



International Network for School Social Work

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Electronic Newsletter November 2009

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Bullying: It's More than Meets the Eye

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Schools continue to struggle with bullying and those who become its target. Bullying is now recognized as a serious problem for students, families and schools. Stories of student suicides and school shootings that have been precipitated by bullying are too numerous to list but many of us have faced such situations first hand. As school social workers, we see the bigger picture and it should come as no surprise that there are many pieces to the problem and no easy solution.

As social workers, our interventions often focus on a systems approach. What are the environmental factors that nurture bullying behaviours and how can they be appropriately addressed? Interventions often include social skills training, peer support initiatives, parent education, advocacy for healthy relationships and school board policies which claim zero tolerance.

In this swirl of interventions, what is often missing is an assessment of the nature of each child involved. There has been a longstanding debate about nature vs. nurture and the nurture viewpoint is the core of most bullying interventions. Nature, however, is now being identified as a missing piece in the systems analysis. Temperament is the innate nature of each of us that drives behaviours and views of the world, yet it is often overlooked in bullying interventions. Temperament is now being recognized as having a significant influence in the development of children and a link to understanding both bullying behaviour and the response of targets of bullying.

Parents who are involved with their children and model traits such as kindness and respect are perplexed when they hear that their child has victimized another child. Other parents, who are guilty themselves of bullying behaviour, sometimes have empathetic and kind children. How can this be? By stepping back and observing the unique nature of each child, you can see how children, even in the same family, can be very different from one another. The nine temperament traits (see chart below) that influence how each person reacts to the world can manifest themselves in a wide range of combinations. When extreme traits are tempered by parenting or other environmental influences, the child's behaviours can be modified to accommodate societal expectations.

Example: Mo is a highly active student who is impulsive and easily frustrated and can be a classroom challenge. He has a history of disrupting classes and not complying with school rules. He sees himself as the "class clown" and expects others to laugh when he is disruptive. He has a steady circle of supporters and mocks those who choose not to engage with him. He was been sent to see me, as the school social worker. I proceeded to have him help me understand him better by discussing each of the nine temperament traits and asking him to place himself on each continuum. He was intrigued to learn why he behaves as he does but also relieved to know everyone has been born with the same nine traits, just in

different places on the continuum. As we discussed his traits, we also commented on where his teacher, friends or family were on the continuum to help build empathy. Assisting this student to understand his temperament profile and suggesting ways to moderate his extremes, such as burning off more energy before school, helped him to take ownership of who he is, without judging behaviour. Discussion helped him to see where his problems started and the difficulty others may have dealing with his behaviour.

Each trait adds to our knowledge of why children behave as they do. Our role can include helping them to understand why they act as they do and how to modify their behaviour. This approach is non-judgemental and often a relief to both student and parent. By charting each temperament trait, the student can easily see where there are extremes. Extreme traits are the most challenging and the starting point for discussing how to temper this trait to be more successful. In Mo's case above, he now understands he acts the way he does because of excess energy, low persistence and high distractibility. He needs help with focusing skills and calming down strategies as well as awareness of the temperament of those around him.

Activity	Quiet	Moderate	Active
Adaptability	Gradual	Moderate	Quick
Distractibility	Focused	Moderate	Easily Diverted
First Reaction	Cautious	Moderate	Adventurous
Intensity	Mellow	Moderate	Dramatic
Mood	Serious	Moderate	Sunny
Persistence	Low	Moderate	High
Rhythmicity	Spontaneous	Moderate	Predictable
Sensory Threshold	Reactive	Moderate	Impervious

Problem behaviours often result when certain traits are clustered. People who bully often have a similar cluster of temperament traits:

- impulsive (low persistence and high distractibility)
- emotionally reactive (low sensory threshold)
- easily frustrated (high activity level and high distractibility).

When a child has this cluster of traits it is imperative that parents and teachers provide more guidance to help him temper these traits to be successful in life.

Temperament may also heighten stress responses or buffer their impact (low vs. high adaptability; low vs. high sensory threshold and level of intensity). For children who are targets of bullying, this may help explain the variation in responses. For some students, the intimidation they experience by those who bully is very hurtful. Even the typical tactic “I won’t invite you to my birthday party” can leave some students shattered, while others just shrug it off and know that tomorrow it may be someone else who is excluded. Knowing why you react strongly, or not at all, is helpful in accepting who you are. In any case, all children benefit from learning more about their temperament and the temperament of those around them.

Fortunately temperament does not predict outcome. Understanding temperament adds to our growing knowledge of root causes of bullying and how best to temper those traits that may lead to harmful behaviours. Caring adults can benefit from knowing temperament, and nurturing and molding the traits each child is given. Temperament is not just an obstacle that needs to be overcome but an opportunity for all of us to explore new ways to help shape a child’s natural tendencies in more successful directions. As social workers, temperament gives us an easy and observable tool that children and adults alike can understand and use in modifying behaviours.

School Social Work Association of America Annual Conference

The April 2010 Conference Brochure can be downloaded from the SSWAA web site at <http://www.sswaa.org/index.asp?page=82>