



Bullying and the Christian School: A Research Report

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I once said to a parent, “Look, our school does not have a significant problem with bullying.” Big mistake. While bullying may not be a *widespread problem*, when it is *your* child, it is most definitely significant!

As every Christian school principal knows, bullying happens in our schools despite our best efforts, but that behavior is critical because it suggests a failure of our central mission: character development. Very little research exists on bullying in Christian schools other than my own (Hazeltine, 2012; Hazeltine & Hernandez, 2015) and now, in partnership with CSM (Hazeltine, 2023). Each of these studies began by surveying the people in the schools that know best what is happening: the children. This most recent work is based on data collected from over 2000 students in nine Christian schools in 2016. We examined grade, gender, years attending a Christian school, school size, reasons for bullying, interventions, attitude, and location. We solicited views not only from victims but also bystanders and perpetrators.

What We Found

Gender

Girls witness significantly more verbal and social bullying and are more likely to be victims of social bullying. However, in contrast to other studies, boys did not experience physical forms of bullying more than girls. Indeed, physical bullying was among the least prevalent forms of bullying reported with 63% of students saying that they had never witnessed any (41%) or had seen it only once (22%) or two to three times (21%) in the last two months.

Grade, Division, and Years Attending

There was a statistically significant and very large correlation between grade and the occurrence of bullying with less bullying the higher the grade. This contrasts with other studies that indicate that bullying increases through the grades. This is encouraging because it suggests that parents, teachers, and fellow students are doing an effective job of socializing children.

However, we could find no statistically significant relationship between years attending the Christian school and any bullying behaviors. The fact that we could not find a direct correlation between years attending the Christian school and the decline in bullying does not mean that the school has no influence, but it does mean that we cannot identify that influence apart from the influence of supportive parents and a positive peer culture. These two factors are likely more significant in socializing young people than the school. At the same time, the Christian

school works as a means of bringing together like-minded people to create a culture that appears to do a good job of socializing students.

Interestingly, while victims and bystanders report less bullying in higher grades, students in upper grades were more likely to report themselves as being perpetrators. It is difficult to explain this, but one possibility is that there may be more perpetrators in higher grades, but they victimize fewer students and do so more covertly. The second possibility is that as students mature, perhaps they are more honest and willing to admit to this kind of negative behavior.

School Size

School size was significantly associated with all kinds of bullying, but the effect sizes were very small. Small schools generally reported less bullying than midsize schools, but larger schools reported even less. Administrators of midsize schools need to be mindful that as they grow, they may lose some of the sense of community that occur naturally in a small school. At the same time, they may lack the support resources of a larger school to address behavior problems systematically.

Intervention

Girls were more likely than boys to intervene to stop bullying behavior, but boys were more successful. The reason for these differences is not clear, but it may be due to gender stereotypes in which the female is viewed as nurturing and the male is viewed as powerful. Girls may see themselves as obligated to reach out to care for others while boys may prefer to use their size and strength to ensure that they get the desired results.

Students in lower grades were somewhat more likely to intervene to stop bullying than those in the upper grades. The reasons for this are unclear, but it might be due to elementary students having a stronger sense of community. Nevertheless, upper grades students were somewhat more likely to achieve positive results when they did intervene. This may be due to increased size and strength, but perhaps also to increased status in the school as upper grades students.

Students also reported that bullying in their school was less prevalent than in their previous public schools. They also reported that teachers were both more likely to intervene in addressing the problem and in solving it.

Location and Reporting of Bullying

Bullying patterns are directly connected to school life, so we find it where students hang out the most. Elementary children, for example, see more bullying on the playground, and high school students see more in the hallways and on social media. Students in elementary grades, and girls generally, are more likely than others to report bullying to a teacher, but much of it goes unreported, so it is critical that teachers exercise careful supervision of the most common locations.

A challenge for teachers in the upper grades is that perpetrators seem to have developed skill in bullying in ways that go undetected by teachers. Indeed, students in higher grades report

they are more likely to be bullied in the classroom with the teacher present! However, since most students who reported bullying indicated that doing so either solved the problem or made it better, teachers should encourage students to speak up.

Reasons and Attitudes

When asked about the reasons for bullying, students agreed that most occurred as a response to what other students had done or said. If this is accurate, then bullying is more a matter of retribution than actual malice, and in that case teachers would do well to focus on self-control and forgiveness. Victims need to understand how their words and behavior may be viewed by others as incitement, and perpetrators need to understand how to respond to incitement with self-control and forgiveness.

It should come as no surprise that being bullied has an impact on a student's attitude toward school. We found a clear relationship between a higher incidence of being bullied and a greater dislike of school. Students who felt threatened and unsafe at school due to the presence of bullies began to develop negative attitudes toward school. These negative attitudes may eventually impact student behavior or academic achievement.

Conclusion

Given the very large effect sizes for grade and gender, these are the factors that teachers and administrators should keep foremost as they attempt to address problems in their schools. Bystanders, victims, and perpetrators largely agreed about the kinds of bullying taking place, where it happens, and the reasons for it. Armed with this information, administrators can focus their efforts on addressing verbal and social bullying among girls and in less supervised areas such as playgrounds and hallways. Schools may also find success by teaching students about the impact of their words and actions and the need to respond with self-control. Most importantly, victims need to be encouraged to speak up, and bystanders to stand up.

Note: The first step to better understanding the incidence of bullying in your school is to ask the children. This can best be done through the use of a comprehensive and carefully designed survey instrument, for example, CSM's Student Experience Survey.

References

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