

Peer Abuse in Schools: Why it Matters and What Schools Can Do

A companion publication to the Pennsylvania Bullying Prevention Toolkit

Research suggests that young people who experience abuse are more likely than their non-abused peers to have behavioral health problems, substance abuse and negative life outcomes.^{1,2} Many of the effects of peer abuse mirror effects of domestic violence.³ For example, people who are targets of peer abuse may experience emotional symptoms, feelings of negative self-worth and a pattern of unhealthy relationships that persist into adulthood.

This publication addresses three common forms of peer abuse: bullying, teen dating violence and hazing. It defines and explores connections between these three common forms of adolescent peer abuse, addresses the legal implications of each for schools and identifies best practices for educators who wish to implement a comprehensive approach to peer abuse prevention.

Bullying

Bullying is defined by the U.S. Department of Education and Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) as **“any unwanted aggressive behavior(s) by another youth or group of youths who are not siblings or current dating partners that involves an observed or perceived power imbalance and is repeated multiple times or is highly likely to be repeated.”** Bullying may be physical, verbal or relational and may occur directly in the presence of the targeted youth or indirectly through electronic devices or other methods of communication.⁴ It is estimated that 20 percent of students, grades 3-12, are directly involved in bullying experiences either as targets or bullies.⁵ Research on bullying indicates youth who bully others are at greater risk of depression and involvement in delinquent behaviors than youth who do not engage in bullying behavior.^{6,7} Similarly, being bullied has been linked to physical symptoms, depression and anxiety, as well

as feeling unsafe at school and experiencing lower academic achievement.⁸⁻¹⁰

Examples of bullying: teasing, name-calling, inappropriate comments, threats of harm, purposefully excluding someone, spreading harmful rumors, coercing others to say or do harmful things, kicking, hitting, pushing, spitting, damaging or taking someone's property, rude or mean gestures.¹¹

Teen Dating Violence

Teen dating violence (TDV) is defined by the CDC as any **“physical, sexual, psychological or emotional violence within a dating relationship, including stalking. It can occur in person or electronically and might occur between a current or former dating partner.”** Research suggests that between 9 and 30 percent of teens have been physically abused by a boyfriend or girlfriend in the last 12 months. Only one out of ten victims report seeking help, with about half as many male victims as female victims reporting their abuse.^{12,13}

Research on TDV has documented a relationship between early bullying behavior and TDV perpetration, particularly for males.¹³ Young people who are targets of TDV are at greater risk for anxiety, depression and suicidal ideation compared to non-abused peers¹⁴ and are at greater risk

for involvement in delinquent behavior.¹⁵ Among adult victims of domestic violence, 15-22 percent report that they were initially abused by a dating partner during the teen years.¹⁶ Thus, TDV can be a precursor to future victimization.

Examples of TDV: pinching, hitting, shoving or kicking a partner; threatening a partner or harming his/her sense of self-worth by name calling, shaming, bullying or embarrassing on purpose; keeping him/her away from friends and family; or coercing or forcing a partner to engage in a sex act when he/she does not or cannot consent.¹⁷

Hazing

Hazing is defined in different ways by different people. There is general agreement that hazing includes **“any activity expected of someone joining or participating in a group that humiliates, degrades, abuses or endangers participants regardless of a person's willingness to participate.”**¹⁸

Most research on hazing has been conducted among college students. One study of young adults found 48 percent of boys and 39 percent of girls involved in high school activities reported being subjected to one or more hazing activities during high school. Approximately half of the students who were hazed reported being subjected to dangerous activities such as assault, vandalism or alcohol, tobacco or other drug (ATOD) use.¹⁹ The effects of hazing on youth are difficult to ascertain because, like other forms of peer abuse, it is significantly under-reported. Hazing resulting in humiliation is believed to have negative psychological effects. Physical forms of hazing have been linked to serious injury and even death.²⁰

Researchers make a distinction between hazing and initiation rites. Initiation rites are pro-social behaviors that build social relationships, understanding, empathy, civility, altruism and moral decision-making among members of a group. This includes such things as requiring members to maintain a certain grade point average, dress up for events, undertake group projects/fund-raisers and participate in singing/chants with prosocial themes.

Examples of hazing: physical mutilation, yelling or swearing with the intent to demean, coercing or requiring ATOD use or excessive exercise, confinement in a restricted area, coerced consumption of nonfood substances, drowning/near drowning, immersion in noxious substances, sleep or food deprivation, forced public humiliation or forced sexual activities.

Legal Implications

Of the three forms of peer abuse discussed in this publication, the Pennsylvania School Code specifically addresses bullying and teen dating violence in K-12 public schools.

Bullying

The Pennsylvania School Code defines bullying and requires schools to: 1) adopt and publish a bullying policy, 2) designate a staff person in each school to receive reports of bullying, 3) inform parents and students of the policy on a regular basis and 4) report the total number of bullying incidents to the Pennsylvania Department of Education annually. The legislation also encourages schools to implement anti-bullying strategies which are to be reported each year. (24 P.S. §13-1303.1-A)

Teen Dating Violence Education

The Pennsylvania School Code describes best practices schools may take regarding TDV policy and education. While the law allows individual school districts to determine how to address TDV in policy and curricula, it specifies content to be considered. It further notes that the law “should not prevent a person from seeking judicial relief from dating violence under any other law or as establishing or modifying any civil liability.” When students engage in TDV behaviors at school that are illegal, schools are obligated to intervene. (24 P.S. §15-1553)

Hazing

Hazing is addressed by the Pennsylvania School Code; however, the law only applies to institutions of higher education. These institutions are mandated to adopt and enforce an anti-hazing policy along with rules prohibiting students and others associated with the school from engaging in hazing activities. Although K-12 schools are not required to follow these mandates, schools are encouraged to do so, as hazing behaviors are increasingly reported among secondary school students²¹ and may result in legal action against perpetrators, adult supervisors or the school.²² (24 P.S. §5352 et seq.)

Educators should be aware that bullying, TDV or hazing behaviors may violate civil, criminal and/or civil rights laws. For example, some acts of peer abuse may meet legal definitions for defamation, assault, stalking, sexual harassment, etc. In such cases, parents may wish to pursue a remedy through the legal system. When peer abuse targets a student’s race, color, religion, national origin, gender or other protected class, schools are obligated by state and federal civil rights laws to put an end to the offensive behavior and prevent future acts. If the peer abuse behaviors include physical acts, such as assault or sexual assault, educators must report the abuse to Childline and contact law enforcement.



Connections and Best Practices for Schools

Although bullying, TDV and hazing are distinct forms of peer abuse, all are known to manifest among school-aged youth and can result in significant harm. In addition, these forms of abuse share a common element: all reinforce an imbalance of power between victim and abusers. Such power imbalances carry risks for public organizations, like schools, which have a duty to protect young people and a legal mandate to address systemic inequalities.

A review of research on peer abuse suggests that there are some common strategies schools should consider to prevent peer abuse and ensure adults are prepared to intervene when peer abuse is suspected. It is important to note that classroom level interventions or curriculum-only approaches are less effective than interventions that also include school level or systemic components.

1. Policies Beyond Bullying

It is recommended that schools establish discreet policies on hazing, TDV, bullying and harassment. It is critical that policies aimed at addressing peer aggression define the behavior with specificity and describe how students and adults should report the behavior when it is observed or suspected and to whom. It is important that school administrators work closely with affected students and parents – and law enforcement and the courts, when appropriate – to effectively respond to peer abuse and prevent future acts. In addition, it is useful to include a statement about how the policy links to the school’s disciplinary practices, supportive services and prevention education. Links to model policy resources are provided at the end of this publication.

2. Clear Procedures for Intervening

Schools should have clear procedures in place for investigating and responding to suspected or observed instances of peer aggression. These should be communicated to all staff in writing and reviewed at least once a year. The person(s) responsible for conducting investigations should be trained in recognizing and responding to different forms of peer aggression and



should make efforts to protect the targeted student and any youth reporting the harmful behavior. Interventions for targets and perpetrators should include supportive interventions, as well as disciplinary responses for perpetrators when appropriate. Follow-up strategies should be implemented to insure the targeted student's safety immediately following the incident. This may include such things as raising awareness among supervising adults, increasing supervision in hot spots, stay-away orders implemented by the school, and regular check-in meetings with a supportive adult. Educators should forge partnerships with local domestic violence providers to ensure mechanisms of education and support are available to youth affected by TDV.

3. Professional Development for Teachers, Coaches and Support Staff

Because peer abuse is so prevalent and the effects can be long-lasting and severe, it is important that school staff and coaches are trained to recognize different forms of abuse, as well as their warning signs. In addition to providing information on bullying, TDV and hazing, training should include: guidance on how to talk with students about different forms of peer abuse; role play activities that teach adults how to intervene when abuse is observed or suspected; and instruction on how to report suspected and observed peer abuse.

4. Prevention Programming

Developmentally appropriate prevention programming should be implemented to ensure students understand what healthy relationships look like and what to do when they experience peer abuse or suspect that another student is being targeted. Programs that build social and emotional skills can be beneficial. These programs should include or be accompanied by instruction on bystander roles and definitions of bullying, TDV and hazing.

5. Engage Peers as Supporters

The three forms of peer abuse discussed in the publication are distinct in many ways. Yet, research on each form of abuse has identified peers as key players in the abusive dynamic, as well as key players in successful intervention. In the case of bullying and hazing, other students are often aware of the problem behavior. When bystanders choose to ignore it or join in the abuse, they empower the perpetrator and condone abusive behavior. In the case of TDV, friends of the victim may become alienated from him/her or blame the target for remaining in an abusive relationship. Because social isolation can play a role in discouraging abused youth from leaving an unhealthy relationship, friends should be encouraged to remain connected and available to peers that may be in unhealthy dating relationships.

6. Provide Targeted Information and Support to Specific Groups

Prevention and intervention for peer abuse should be linked to a three-tiered system for improving school climate and safety. This approach addresses:

- What information and skills will be taught to all students (Tier 1) and how these will be taught (prevention programming)
- What group supports will be available to students who demonstrate risk factors for peer abuse (Tier 2)
- What individualized interventions will be used or recommended to support students who demonstrate behavioral health issues related to peer abuse (Tier 3)

In addition to prevention programming, schools may offer educational support groups focused on healthy relationships to youth who have experienced peer abuse,

as well as to students that demonstrate risk factors for peer abuse. For example, research suggests that students who have experienced trauma or placement in the child welfare system are at greater risk of involvement in unhealthy relationships than students who have not had these experiences.^{23,24}

Because hazing is most often associated with involvement in school activities and sports, schools should provide training and discussions about what constitutes hazing to participants in school-sponsored groups. Parents and students should be asked to sign a code of conduct that states the definition of hazing and the school's policy before the student is allowed to participate in school-sponsored activities. The code should specify bystander and reporter roles, as well as the names of the school employees who are designated to accept reports of hazing.

7. Link Definitions to Data-Collection Systems

Schools use a range of data collection systems to gather information about school climate and students' educational needs. Schools should consider collecting data on peer abuse, as appropriate, through office disciplinary referral systems. In addition, periodic anonymous student surveys may be conducted to inform prevention and intervention programming plans. This may be as simple as administering a survey in health class or to specific grade levels. The Pennsylvania Youth Survey, available at no charge through the Pennsylvania Commission on Crime and Delinquency, provides information about students' behaviors, attitudes and knowledge about a number of risk factors and violent behaviors.

8. Develop a School-Parent-Community Effort

It is important that schools develop and maintain partnerships with parents and community leaders to provide consistent messages, support and care. Partnerships with local behavioral health providers and prevention organizations can ensure students have access to support outside the school. A team effort can also help to promote shared responsibility for the health and well-being of youth across all settings.

Resources

PA Laws and Model Policies

Commonwealth of Pennsylvania Department of Education Model Dating Violence Policy

Pennsylvania School Boards Association Bullying/Cyberbullying Model Policy

Vermont Department of Education Model Hazing Prevention Policy

Centers for Disease Control Fact Sheets

Understanding Bullying

Understanding Teen Dating Violence

Websites and Other Information

Loveisrespect.org

Loveisrespect is an online resource for teens that are/were experiencing dating violence and abuse.

Stopbullying.gov

U.S. government website that serves as the clearinghouse for bullying related information and resources.

Links to these resources can be found in www.SafeSchools.info/BPPeerAbuse2015

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Stophazing.org

Research, advocacy and training organization addressing hazing in high schools and colleges.

Youth.gov

U.S. government website aimed at engaging youth to promote change; the teen dating violence page includes many helpful links.

PACER.org

A national education and advocacy group focused on preventing bullying among children with disabilities.

Pennsylvania Coalition Against Domestic Violence (PCADV)

PCADV supports local domestic violence prevention programs and coordinates statewide efforts to eradicate domestic violence and support people who are affected by it. TDV is addressed as part of the organization's prevention work.

Shifting Boundaries Curriculum for Middle School Youth

Teen dating violence initiative and free curriculum for middle school youth available from the National Institutes of Justice.

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Helplines

National Teen Dating Violence Helpline (866) 331-9474

Advocates are trained on issues related to dating abuse and healthy relationships, as well as crisis intervention. If you have questions about dating in general or a specific relationship, or if you are in an unhealthy or abusive relationship, peer advocates are available to provide support. This helpline is a project of Loveisrespect.org.

Trevor Lifeline (866) 488-7386

The Trevor Lifeline is part of the Trevor Project, an organization established to help lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender youth in suicide prevention. Although the Trevor Project advocates for LBGT youth, any child or teen in crisis can call the hotline 24 hours a day for help, advice or to talk without judgment.

Training

Center for Safe Schools

The Center provides training and consultation for administrators and school staff on policy development, evidence based prevention and intervention programs, schoolwide planning and evaluation of prevention efforts.

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