or not? Authorities are tied up in knots about this from a legal standpoint, but from a prevention standpoint, we think it makes most sense to target all such behavior in prevention efforts.

We also have qualms about the suggestion to exchange the term bullying for the term "violence". Will this term be readily applied to Internet harassment, exclusionary behavior and sexual derogation? No, most people do not think of this as violence. The WHO definition tries to shoehorn these forms of aggression into the concept of violence by talking about violence as the "use of power that has a high likelihood of harm" (Krug, Dahlberg, Mercy, Zwi, & Lozano, 2002). But categorizing non-physical aggression as violence has 2 other problems. First, it violates a long tradition in empirical social science (as opposed to advocacy) that limits the word violence to physical force (Finkelhor, 2008; Straus, 1991). Second, it would greatly hamper efforts by school officials to gain the cooperation of parents of perpetrators, who would now see schools as upping the ante by labeling their children "violent offenders".

The issue of how to frame the advocacy and the research in this area is important, and may affect how and how effectively prevention is done. There certainly are many factors to be considered and a full discussion of the implications is merited. Experiments may even be useful. But from a conceptual vantage, we think substituting "violence" (vaguely defined) for "bullying" is unlikely to facilitate clarity.

References

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