

Speech-language pathologists positioned to help victims of bullying

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Bullying can have devastating impacts on children's well-being, and Gordon Blood may have a way to effectively address the problem.

(PhysOrg.com) -- Bullying has gained national attention recently after the suicides of Phoebe Prince, a high school student from Massachusetts, and Tyler Clementi, a college student from Rutgers University. The problem may be even more widespread than people think, says Penn State professor Gordon Blood, and certain types of bullying are often misunderstood. Bullying can have lasting effects on children's well-being and self-confidence, and, because bullying often occurs during school hours, it affects children's learning. This may be a greater problem for children with disabilities, especially those with communication, developmental and social disabilities.

Blood, the head of the Department of Communication Sciences and Disorders at Penn State, has been studying bullying for years, and he has

a solution in mind. Speech-language pathologists (SLPs), he said, can make a difference and restore the balance of power that is disrupted in a bullying scenario.

SLPs are present in virtually every school district across the country (there are more than 140,000 registered with the American Speech-Language-Hearing Association), putting them close to the action of many forms of bullying. What's more, many of the children SLPs commonly work with -- those with communication disorders -- are typical targets of bullying.

"Bullies tend to look for shy, timid children who appear nervous and withdrawn and have poor social and communication skills. Unfortunately, these are oftentimes the hallmarks of certain developmental disorders, including autism, stuttering and specific language impairments," said Blood.

Confronting beliefs about bullying

One challenge Blood said he is up against is that many people understand bullying only in its traditional forms -- physical and verbal. These are easy to see; physical involves doing something mean repeatedly (such as pushing, hitting, or kicking) and verbal involves repeated negative insults and name calling.

Then there's relational bullying -- sometimes called social bullying -- which is more problematic, said Blood. "Relational bullying occurs when a child's attempts to socialize and form relationships with peers are rejected," he said. "A child may not be allowed to join a game, participate in conversation with peers, or becomes the subject of ridicule or negative gossip."

The common tie between these forms of bullying?

"In all bullying, there's intent to do harm, a perceived power imbalance, and it is repetitive in nature," said Blood. Another similarity among the various forms is the effects; victims of bullying typically experience academic difficulties (perhaps resulting from decreased concentration and learning, said Blood), and they are at higher risk for developing emotional and mental health problems such as depression and anxiety. This increased risk extends to later in life, not just while a child is a victim.

In a national survey he conducted in 2010, Blood found that SLPs in school did not take relational bullying as seriously as verbal and physical bullying. "SLPs in this study rated all physical and verbal bullying as 'moderately serious' to 'very serious' but relational bullying was rated 'not very serious' or 'not at all serious,'" writes Blood in his findings of his study, which were published in the *Journal of Fluency Disorders* in 2010.

These pathologists also said they were "not very likely" or "not at all likely" to intervene when they saw instances of relational bullying. Blood presented the SLPs with descriptions of different types of bullying, some of which involved children with stuttering problems. Regardless of the children in the scenario, SLPs were generally standoffish in response to all instances of relational bullying.

Blood said that this finding extends beyond SLPs; other research indicates that administrators in schools also do not see relational bullying as a problem and are not likely to intervene to stop the bullying. In fact, some research shows that many adults in schools see relational bullying as "normal" child behavior.

When respondents in Blood's study did volunteer strategies to address relational bullying, some chose strategies effective for physical and verbal bullying; for example, reporting the bully or talking to an adult

about the problem. However, many recommended children ignore the bully, pretend not to be bothered, and try to fit in better as effective strategies. "The literature clearly states that physical bullying tends to decrease with age but relational bullying often intensifies," said Blood. For relational bullying, then, ignoring the problem or pretending not to be bothered are not likely to help.

Even more of a concern is the newest addition to the bullying scene -- cyber bullying. "With physical, verbal, and relational bullying, we know we can have an impact when meeting face-to-face with either bullies and/or victims. That's not the case with cyber bullying," said Blood. Cyber bullying, fueled by social media, can become viral in cyberspace. When this happens, the number of bullies and bystanders expand rapidly; a victim may accrue a throng of bullies and bystanders, most of which he or she doesn't even know, said Blood.

Helping children restore the balance

"Young children need adults to correct the power imbalance of bullying," said Blood. "Adults make an impact on bullying, no matter what your role is. But if you don't know what to do, you could do harm when trying to intervene."

Confronting the bully -- an approach some people lean toward -- can make the situation worse by irritating the bully. Instead, Blood advocates that listening to the victim is the most important strategy for SLPs and other educators. Teachers typically only see one in 25 instances of bullying, said Blood. And, a single incident of bullying only lasts 37 seconds, on average. "We can't always monitor what happens in the bathrooms, on the bus, on the playground, or around lockers," said Blood, "so it's important that we listen to children."

Blood also says that praising children for discussing instances of bullying is important, as it's typically difficult for children to vocalize this.

Finally, encouraging the student to build his or her social network can make a big impact. "One or two friends is all most children need to stick up to a bully," he said. "Bullies tend to look for the weakest link, but if that weakest link becomes stronger, it decreases the likelihood of bullying."

Blood has taken his message to in-service workshops at schools and to professional conferences, where he educates SLPs and other school personnel about how to effectively make a difference.

In addition, he is expanding his research, which originally studied perceptions of bullying that involved children who stuttered. He is now examining how SLPs across the country react to instances of bullying that involve children with other types of communication and developmental disorders, such as autism.

By better understanding how people perceive bullying, Blood can educate them on whether their perceptions are really misconceptions, and whether or not intervention from an adult is necessary. Ultimately, Blood hopes that his work will cascade down, and that children can have the confidence to overcome [bullying](#) so that it doesn't affect their learning and health. "[Children](#) have a fundamental right to feel safe in the schools," he says.

Co-authors on Gordon Blood's paper include Ingrid Blood, professor of communication sciences and disorders (CSD), and Michael Boyle and Gina Nalesnik, both CSD graduate students.

Provided by Pennsylvania State University

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