

REDUCING THE EFFECTS OF BULLYING IN ADOLESCENCE:  
THE ROLES OF SCHOOLS AND FAMILIES

By

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B.S., Kansas State University, 2009

A REPORT

submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree

MASTER OF SCIENCE

School of Family Studies and Human Services  
College of Human Ecology

KANSAS STATE UNIVERSITY  
Manhattan, Kansas

2011

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## **Abstract**

The increasing incidence of school-related bullying problems has caught the attention of the media in the United States and rest of the world. The bullying phenomenon has administrators, educators, school site councils, and parents searching for effective prevention programs to reduce youth peer violence and improve the learning environment for students. Many schools are required by state laws to have bullying intervention and prevention programs in place; however, questions arise about the success of popular and widely-used bullying prevention programs. Research data shows that zero-tolerance policies, which appeal to those who demand a strong disciplined reaction to peer violence, are often implemented without using common sense. Many parents or guardians of victimized children are either unaware of the problem, or they do not know what to do when their children are bullied. This report reviews current knowledge about bullying in school during adolescence. It begins by looking at the historical context of bullying and bullying research, and then examines adolescent development in relationship to bullying behaviors. The literature review includes topics regarding types and definitions of bullying, bully, victim, and bully-victim profiles, and well as the role of the bystander. Using Bronfenbrenner's bio-ecological model of human development, this report then identifies the need for parental involvement as a way to help adolescents cope with bullying incidents.

## Table of Contents

List of Figures .....	vi
Acknowledgements .....	vii
Dedication .....	viii
INTRODUCTION .....	1
Historical Interest in Bullying: Social Problems and Attention in the Media .....	2
Bullying Related to School Shootings .....	3
Current Anti-Bullying Movement.....	4
Interactions with School Personal and Parents .....	7
A Current Method to Avoid Bullying.....	8
ADOLESCENT DEVELOPMENT .....	10
Biological Development .....	10
Brain Structure .....	10
Hormonal Changes.....	11
Cognitive Development .....	15
Decision Making.....	16
Socio-Emotional Development.....	17
Peer Social Groups.....	19
Implications of Adolescent Development on Bullying.....	19
REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE .....	21
Types of Bullying .....	21
Cyberbullying .....	22
Definition of Bullying.....	24
Kansas Anti-Bullying, Cyberbullying and Character Development Legislature.....	26
Bully, Victim and Bully-Victim Profiles.....	28
Gender.....	30
Age.....	31
Race and ethnicity.....	32
Bully-victims.....	32

Bystanders in the Bullying Phenomenon.....	33
Bystander Roles .....	34
Attitudes in Relationship to Bystanders.....	35
Prevalence of Bullying and Victimization.....	36
The Impact of Bullying.....	38
Which Comes First: Health Symptoms or Victimization?.....	40
Cyberbullying .....	41
Learning Disorders Related to Bullying .....	42
Bullying as an Global Problem.....	42
School Context in Bullying.....	44
Bullying and School Size.....	44
School Programs Directed at Bullying .....	46
Zero Tolerance School Policies .....	47
Effective School Strategies .....	50
Bio-ecological Model of Human Development.....	51
THE PARENT’S ROLE IN REDUCING THE EFFECT OF BULLYING.....	54
Parental Styles and Families of Bullies and Victims .....	54
Parental Responses to Bullying.....	56
It Takes a Village to Reduce Bullying.....	57
What More Can Be Done to Reduce Bullying?.....	59
Personal Recommendations .....	59
Implications for Family Life Education.....	59
CONCLUSION.....	64
How Serious is Bullying? .....	64
Where Do We Go From Here? .....	65

## **List of Figures**

Figure 1. Bullying Circle. ....	29
Figure 2. Percentage of Students in Grades 9-12 Who Reported Having Been in a Physical Fight During the Previous 12 Months on School Property: 1993 to 2003. ....	49
Figure 3. State and Federal Bullying Information .....	57

## **Acknowledgements**

I would like to thank my co-major professors, Dr. Karen Myers-Bowman and Dr. Elaine Johannes, for all of their assistance and for being a source of encouragement throughout this report. Dr. Tony Jurich agreed to serve on my committee, and I deeply regret his passing and missing out on the opportunity to learn from his expertise on adolescent suicide which was my original topic of interest. However, I went in another direction and have learned so much about the bullying phenomenon during adolescence. I also want to thank Dr. Farrell Webb for serving on my committee, and to all of the FSHS faculty and staff who have led me on the incredible journey of Family Life Education.

## **Dedication**

This report is dedicated to my family for all of their support and encouragement—it has been a long-time goal of mine to complete a master’s degree. I love being a mother to Kristi, Nick, and Megan, and they inspired my interest in the Family Studies major. I believe strong families are the backbone of a strong society.

# INTRODUCTION

*“It is the fundamental democratic right for a child to feel safe in school and to be spared the oppression and repeated, intentional humiliation implied in bullying”(Olweus, 1999, p. 21).*

Adolescents in the United States spend nearly half of the time they are awake in school (Brookmeyer, Fanti, & Henrich, 2006), and because the interactions incurred in school help shape their lives, they need an environment conducive for them to learn and thrive. A positive school climate (defined by shared values and beliefs that develop interactions between students and educators and set boundaries for acceptable behaviors) helps to create a successful school environment (Koth, Bradshaw, & Leaf, 2008). Because the *No Child Left Behind Act of 2001* ensures orderly and safe school environments in the United States, school staff have become more concerned with bullying prevention in schools and altering the social norms associated with bullying (Bradshaw, Sawyer, & O’Brennan, 2009; Whitted & Dupper, 2005).

Bullying is a type of aggressive behavior which occurs in situations where victims cannot easily escape, and more often in school settings since schooling is normally compulsory (Olweus, 1999). Bullying in schools is a problematic behavior that affects social skills, school achievement, and psychological health for both the bully and the victim (Wang, Iannotti, & Nansel, 2009). It is a pervasive social problem; however, parents are often unaware of the situation even when their own child has been victimized (Matsunaga, 2009). Furthermore, families can provide important coping resources for children, and given the negative impact of bullying, underutilizing these resources is disturbing in terms of the child’s health. Although bullying among children is a very old phenomenon, it has only been recently that society has taken an interest in it (Olweus & Limber, 2010).

## **Historical Interest in Bullying: Social Problems and Attention in the Media**

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, bullying, or “mobbing” behavior, was introduced by a Swedish school physician, P.-P. Heinemann, who borrowed the term from a book on aggression written by Konrad Lorenz, a well-known Austrian ethologist (Olweus, 2010). Mobbing had previously been used in different ways, such as to describe an attack on an animal by a group of natural enemies, or the actions of a group of school children ganging up against another individual. Daniel Olweus (2010), an aggression research psychology professor from Norway, thought the concept of mobbing made the recipient of the aggression—who is seen as provoking others—responsible for potential problems. He began to question how often mobbing, or the “all-against-one” scenario, implied by the term actually occurred. Although Olweus believed temporary outbreaks could occur among a group of children in school, he began to direct his attention towards another kind of situation in which students are exposed to aggression repeatedly from another individual or a small group of peers.

After three adolescent males committed suicide in Norway in 1983, as a possible consequence of school bullying, a national campaign against bullying was initiated by the Ministry of Education in Norway (Olweus & Limber, 2010). With little empirical research data to fall back on, Olweus initiated the first research project on bullying. During his studies, he found that (a) students varied remarkably in their degree of aggressiveness, (b) these differences tended to be stable over time unless interventions were introduced, and (c) usually only a small number of students in a class were involved in bullying (or peer harassment) making it clear that the term “mobbing” was no longer useful.

Often considered the pioneer in bullying research, Dr. Olweus has spent the last several decades helping to create safe school environments for children, and he is best known for the

world's foremost evidenced-based bullying program, *Olweus Bullying Prevention Program*. The program's website <http://www.olweus.org/public/index.page> provides a wealth of information including the definition of bullying, state laws, testimonials, training, upcoming seminars, and funding (Olweus Bullying Prevention Program, 2011).

Attention given to bullying in the United States has been fueled by several highly publicized school shootings such as the 1999 Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado in which the massacre of students have been linked to bully/victim behaviors among the shooters (Olweus & Limber 2010; Vossekuil, Fein, Reddy, & Modzelski, 2002).

### ***Bullying Related to School Shootings***

The shooting incidents that occurred at the Littleton, Colorado, Jonesboro, Arkansas, and West Paducah, Kentucky schools are included in the list of communities who are all too familiar with the aftermath of school violence in the past several decades in the United States. Although school shootings are rare, they are a part of school violence, and they leave a devastating and lasting effect on not only the students, school, and surrounding community where it occurred, but on the entire nation as well (Vossekuil et al., 2002). After their tragic occurrence, parents, educators, mental health professionals, and law enforcement officers are left wondering how they could have known the attack was being planned, as well as what to do to help prevent future attacks from happening.

After the fatal shootings at Columbine High School, the Department of Education and the Secret Service in the United States initiated the *Safe School Initiative* study in June 1999 with an emphasis placed on examining the thinking and behavior of the attacker(s) prior to the incident (Vossekuil et al., 2002). The *Safe School Initiative* researched 37 incidents involving 41 attackers between 1974 and 2000 and found one common factor—71% (or 29) of the attackers “felt

bullied, persecuted or injured by others prior to the attack” (Vossekuil et al., p. 21). The objective of the Initiative was an attempt to gather information to produce a base of knowledge on school attacks that is both factual and accurate and which might provide some kind of prevention or intervention for future attacks. Key finding 7 of the top ten key findings revealed:

Many attackers felt bullied, persecuted, or injured by others prior to the attack. Bullying was not a factor in every case, and clearly not every child who is bullied in school will pose a risk for targeted violence in school. Nevertheless, in a number of the incidents of targeted school violence studied, attackers described being bullied in terms that suggested that these experiences approached torment. These attackers told of behaviors that, if they occurred in the workplace, likely would meet legal definitions of harassment and/or assault. The prevalence of bullying found in this and other recent studies should strongly support ongoing efforts to reduce bullying in American schools. Educators can play an important role in ensuring that students are not bullied in schools and that schools not only do not permit bullying but also empower other students to let adults in the school know if students are being bullied (Vossekuil et al. p. 35-36).

### ***Current Anti-Bullying Movement***

Dr. Phil McGraw (2011), a well-known psychologist, author, and television host, is involved in his own Anti-Bullying Movement, and he recently went before the United States Congress with his battle against cyberbullies ([www.drphil.com](http://www.drphil.com)). The stories presented below were taken from his website. These personal experiences were chosen because they illustrate students and families who have experienced bullying and suicidality related to bullying. They show the frustration, anxiety, anger, and fear that bullying behaviors inflict on victims and family members. The stories are included verbatim, and the spelling and grammatical errors

were not changed. All three stories represent students of varying age groups, both male and female students, and different types of bullying. More important, as parents and grandparents pleaded for help and advice in knowing what to do, the stories show how helpless families feel in bullying situations.

### **Karen**

I was a “victim” of bullying in high school back in the 60’s. It was not until only recently that I overcame the power and the pain of that bullying. Yes, suicidal ideation continued throughout my life for 58 years! Even in my own family, I was also abused in the same manner as I was abused at school. My mother, in support of my siblings would say that it was “just sibling rivalry” or that “boys will be boys.” She also participated in the same abuse toward me that they did! Well, I have no family anymore. I “divorced” all of them last year. Now, without further abuse to remind me what a piece of you-know-what I am, I am finally gaining a life of my own and becoming someone I ought to have been so long ago. People will never really know the true overall damage that bullying does. The “secrets” are kept by them, usually, forever!

July 18, 2010

### **Bullying and suicide, my grandson**

My grandson is 12 but is about the size of an eight or nine year old. He is in middle school and has apparently been bullied this whole year but it has recently escalated. Today I learned from my daughter-in-law that my grandson talked to the school policeman about bullying and told the policeman that he was having suicidal thoughts. NO ONE FROM THE SCHOOL INFORMED THEM. My grandson talked to my daughter-in-law asking to be taken out of school and told her about talking to the policeman. When she

went to the school to talk to them they turned everything around on my grandson stating he is instigating the bullying. We need help in knowing what to do. What if the day he talked to the policeman had been the day he had decided to follow through on those suicidal thoughts. This policeman and the school board members, teachers, etc. need to be held accountable for not informing my daughter-in-law. They also need to be better educated on the seriousness of bullying. My grandson lives in Texas and I live in Louisiana and I feel totally helpless as to how to help my grandson. Any help or advice will be appreciated.

January 23, 2011

### **Phoebe Prince's Story**

Phoebe moved to South Hadley, a quiet suburb in Massachusetts, with her family from Ireland. A freshman in high school, she had a brief relationship with a senior football player, which got her on the wrong side with a group of girls at the school, dubbed the "Mean Girls." For three months, they went after her. They called her a slut. They confronted her in the hallways and pushed her around. One afternoon this past January, the girls drove past Phoebe as she was walking home. They shouted at her and threw an energy drink at her. "Phoebe kept walking, past the abuse, past the can, past the white picket fence, into her house," wrote Kevin Cullen, a *Boston Globe* columnist. "Then she walked into a closet and hanged herself... You would think this would give the bullies who hounded Phoebe some pause. Instead, they went on Facebook and mocked her in death.

March 31, 2010.

## *Interactions with School Personal and Parents*

The previous three stories demonstrated the helplessness individuals, parents, and grandparents sometimes feel when bullying in school occurs. According to Smith (2006), “Parents are in a position to determine and possibly correct the underlying causes of bullying,” and “Schools and parents should work together for the benefit of children.” I felt it would be beneficial to my report to gain first-hand information on bullying in schools from school personal so I interviewed a principle, two vice-principles, and a school counselor at an elementary, middle, and high school in a mid-west university city to gain a more personal and better understanding of bullying in schools.

My findings were similar to the literature review: bullying occurred more often during the middle school years than in the primary (kindergarten through fourth) grades or high school years, bystanders significantly played a part in the bullying phenomenon (i.e. they did not want to “rat” on their peers) and a “lack of empathy” by some adolescents was evident during the middle school years. The middle school vice-principal assured that approximately 85% of his students stayed out of trouble, 10% of students were multiple offenders, and 80% of his time was spent repeatedly disciplining a small number (15%) of students.

I also contacted site council members at a middle school to inquire what they knew about bullying in schools and to undertake a needs assessment regarding various resources that would be helpful for families in the bullying process. Several site council members/parents responded to the following questions:

- 1) *Do you have a bully prevention program at your school and if so, what is it?*
- 2) *How is bullying defined at your school?*
- 3) *What do you consider bullying?*

- 4) *How often do bullying episodes occur at your school?*
- 5) *How do you address bullying?*
- 6) *What kind of training/education is provided for school staff members and students?*
- 7) *What resources would be the most helpful for families dealing with bullying issues?*

The site council members' responses revealed a variation in their knowledge about bullying in schools. All of the members were aware of a bullying prevention program at their middle school, and they described bullying using terms such as 1) physical, verbal, or emotional power or control, 2) intimidation of a weaker person, 3) a form of abuse, and 4) repeated acts over time. Responses regarding the frequency of bullying ranged from not knowing how often bullying occurred, to being aware of one event, to most likely occurring on some level every week of the school year.

This information showed that parents want information and support in knowing what to do when bullying incidents occur. Furthermore, it revealed that parents may not be aware that bullying occurred; however, if they did, some might talk to their child about it, talk to the school or contact the parents of the other child(ren). Other responses emphasized the importance of communication with children. Most important, site council members wanted to know that the school cared for and wanted to help families, and they wanted to receive support and education from school experts as what to do in bullying situations.

### ***A Current Method to Avoid Bullying***

More recently, the media presented a controversial way some teens and their parents were dealing with bullying and teasing in school that is associated with physical imperfections. *Today* (MSNBC, 2011a) informed viewers that plastic surgery, in the form of breast augmentations, liposuctions, nose and ear surgeries, and male and female breast reductions were being

performed on students as a way to for them to “blend in”. During the interview, one 13 year old girl stated she was very self-conscious about many things including what she wore and how her hair looked. However, a protruding ear made her feel exceptionally bad because she had no control over it. She felt her ear made her a target for bullying and was considering surgery to correct it. Her plastic surgeon replied that parents were recognizing the psychological and emotional trauma that children experienced and were taking a more proactive stance to help.

The most common reconstruction was ear surgeries, and they were preformed on children as young as five or six; although many plastic surgeons recommended that children prolong surgery until they reached physical maturity before they considered breast or nose reconstructions (Today, 2011a). However, a guest psychiatrist on *Today* stated bullying is pervasive and would not stop because the student had corrective surgery; rather parents play a critical role in helping their adolescents develop self-acceptance. She argued that parental love, parental warmth, and parental acceptance were key factors that helped in bullying prevention, and that parents needed to assist their teenagers in accepting their imperfections.

Adolescence is an important stage in a child’s life where perceptions of the body are viewed differently than in other phases of life. Why would a teenager consider surgery to avoid bullying? The following section explains the biological, cognitive, and socio-emotional development adolescents experience during this stage.

# **ADOLESCENT DEVELOPMENT**

Adolescence, which is marked by the beginning of puberty, is the transitional stage between childhood and adulthood. It is a time of significant development, and the physiological changes that occur in pubescence precede many psychosocial demands that are common to the adolescent period (Erikson, 1968). According to Santrock (2010), adolescence begins around ages 10 to 13 and ends towards the late teens in the United States.

One of the main tasks of adolescence is preparing for adulthood. Biological, cognitive, and socio-emotional processes all determine human development which involves patterns of change beginning with conception and continuing throughout the lifespan. Changes during adolescence range from the development of biological processes involving sexual functions to hypothetical reasoning to independence (Santrock, 2010). The following section describes how and why developmental changes influence adolescent behaviors commonly found in bullying and/or victimization and why they need to be addressed.

## **Biological Development**

Biological processes relate to physical changes in each individual. Genetic make-up, structural changes in the brain, and hormonal changes in puberty all reflect biological development (Santrock, 2010).

### ***Brain Structure***

Important structural changes in the corpus callosum, the prefrontal cortex, and the amygdale occur during adolescence. Santrock (2010) stated that as the corpus callosum thickens during the adolescent years, the ability to process information is improved, and the prefrontal cortex—the area involved in decision making, reasoning, and self-control—continues to develop through approximately 18 to 25 years of age. However, the amygdale, a part of the limbic

system that processes emotions such as anger, matures before the prefrontal cortex. Although adolescents can express very strong emotions, their prefrontal cortex has not yet developed to the point where they can control them.

### ***Hormonal Changes***

Hormones are strong chemical substances that are secreted by the endocrine glands, and they circulate throughout the human body via the bloodstream (Santrock, 2010). Androgens, the primary class of male hormones, and estrogens, the primary class of female hormones, are produced in both males and females, however in significantly different amounts. During puberty, the androgen, testosterone, and the estrogen, estradiol, increases in both boys and girls. Nottelmann et al., (1987, as cited in Santrock) found that testosterone levels rose 18-fold for males, and only 2-fold for females during puberty, while estradiol levels rose 8-fold for females and only 2-fold for male adolescents.

Adolescents are well known to have mood changes—parents of teenagers may likely say that one minute their adolescent children appear to be on “top of the world” and the next minute they are “down in the dumps”. The emotional upheaval of early adolescence (ages 11-13) may be related to the changing hormonal levels at this stage; in fact, researchers think hormonal factors play a part in the increases in negative and fluctuating behaviors commonly found in adolescents (Santrock, 2010). For example, higher levels of testosterone have been linked to violence and conduct disorders in adolescent males, increased levels of estrogens have been associated with depression in adolescent girls, and higher levels of adrenal androgens have been found to have negative effects on girls.

However, there are other factors involved in adolescent behaviors besides changing hormone levels. Santrock (2010) stated social factors have also been associated with depression

and anger in girls, and the quality of parent-teen relationships have been linked with risk behaviors (i.e., when relationships were stronger, depression symptoms decreased and fewer risk-taking behaviors were found). Finally, as adolescents mature, their moods become less extreme, which is most likely explained by the adaptation of hormone levels and prefrontal cortex maturation.

Testosterone is the most important sex hormone in males, and it affects both physical and behavioral masculinization (van Bokhoven et al., 2006). Although it is well known that circulating levels of testosterone have organizational effects on brain development in males during the fetal stage, less is known whether circulating levels of plasma testosterone are associated in systemic ways to aggressive behavior during or post puberty (Olweus, Mattsson, Schalling, & Low, 1988).

Previous studies on human males have shown conflicting results, thus Olweus et al. (1988) selected fifty-eight 15-17 year old adolescent boys in Sweden who provided blood samples and completed a series of personality inventories to measure the influence of testosterone on aggressive behavior. Olweus et al.'s study found a significant correlation between testosterone and Verbal Aggression and Physical Aggression—two scales on the Olweus Aggression Inventory. Further analysis of the data revealed that testosterone had causal effects on Provoked and Unprovoked Aggressive Behavior. For example, increased levels of the hormone created a stronger tendency for them to respond aggressively and assertively when they were provoked or threatened. The results of this study indicated that high levels of testosterone to some degree, affects the chance that boys will initiate aggressive behavior because they are more irritable or impatient. However, given the boys' readiness to engage in aggressive behaviors, it was clear that many possible other casual factors could be involved.

Human studies have shown a positive correlation between aggression and testosterone in different groups of pubertal and postpubertal males (Dabbs & Morris, 1990). However, Constantino et al. (1993) stated all of the published studies on testosterone and aggressive behavior in humans had been performed only on pubertal and postpubertal males. Their study on highly aggressive, prepubertal boys (subjects at Bronx Children's Psychiatric Center for unmanageable or violent behavior) proposed that if testosterone truly played a causal role in developing aggression, children with high levels of aggression should have higher levels of testosterone as compared to normal children.

The results of Constantino et al.'s (1993) study, particularly in boys younger than eight years old, did not show a significant difference in testosterone levels between non-aggressive and aggressive boys suggesting that testosterone was not independently linked to the development of abnormal aggression in humans. Furthermore, testosterone levels in younger children were almost identical to normal controls, which suggested that serum testosterone was not a determinant in developing abnormal human aggression.

Instead, Constantino et al. (1993) referred to the development of aggression in children as a multifactorial process. Most of the boys in their study had well-documented histories of neglect or abuse, as well as observable aggression before they were six years old. The authors suggested to view elevated testosterone levels in aggressive adolescents and adults as "*effects* rather than causes of aggressive behavior" (p. 1221). Specific changes in mood or status (i.e., responses to a lottery winning or medical school graduation) are associated with brief elevations of testosterone that last several hours to several days which may explain why serum levels that are only drawn once from aggressive people (who may be more likely to experience fluctuations) may be higher than in less aggressive people.

More recently, van Bokhoven et al. (2006) investigated the relationship between testosterone and aggression, delinquency, and dominance in a longitudinal study following male students in Montreal from kindergarten through the age of 21. As expected, the authors stated testosterone levels rose significantly during puberty, but aggressive behavior (reported by teachers) and delinquency incidents (reported by participants) did not increase; rather patterns of decreasing behaviors were found. Consequently, there was not enough evidence to show that testosterone had a direct effect on adolescent aggression, and the results remained controversial.

However, after examining the data more closely, van Bokhoven et al. (2006) found a clear and positive association between testosterone (T) and aggression and/or delinquent behavior during different annual time frames. Boys who had higher testosterone levels at age 16 had higher criminal records in adulthood than boys without records, and T levels were higher in 21 year old males who reported more delinquencies from ages 13 to 20 than in boys reporting fewer delinquencies. In contrast to previous research, van Bokhoven et al. stated they did not find a relationship between testosterone in boys at age 13 and aggressiveness.

Thus, van Bokhoven et al. (2006) stated strong social restraints may inhibit 13 year olds boys from showing aggression, unlike 16 year old males when social constraints appear to weaken, leading to an increased testosterone/aggression relationship. Also, antisocial behaviors decline as boys become more involved in work and relationships which might indicate that social factors, rather than biological, are related to a stronger pubertal relationship. Although van Bokhoven et al. (2006) found some positive association between testosterone and aggression/delinquency over time, they stated different variables had a significantly positive relationship with testosterone at different ages which may be explained by the sample they studied—boys from low socioeconomic families who tend to have more externalizing problems.

In conclusion, the boys were studied during a time when important biological, emotional, and social changes were occurring, and the timing of the measurements of testosterone could have an effect on the different types of aggressive and delinquent behavior.

## **Cognitive Development**

Cognitive processes relate to how an individual thinks (Santrock, 2010). Abstract thinking, problem solving, and thinking about consequences all reflect cognitive development. In his theory of cognitive development, Piaget (1967) proposed that individuals actively construct their view of the world through four distinct stages of cognitive development. Starting at birth, individuals move through each stage constructing their understanding of the world through the processes of organization and adaptation. Children and adolescents vary greatly in their levels of thinking. Cognitive development begins in the sensory-motor stage during infancy and moves through several stages to a more mature way of thinking in adolescence called formal operational. This stage appears between 11 and 15 years of age as individuals begin to think in more logical and abstract terms.

According to Piaget (1972), the speed of development through each stage may vary from one individual to another; but the order of succession through the stages remains the same. An adolescent develops a more complete sense of logic around 11-12 years of age that will reach a state of equilibrium around 14-15 years of age. Piaget stated the main novelty during this stage is the ability of the adolescent to reason in terms of hypotheses rather than only about concrete objects. This a major turning point in cognitive development because the ability to reason, consider consequences, and envision other alternatives is essential to making decisions about relationships with peers and friends.

From a social viewpoint, hypothetical reasoning changes how individuals approach the

nature of discussions (Piaget, 1972). Adolescents who think in hypothetical terms can adopt another person's point of view, draw logical consequences from it, and judge its value after confirming the consequences. They are also more likely to engage in problems that are beyond their level of experience. Hypothetical reasoning also allows adolescents to have a greater capacity to understand others, to construct theories, and to participate in society. Some adolescents may even desire to change society, and if necessary, dream about destroying it in order to create a new and better one.

### ***Decision Making***

Cognition, like social and emotional processes, is “part of most decisions and all of none” (Fischhoff, 2008, p. 25). The number of poor choices teens make reflects both the nature and the number of challenges they face, as well as their level of social and cognitive ability. Some of these choices may leave adults wondering if “information” works for adolescents. From a behavioral decision research perspective, Fischhoff stated there is no simple answer and that in certain situations adolescents would not alter their choices regardless of what truthful information they were told. For example, many states require passengers to “buckle-up” while riding in moving vehicles. Many teens are aware of this law and the risks involved, but still choose to not wear a seatbelt. However, their choices may offend people who disagree with the values associated with those decisions. Furthermore, some adolescents, such as those in abusive relationships or addictions, may not like their choices if they desire better options.

Adolescence is a time for making many decisions regarding friendship, intimacy, identity, careers, and appearance. These decisions often have unpredictable effects, require learning new information, and may present difficult tradeoffs. According to Santrock (2010), older adolescents (ages 16-19) appear to be more competent, and make better decisions than

younger adolescents, who in turn, are more competent and are better decision makers than young children. For example, adolescents are more likely to look at a situation from several different perspectives, anticipate consequences, contemplate the credibility of sources, and regulate their emotions during decision making more so than children.

## **Socio-Emotional Development**

Socio-emotional processes relate to changes in personality, individual emotions, relationships, and social interactions (Santrock, 2010). Erikson's (1963) Psychosocial Developmental Theory proposes that there are eight stages of social-emotional development that impact human development and unfold across the entire lifespan. A unique developmental task at each stage presents the individual with a crisis that must be resolved. According to Erikson (1968), the word *crisis* does not refer to an impending catastrophe, but rather it is a necessary turning point that requires development to move one way or another in order for growth to occur. Each developmental crisis needs to be resolved before the next stage can be successfully addressed.

Erickson (1968) stated the adolescence stage has become more salient as advances in technology put more and more time between the earlier school years and later years of work. As adolescents encounter physical maturation and uncertainty about future roles, identity formation continues. Young people become more preoccupied with what others think of them rather than what they think about themselves, and they begin to question how to connect previously learned roles with present day roles. In their search for continuity, some adolescents have to return and resolve earlier crises.

In Erickson's (1963) Psychosocial Developmental Theory, adolescence is associated with the fifth stage *identity versus role confusion*. The danger for a child at this stage is role

confusion. In his book, *Childhood and Society*, Erickson wrote:

Young people can also be remarkably clannish, and cruel in their exclusion of all those who are “different”, in skin color or cultural backgrounds, in tastes and gifts, and often in such petty aspects of dress and gesture as have been temporarily selected as *the* signs of an in-grouper or out-grouper. It is important to understand (which does not mean condone or participate in) such intolerance as a defense against a sense of identity confusion. For adolescents not only help one another temporarily through much discomfort by forming cliques and by stereotyping themselves, their ideals, and their enemies, they also perversely test each other’s capacity to pledge fidelity (p. 262).

The integration of ego identity is more than the sum of what has been previously identified in childhood (Erickson, 1963). The adolescent mind, as described by Erickson, is essentially in *moratorium*, a psychological stage between morality learned in childhood and ethics developed in adulthood. The ideological mind of an adolescent seeks affirmation from peers, confirmation from teachers, and inspiration from worth-while life examples (Erikson, 1968). However, if an adolescent feels the environment deprives him or her of growth and integration to the next step, he or she may resist with strength similar to a wild animal defending its life.

Baumrind (1991) stated identity formation is the core developmental task of adolescence, and it involves negotiating the “transition between the literal safe reality of childhood and the more complex, intermediate reality of adulthood” (p. 114). Even though family is still important to the adolescent, as a socializing context the peer group becomes significantly more important. Consequently, it is developmentally appropriate for peer relationships to intensify during adolescence, as does the need for social approval from peers. This serves the important function

of creating a sense of self that is both separate from, and belonging to, a social group. In order to achieve identity and status within their peer group, adolescents may conform to standards that differ from adult norms.

### ***Peer Social Groups***

Adolescence is a time when peer groups become more important to youth as they seek independence from their parents, and they are more likely share their thoughts, feelings, and doubts with their friends rather than significant adults (Espelage & Holt, 2001). However, dependence on friends is combined with an increasing pressure to achieve social status with their peers. Adolescence is also a time when the larger peer population divides into smaller, more stratified groups, and teens strive to be popular and accepted within their circle of friends. Research has shown that social status improves for boys when they appear tough and aggressive, while appearance is an important social factor among girls (Espelage & Holt). Therefore, the pressure to acquire status or gain acceptance may be associated with increased bullying (i.e. name calling or teasing) during adolescence as a way to demonstrate superiority over others.

### **Implications of Adolescent Development on Bullying**

Adolescence is a stage within the life course when one experiences many biological, cognitive, and socio-emotional changes. Biological, cognitive, and socio-emotional processes do not function independently; but rather they are intricately woven together (Santrock, 2010). Socio-emotional processes affect cognitive processes; cognitive processes can either enhance or restrict socio-emotional processes, and biological processes directly influence cognitive processes.

Bullying impairs an individual's physical, mental, and social well-being, and victimization has been pervasively associated with poor psychosocial adaptation, health issues,

and problems adjusting in school (Matsunaga, 2009). Adolescents may be confused and unsure about the many changes they are facing during this stage in their lives, and the harmful effects of bullying only add to or complicate these issues. Peer groups become significantly important during adolescence, and it may be difficult for youth to confide in teachers or parents when they are victimized. Adolescent biological, cognitive, and socio-emotional development is important in understanding how youth physically mature, process thoughts and emotions, and make decisions in relationship to their roles as bullies, victims, or bystanders. Next, a review of the literature will examine the types, definitions and prevalence of bullying, bully, victim, and bully-victim profiles, and the roles of the bystander.

## **REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE**

Bullying is now considered a major public health threat among school-age children in the Western world, and the importance of focusing attention on school bullying was emphasized in a report published by the Surgeon General of the United States in 2001 (Klomek, Sourander, & Gould, 2010). Research suggests that bullying can occur in *any* school, although the degrees of severity will vary, as well as in other adult settings such as family homes, the workplace, prisons, and nursing homes (Smith & Brain, 2000). In these settings, bully-victim relationships may be considered normative in the sense that they be expected to occur; however, normative does not imply that bullying is socially acceptable.

Some individuals have pro-bullying attitudes and view it as a necessary part of growing up because they believe it builds character and prepares them for life (Smith & Brain, 2000). However, because of the evidence of harm to victims, who generally cannot defend themselves, most people view bullying as a vindictive act which needs to be countered.

What exactly is bullying? Do students, teachers, administrators, and parents think about bullying in the same way? For example, if a student told his or her parents that a classmate called him or her a hurtful name would that be considered bullying? Or, if two 8<sup>th</sup> grade boys on the playground got in a scuffle, is that a bullying behavior?

### **Types of Bullying**

A generation ago, students may have stated their greatest school worries were about passing tests or being promoted to the next grade, while students today are also concerned about their safety (Graham, 2006). There are many forms of bullying, and it occurs in both direct and indirect ways. Direct forms include physical bullying (i.e., pushing, hitting, or kicking) and verbal bullying (i.e., hurtful teasing, taunting, making threats, or name calling), while relational

bullying (i.e., spreading rumors, gossiping, sabotaging, or socially excluding others) is an indirect form of bullying (Wang et al., 2009).

Two other types of bullying in schools were outlined by The Newmours Foundation (n.d. as cited in Whitted & Dupper, 2005). Sexual bullying involves physically intrusive behaviors such as touching or grabbing private body parts and forcing sexual behaviors on others. Offensive sexual jokes, unwanted notes, rumors, pictures, and taunts are other types of sexual bullying. Racial bullying includes descriptive graffiti, racial slurs or offensive gestures, and ridiculing the victim's culture.

Wang, Iannotti, Luk, and Nansel (2010) referred to five subtypes of bullying: physical, verbal, social exclusion, spreading rumors, and cyberbullying. The first four subtypes were identified as *traditional* types of bullying. This was the first study to investigate the co-occurrence of the five sub-types of victimization using a nationally representative sample of American adolescents. The results of their study showed that the different types of victimization do co-occur, and they placed the patterns of victimization in a three-class model.

Class 1 included adolescents who were victims of all five subtypes, adolescents who experienced verbal or relational victimization were listed in Class 2, and Class 3 participants reported few experiences with any type of victimization. Adolescents in the first class reported more injuries, increased depression, and required more medication for sleeping disorders and nervousness than the second class, followed by those who had the least victimizing experiences. This significant finding showed that adolescents reported more physical and psychological distress as they endured higher levels of co-victimization (Wang et al., 2010).

### ***Cyberbullying***

There is a growing interest among researchers in cyberbullying as cell phone and internet

usage gains popularity with children and adolescents. Although cyberbullying is difficult to define, Dooley, Pyzalski, and Cross (2009) described it as a type of electronic bullying which recently has been intensely scrutinized by the media largely “due to a number of high profile and tragic cases of teen suicide” (p. 182). Mobile phone text messaging, e-mail, instant messaging, phone calls, websites, chatrooms, and picture/video clips (including “happy-slapping”—where victims are slapped and made to look silly by one individual, while filmed by another and then circulated on mobile phones) are electronic methods used to intentionally inflict harm on others (Smith, et al., 2008). Mesch (2009) stated a recent survey found that 87% of youth in the United States send or receive e-mails, 68% send or receive instant messages, 55% participate in online networking sites, 57% in video-sharing spaces, and 18% sign into chat rooms.

According to Smith et al. (2008), the most common form of cyberbullying involves phone calls, text messaging, and instant messaging on the internet. Unlike traditional bullying which occurs more often in school, cyberbullying occurs more often away from school because many schools restrict phone and internet usage. However, Smith et al. stated that even though messages are sent or received outside the school setting, in 57% of the cases the victim knew the perpetrator(s) was from his or her school and problems were likely to follow in school the next day. Banning cell phones or internet usage in schools may be a natural step in addressing cyberbullying, but it does not necessarily solve the problem.

Electronic equipment such as personal computers and cell phones offer several advantages to bullies (Patchin & Hinduja, 2006). First, the perpetrators can remain anonymous by falsely identifying themselves in chat rooms or participating in temporary e-mail accounts. Second, cybertechnology typically lacks supervision. Some chat rooms may have hosts policing the conversations, but messages sent by e-mails on the computer and text messages on cell

phones are typically uncensored. Also, many adolescents have access to computers in the privacy of their own bedrooms, and because teenagers tend to know more than their parents about computers, parents may be oblivious to any bullying activities. Patchin and Hinduja (2006) stated cybertechnology is available to bullies in almost any place and anytime, and since many adolescents have Internet access at home cyberbullying can occur outside the school premises. Furthermore, cyberbullying can be prolonged indefinitely by saving e-mails, archiving Web pages, and logging chat room conversations.

Recent studies have shown that victims of traditional bullying are at an increased risk for cyberbullying (Wang et al, 2010). An important aspect of Smith et al.'s (2008) study of secondary students in London showed that the majority of traditional victims who cyberbully had previously been traditional bully/victims. Student focus groups often believed that cyberbullies used technology to "have fun" with other students. This concept is often used by bullies to rationalize their behavior, as well as by bystanders, to explain the bully's behavior. If it is indeed fun to bully others, cyberbullying reduces the perpetrator's opportunity to see the victim's response, as well the bystander's opportunity to receive gratification (Smith et al.). However, cyberbullies may be rewarded by sharing their video clips or pictures with their peers, therefore amusing them and forming the wide audience that is typically found in cyberbullying.

### **Definition of Bullying**

When the campaign against bullying was initiated by the government in Norway 1983, Olweus (2010) stated there was an urgent need for a clear and restricted definition of bullying. By means of a student questionnaire on which bully/victim problems were recorded, the following definition was constructed: *A student is being bullied or victimized when he or she is exposed repeatedly and over time to negative actions on the part of one or more other students*

(Olweus 2010, p. 11; Olweus & Limber, 2010, p. 124).

Olweus's three criteria: (1) intention (behavior that inflicts discomfort or injury on another individual), (2) repetitiveness (exposure to negative or aggressive acts repeatedly and over time), and (3) imbalance of power (where the individual exposed to negative actions has difficulty defending himself or herself) are widely used among both practitioners and researchers (Smith & Brain, 2000). Rigby (2003) stated it is important to distinguish the imbalance of power because bullying does not occur when people of equal (or similar) power conflict; therefore, the effects of repeated threats or attacks by someone more powerful differ from those of equal power. For example, a conflict between two tenth grade boys differs from the power imbalance found between a tenth grade boy and a seventh grade boy who is likely to feel more helpless.

Olweus and Limber (2010) stated that bullying often occurs without apparent provocation by the victim. The above definition makes it clear that bullying can be viewed as a form of abuse, and sometimes the bullying phenomenon is labeled as *peer abuse*. The difference between abuse, such as domestic violence or child abuse, and bullying lies in the relationship between the involved parties and the context in which bullying occurs (Olweus & Limber).

According to Vandebosch and Cleemput (2009), there are discrepancies in the literature regarding the range and definition of bullying. Greene (2000, as cited in Vandebosch & Cleemput) found that some researchers have added two more features to Olweus's first three criteria: "(4) the victim does not provoke bullying behavior by using verbal or physical aggression; and (5) bullying occurs in familiar social groups" (p. 1350). Furthermore, earlier definitions regarding the range in bullying did not include a) social aggression, b) relational aggression, or c) indirect aggression.

## ***Kansas Anti-Bullying, Cyberbullying and Character Development Legislature***

As a part of the *2001 No Child Left Behind Act*, the Safe and Drug-Free Schools and Communities Act provides federal support to help promote school safety. Although the act does not specifically address harassment and bullying in schools, most states have laws addressing bullying (Olweus Bullying Prevention Program 2011). Bullying is defined in Kansas by Statute 72-8256, Chapter 72, Article 84 (Olweus Bullying Prevention Program, 2011, n. p.).

(1) "Bullying" means: (A) Any intentional gesture or any intentional written, verbal, electronic or physical act or threat that is sufficiently severe, persistent or pervasive that it creates an intimidating, threatening or abusive educational environment for a student or staff member that a reasonable person, under the circumstances, knows or should know will have the effect of:

- (i) Harming a student or staff member, whether physically or mentally;
- (ii) Damaging a student's or staff member's property;
- (iii) Placing a student or staff member in reasonable fear of harm to the student or staff member; or
- (iv) Placing a student or staff member in reasonable fear of damage to the student's or staff member's property;

(B) cyberbullying; or

(C) any other form of intimidation or harassment prohibited by the board of education of the school district in policies concerning bullying adopted pursuant to this section or subsection (e) of K.S.A. 72-8205, and amendments thereto.

(2) "Cyberbullying" means bullying by use of any electronic communication device through means including, but not limited to, e-mail, instant messaging, text messages,

blogs, mobile phones, pagers, online games and websites

(3) "School vehicle" means any school bus, school van, other school vehicle and private vehicle used to transport students or staff members to and from school or any school-sponsored activity or event.

(b) The board of education of each school district shall adopt a policy to prohibit bullying on or while utilizing school property, in a school vehicle or at a school-sponsored activity or event.

(c) The board of education of each school district shall adopt and implement a plan to address bullying on school property, in a school vehicle or at a school-sponsored activity or event. Such plan shall include provisions for the training and education for staff members and students.

(d) The board of education of each school district may adopt additional policies relating to bullying pursuant to subsection (e) of K.S.A. 72-8205, and amendments thereto.

Furthermore, K.S.A. 72-8256 requires every school in Kansas to have a bullying prevention policy as well as to provide bullying prevention training for staff and students. The policy must include the following:

- (1) A statement prohibiting bullying on school property or at school events,
- (2) A definition of bullying not less than that outlined in KSA Supp 72-8256 (2008),
- (3) Procedures for reporting bullying incidents,
- (4) A requirement for school personnel to report bullying incidents,
- (5) A requirement of notification to parents or guardians of students involved in an incident,

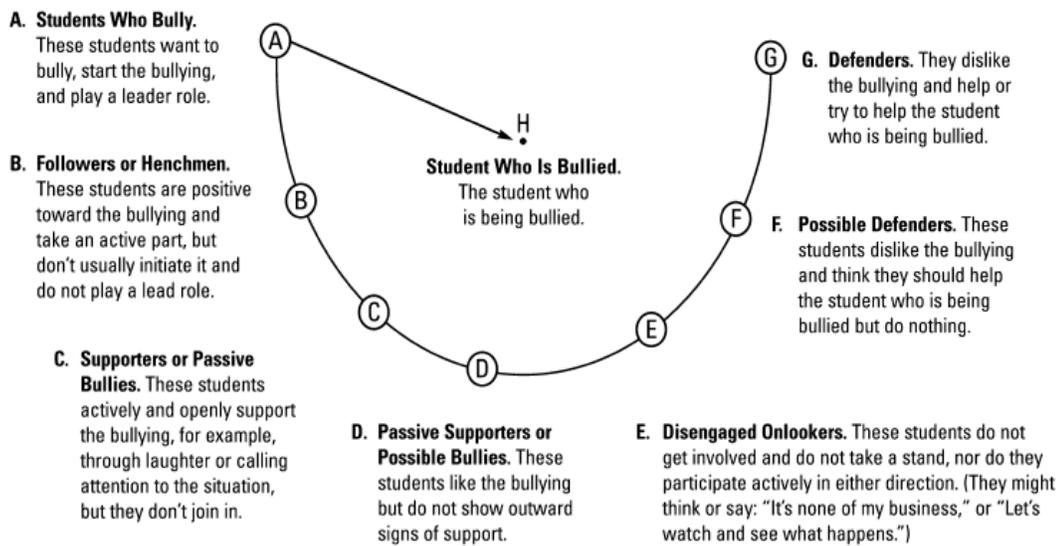
- (6) Procedures for documentation of reported incidents and responding to and investigating reported incidents,
- (7) A strategy for protecting victims from additional bullying and/or retaliation,
- (8) Disciplinary procedures for any student guilty of bullying, and (9) A requirement for confidentiality for any reported act of bullying.

### **Bully, Victim and Bully-Victim Profiles**

Adolescents experience major changes, both individually and within the family and especially during the middle school years, which places them at risk for potential problems with their peers (Wienke Totura et al., 2009). According to Toblin, Schwartz, Hopemeyer Gorman, and Abou-ezzeddine (2005), research has shown that a minority of children are chronically selected for verbal and physical abuse by their peers. Recent research on bullying challenges the notion that bullies and victims fall into a dichotomous bully or victim category (Espelage & Swearer, 2003). Rather, researchers argue that bullying behaviors are dynamic and occur on a continuum as bullies, victims, bully-victims and/or bystanders.

Some studies have found that bullies and victims are not as popular as other students (Salmivalli, Lagerspetz, Bjorkqvist, Osterman, & Kaukiainen, 1996), while others studies disagreed. When Espelage and Holt (2001) studied sixth through eighth grade students in a small midwestern school, they found that bullies were as popular and had as many friends as non-bullies indicating that bullies have a strong social network. However, after further examination, Espelage and Holt revealed significant differences between bullying and popularity. A strong correlation between the two variables was found in 6<sup>th</sup> grade male students; however, it fell considerably in 7<sup>th</sup> graders and was not significant for 8<sup>th</sup> grade male students. Perhaps, the majority of bullying for younger boys is an effective means of obtaining status.

The combination of individual personality traits, physical endurance in males, and attitudes or behaviors of adults in school settings play major roles in determining the degree to which problems will occur in a school (Olweus and Limber, 2010). Furthermore, the majority of bullying incidents involve children and adolescents other than the bully or the victim in both direct and indirect ways. Olweus described seven different roles in the bullying phenomenon as shown in the Bullying Circle:



*Figure 1.* Bullying circle.

**Figure 1. Bullying Circle.**

(Olweus and Limber, 2010, p. 125).

Boys and girls interpret and respond in different ways to their social settings, which may put them at an increased risk for bullying or being bullied (Wienke Totura et al., 2009). For example, two students may react very differently when they are teased by another student. One student might laugh and go along with the teasing, while another may be angered enough to throw a punch. Which students are more likely to bully others or to be bullied? Why do students stand by and not help the victim? Are children aware of their own participant role in the bullying

process? The following information shows there are some clear distinctions between bullies, victims, and bystanders.

### ***Gender***

Research consistently shows that boys have a higher prevalence rate to bully others than girls do (Bradshaw et al., 2009; Nansel et al, 2001; Smith et al., 2008; Wienke Totura et al., 2009). Furthermore, Wang et al. (2009) found that males and females differ in types of aggressive behavior. Boys are more likely to physically harm others (Baldry and Farrington, 2000) by engaging in physical, verbal, and cyberbullying (Wienke Totura et al). In contrast, girls are more likely to inflict psychological harm (Baldry and Farrington) by engaging in indirect forms of bullying such as social exclusion or spreading rumors (Wienke Totura et al.). Girls tend to ruminate about emotional events which may affect their level of internalizing behaviors, while boys lack control over their behaviors and manage them poorly.

While not as much is known about the characteristics of female bullies, male bullies are generally impulsive, tough, aggressive, outgoing, lack empathy, are fairly popular, and score below average in academic achievement (Baldry & Farrington, 2000). Furthermore bullies, unlike victims, are competent and have high self-esteem.

Salmivalli et al., (1996) referred to contrasting male/female social roles to explain the differences in aggression and in helping behaviors. Physical aggression is more common and also more acceptable in males; at times it is even expected. Peer acceptance requires that boys join in, to some degree, in rough play and bullying behaviors. Female social roles expect girls to be more nurturing and behave in caring and helpful ways. Also, girls tend to be more empathic and sensitive which explains why girls are more likely to help victims and less likely to bully others.

Although boys are far more likely than girls to bully others, the difference between the two is not as pronounced among victims (Smith, 2008; Wienke Totura et al., 2009). Girls tend to experience more distress, anxiety, depression, and anger when involved in negative peer relationships than boys do. Older boys in elementary school and younger adolescent males reported loneliness and psychological problems, but not as often as girls. Wilkins-Shurmer et al.'s (2003) study revealed that adolescent boys were rarely victimized by adolescent girls, while 18% of boys reported being bullied by another boy and 15.2% by more than one boy. In contrast, adolescent girls were bullied by both genders; 15.2% of girls reported being victimized by other girls, and 15.9% by boys.

Gender differences regarding cyberbullying were not as clear. Smith et al. (2008) stated that cyberbullying resembles indirect bullying because it does not involve face to face interactions. Therefore, girls may be more likely to engage in cyberbullying, but the technological aspects of cyberbullying may appeal more to boys. However, they found that girls were more likely to be victims than boys were, and when the cyberbullies were identified, they were more likely to be girls as well.

### *Age*

Developmental trends for bullying behaviors show the risk for involvement increases during the elementary years, peaks in middle school, and declines through the later years (Bradshaw et al., 2009; Espelage & Swearer, 2003; Wang et al., 2009). Bradshaw et al. reported elementary school students (32%) tend to be victimized more often than middle-school students (28%), and that the risk for involvement spikes during the transition between elementary and middle school and between middle and high school.

However, Smith et al. (2008), stated age trends may differ between traditional bullying

and cyberbullying because of its indirect and technological nature. Older students (15 years or older) were more aggressive internet users than younger students who were 10-14 years of age, and an increase in perpetrators, and possibly victims, were found in students 11-16 years of age.

Finally, some characteristics of bullying and victimization may change as children developmentally age. Craig et al. (2009) stated it is not unusual for young children to be both physically and verbally aggressive. However, as children grow older, verbal aggression increases while types of physical aggression decreases. Indirect forms of bullying, such as spreading rumors, gossiping, or excluding others, begin to appear as children age and develop social understanding.

### ***Race and ethnicity***

While students of every race and ethnic group are at risk for being bullied and bullying, the results for involvement were inconclusive. In a study of over 15,000 students in the United States, Nansel et al. (2001) found that Hispanic adolescents reported bullying others slightly more than Black or White students, while Black students reported being bullied less often than Hispanic or White students. Bradshaw et al., (2009) reported White middle school students were less likely to report bullying others; whereas Hispanic and African American students were less likely to report victimization (i.e., African American youth were 44% less likely to report being victimized than non African American students). Bullying and race/ethnicity relationships are complicated, and therefore, may be more influenced by the racial/ethnic settings of classrooms, schools and communities (Espelage & Swearer, 2003).

### ***Bully-victims***

Children who are both a bully and a victim are classified as bully-victims. Bully-victims are aggressive, rather than passive bullies, and research has shown they have the least amount of

positive psychological outcomes (Connors-Burrow, Johnson, Whiteside-Mansell, McKelvey, & Gargus, 2009). Bully-victims are similar to bullies; however, they victimize their peers in different ways. They tend to engage in physical aggression more often with their peers, are more impulsive, and have fewer aggressive goals than pure bullies.

According to Wolke and Samara (2004), bully-victims (who account for a third to half of elementary school bullies and a fourth of high school bullies) have the highest rate of psychiatric and behavioral problems compared to bullies or pure victims. Furthermore, Connors-Burrow et al. (2009) stated the literature has shown that bully-victims are not well liked by their peers, they do not have as many friends as pure bullies, and unlike pure victims, are at increased risks to be physically bullied. Nansel et al. (2001) stated it is not known whether bully-victims were youth who were victimized and then bullied others, or whether they were bullies who others retaliated against; however, current expert views support the first explanation.

### **Bystanders in the Bullying Phenomenon**

A large amount of the research on bullying has focused on the individual characteristics of victims, bullies, or bully/victims such as parenting styles, personality traits, and socio-emotional and cognitive abilities. More recently, research has extended beyond analyzing the characteristics of bullies and victims to examine the social context of bullying, and studies have shown that peers play an important role in the bullying phenomenon (Gini, Pozzoli, Borghi, & Franzoni, 2008). In fact, when a bullying incident occurs in school, most students not only know about it, they also witness it. However, if students are not present they still may know about it because, by definition, bullying repeatedly happens over time (Salmivalli et al., 1996).

Witnesses, spectators, and onlookers are terms used for *bystanders* who, although present, do not participate in the event (Stueve et al., 2006). In a school setting, bystanders are

typically thought to be students who witness a fight or some form of aggression. However, Stueve et al. stated this definition focuses on the “here and now” and fails to define situations in which bystanders had access to information such as changes in behaviors, overheard comments, or concealed threats.

Craig and Pepler (1997, as cited in Stueve et al., 2006) reported a bystander was present in as many as 85% of elementary school bullying incidents, while over half of bullying incidents had two or more witnesses. Bystanders in school bullying can also include adults such as teachers, parents, school counselors, bus drivers, or cafeteria workers who witness a wide range of aggressive acts and could possibly prevent them if they choose to intervene (Stueve et al.). Even though bystanders are not directly involved, many described the situation as unpleasant and reported feeling distressed, intimidated, and feared they may become targets as well (Whitted & Dupper, 2005).

### ***Bystander Roles***

Although bullies and victims each have definite roles in the bullying process, bystanders or significant “others” also play a part in the bullying phenomenon. Salmivalli et al. (1996) described three main participant roles by self and peer nominations in their study involving sixth-grade students in Finland. Approximately 17% of the students were classified as *defenders*, they “took sides” with the victim and actively tried to stop the bully, around 26% students “assisted or reinforced” the bully as *followers* by actively helping, laughing or providing an audience, and finally, the *outsiders*, the group who “did nothing” and stayed outside the bullying situation scored around 24%. The study found a significant difference among genders. Girls, compared to boys, were far more likely to be defenders (30.1% to 4.5%), and outsiders (40.2% to 7.3%), while boys outnumbered girls 37.3% to 1.7% as reinforcers and 12.2 to 1.4% as assistants.

In their study, Stueve et al., (2006) stated adolescent bystanders can actively or passively foster bullying in peers. Because they often sympathize with the bully, active bystanders promote violence by serving as accomplices, encouraging aggressive behaviors, or by preventing others from stepping in and helping the victim. They may also dare their friends to follow through with their threats. While passive bystanders do nothing to start or encourage bullying, they also do nothing to prevent it. Furthermore, when bystanders are present, bullies may feel more pressure to demonstrate their power or defend their honor. Passive bystanders may also send the message that bullying is acceptable. These distinctions can significantly help in understanding the dynamics of bullying and the characteristics of each individual involved.

### ***Attitudes in Relationship to Bystanders***

Past studies on attitudes towards bullying have found that although the majority of children reject bullies and sympathize with victims, a significant minority of children (around 15-20%) viewed bullies as *macho stereotypes* (Gini et al., 2008). These children admire and defend the bully's behavior and refer to victims as being weak. Girls, who tend to be more supportive and emphatic, are more likely to have positive attitudes towards victims than boys who may think victims deserve what they get. Furthermore, in their study in Northern Italy, Gini et al. found that as students aged, their attitudes towards victims became more negative, and the number of students who regarded victims as being weak increased.

While most students disapprove of bullying or say they do not understand why someone would bully another, how they behave in bullying situations matters more than their attitudes towards bullying (Salmivalli et al., 1996). For example, when bystanders ignore the situation, bullies may likely interpret this as a form of approval. Social influences, peer expectations, dispersion of responsibilities, and other group components contribute to the pervasiveness of

bullying (Gini et al., 2008). Therefore, preadolescents seem to be more influenced by what their peers do in bullying situations than by their own thoughts and actions. Finally, Caravita, Blasio, and Salmivalli (2008) stated past studies have shown distinguishing factors associated with bullying help in understanding why peers rarely side with the victim regardless of anti-bullying attitudes—peers tend to support bullies who are popular, powerful, or socially intelligent enough to manipulate others.

### **Prevalence of Bullying and Victimization**

Surveys conducted in 1983 on 130,000 Norwegian students provided the earliest estimates on the prevalence of bullying (Olweus and Limber (2010). In his research in Norway, Olweus found that 15% of students (or one out of seven students) in grades three through ten were involved in bully/victim problems on a regular basis, either as victims (9%), as bullies (6-7%), or as bully/victims (1.5%). Two disturbing trends were found in Olweus's large-scale survey in 2001: the percentage of students (a) who were bullied at least two or three times a month had increased approximately 50%, and (b) who were involved in bullying or being bullied at least once a week had increased by 65%.

Recent studies have indicated that approximately 20% to 30% of school-aged children in the United States have been involved in some type of bullying behavior (Klomek et al., 2008; Klomek et al., 2010; Olweus & Limber, 2010). Childhood bullying and victimization behaviors can be assessed by the individuals themselves, or by peers, teachers, parents, or a combination of these groups (Klomek et al.).

Nansel et al., (2001) surveyed over 15,000 public and private school adolescent students throughout the United States in 1998, and of the total sample, 29% were involved in school bullying: 13% as bullies, 10.6% as victims, and 6.3% as bully/victims. In a nationally

representative sample of over 7,000 students in sixth through tenth grades in the United States, 12.8% of students reported they were physically bullied, 36.5% were verbally bullied, and 41% reported social or relational bullying (Wang et al., 2009).

It is important to note that prevalence rates are largely influenced by definitions and criteria attached to bullying behaviors (Klein & Cornell, 2010). Disparities in rates can result from researchers using different time frames in (i.e., bullying in the past year versus bullying in the past month) and different levels of frequency (i.e. how often victimization occurred). Another problem may occur when bullying surveys do not include criteria that distinguish the power imbalance between bullies and victims. For example, students may simply be asked if they have experienced forms of peer aggression that simulate bullying, (i.e., exclusion from peer groups, being hit, or teased). These types of studies may more likely fall under the more extensive category of peer victimization. Finally, Klein and Cornell stated some studies may not align the definition of bullying to a single question, but rather ask students many questions about physical, verbal, and social types of aggression.

In a recent study, Wang et al., (2010) measured victimization experiences by using the 1996 Revised Olweus Bully/Victim Questionnaire. The following information presented below is one example of how victimization and bullying is defined for students in a survey:

(1) physical victimization: “being hit, kicked, pushed, shoved around, or locked indoors,”

(2) verbal victimization: (a) “being called mean names, made fun of, or teased in a hurtful way,” (b) “being called mean names and comments about race or color,” and (c) “being called mean names and comments about religion,”

(3) social exclusion: “being left out of things on purpose, being excluded from their group of friends, or completely ignored,”

(4) victimization by rumor spreading: “being the target of other students’ lies or false rumors,”

(5) cyber victimization: “being bullied by others using computers, e-mails messages, and pictures:, and “being bullied by others using cell phones,”

(6) Response options were “I have not been bullied in this way in the past couple of months,” “only once or twice,” “2 or 3 times a month,” “about once a week,” and “several times a week.” (p. 1105).

### **The Impact of Bullying**

Although academic performance is the primary focus for students, their social and emotional well-being is important as well. Therefore, it is important to understand how issues involving bullying and victimization affect both learning and social-emotional adjustment among adolescents. According to Mishna, Weiner, and Pepler (2008), when bullying occurs within the friendship network, there is clear evidence that it causes physical harm, is socially isolating, and psychologically damaging to all those involved (bullies, victims, and bystanders). Furthermore, a reduction in academic achievement is found when bullying occurs frequently, especially in girls (Wilkins-Shurmer, et al., 2003).

Decades of research confirm that exposure to bullying is likely to seriously affect children and adolescents in a number of ways. According to Murray-Harvey and Slee (2010), victimization is significantly correlated with social/emotional adjustment problems in school, adverse psychological health problems, poor coping strategies, and poor academic performances. Nansel et al., (2001) found that bullies were more likely to be involved in harmful behaviors such as smoking and drinking. Victims of bullying have reported long-term academic, emotional, and behavioral problems (Whitted & Dupper, 2005), and many childhood and

adolescent problems associated with bullying may continue into early or middle adulthood (Olweus & Limber, 2010).

More specifically, children who are bullied can suffer from a list of physical and psychological disorders such as anxiety, social isolation, poor self-esteem (Olweus & Limber, 2010); insomnia, bed-wetting, headaches, stomach aches (Wilkins-Shumer et al., 2003); emotional and behavioral problems (Bowes, Maughan, Caspi, Moffitt, & Arseneault, 2010); loneliness, feelings of unhappiness, disliking school, fear of going to school (Kaltiala-Heino, Rimpela, Rantanen, & Rimpela, 2000); truancy and school drop-out (Whitted & Dupper, 2005). In addition, studies have linked bullying and peer victimization to depression (Hawker & Boulton, 2000; Kaltiala-Heino, Frojd & Marttunen, 2010; Klomek, Marrocco, Kleinman, Schonfeld, & Gould 2007); suicide ideation (Hinduja & Patchin, 2010; Klomek et al.); and suicide attempts (Hinduja & Patchin; Klomek et al.). Hinduja and Patchin stated a recent phenomenon termed, *cyberbullicide*, has been identified in several high-profile cases involving teen suicides which were directly or indirectly associated with on-line harassment.

Klomek et al. (2007) found that victimization and bullying occurred more often during school hours than away from school, and students who were involved, either as a victim or as a bully (in or out of school), were more likely to experience depression, serious suicidal ideation (SSI), and suicide attempts more than students who were never victims or bullies. In fact, students who were often victimized, either in or out of school, were seven times more likely to experience depression than students who never had been bullied, and students who bullied others frequently, in or out of school, experienced depression three times as often as non-bullies. However, Hinduja and Patchin (2010) stated:

It should be acknowledged that many of the teenagers who committed suicide after

experiencing bullying or cyberbullying had other emotional and social issues going on in their lives. It is unlikely that experience with cyberbullying *by itself* leads to youth suicide. Rather, it tends to exacerbate instability and hopelessness in the minds of adolescents already struggling with stressful life circumstances (p. 217).

Rigby (2003) identified four categories of negative health consequences related to the consequences of bullying:

1. Low psychological well-being, meaning that an individual's state of mind is considered unpleasant but not necessarily distressing.
2. Poor social adjustment which includes feelings of aversion towards social environments, as seen in a dislike for school, absenteeism, or individuals who isolate themselves.
3. Psychological distress which is more serious than the above categories and includes depression, high levels of anxiety, and suicidal ideation.
4. Physical unwellness, including psychosomatic symptoms, and evident in medically diagnosed illnesses (p. 584).

### ***Which Comes First: Health Symptoms or Victimization?***

Fekkes, Pijpers, Fredriks, Vogels, and Verloove-Vanhorick (2006) questioned whether victimization preceded health problems or whether health problems were present before students were bullied. They stated past studies have suggested that the stress involved in bullying has been associated with increases in health problems, while others hypothesized that children who were depressed or anxious were at an increased risk for victimization.

Fekkes et al. (2006) studied over 1000 students (ages 9 to 11) in a longitudinal study in the Netherlands and found that those who were bullied early in the school year were at a higher

risk for health-related problems over the course of the year. However, they also found that students who started school with depression or anxiety experienced higher rates of victimization later on. They reasoned that depressed or anxious students may be more vulnerable and easier targets for bullies because they are not as likely to defend themselves. Therefore, bullies may not be as likely to fear retaliation from depressed or anxious peers which makes them easier to be victimized.

Based on converging empirical and theoretical perspectives, Hawker and Boulton (2000) stated victims may be subjected to more psychological problems than nonvictims for two reasons. First, social and psychological experiences, such as physical victimization, play a primary role in developing depression and other psychosocial problems such as anxiety and low self-esteem. Second, specific types of psychosocial problems (i.e., anxiety, depression, low self-esteem, or loneliness) are positively linked with difficulties in peer relationships (such as social isolation, unpopularity in peer groups, or compliancy) which in turn, are positively associated with peer victimization.

### ***Cyberbullying***

According to Patchin and Hinduja (2006), cyberbullying is viewed as a problem only to the point that it inflicts harm towards the victim. Unlike traditional bullying, a victim of bullying in cyberspace can escape from peer harassment (i.e., shutting the cell phone off, deleting e-mail messages, or avoiding facebook), and is protected from the bully by geographical distance. However, Patchin and Hinduja stated that if social acceptance is important to the adolescent's identity and self-esteem, "cyberbullying can capably and perhaps more permanently wreak psychological, emotional, and social havoc" (p. 155). In fact, some victims may prefer a physical beating in place of the psychological pain they experience from cyberbullying because physical wounds might heal faster.

### ***Learning Disorders Related to Bullying***

Previous studies have found that children who struggle with learning disorders are at risk for victimization or social isolation in mainstream schools (Wilkins-Shurmer, et al., 2003). Swearer, Espelage, Vaillancourt, and Hymel (2010) stated that one study found as high as 94% of students with disabilities reported they were victims of bullying. These students endured verbal abuse (i.e., teasing, name-calling, and ridiculing the disability), physical abuse, and were excluded from others. In contrast, other studies have found that students with disabilities were more likely to bully others than were students without disabilities (Swearer et al.). As a consequence of being bullied, students with disabilities may develop aggressive traits as a way to overcome their victimization.

### **Bullying as an Global Problem**

Bullying and victimization is a global concern that affects a large number of adolescents in many countries beyond the United States (Craig et al., 2009). In fact, the majority of studies on bullying have been conducted in Europe and Australia (Nansel et al., 2001). The prevalence of bullying in the United States is similar to that in Australia, the United Kingdom, and Scandinavia; however international comparisons have been restricted due to “the difficulties in translating the word ‘bullying’ into other languages” (Wilkins-Shurmer et al., 2003, p. 436).

Craig et al. (2009) surveyed over 200,000 eleven to fifteen year old students in a large cross-sectional study involving 40 countries. The results of this study found that 26% of the students had been involved in some type of bullying behavior two to three times, or more, each month in three categories: 10.7% as bullies, 12.6% as victims, and 3.6% as bully/victims. Boys, in all age categories, reported higher bullying rates than girls, while girls reported higher rates of victimization in most of the countries. The prevalence of involvement in the three categories for

boys ranged from 8.6% in Sweden to 45.2% in Lithuania and from 4.8% in Sweden to 35.8% in Lithuania among girls.

Eastern European countries reported higher bullying and victimization rates than northwestern European (mainly Scandinavian) countries (Craig et al., 2009). Seven countries in order, Lithuania, Latvia, Greece, Greenland, Romania, Turkey, and Ukraine were in the “top 10” countries who reported the highest victimization rates for both boys and girls. Nine of the top ten countries in order, Latvia, Estonia, Greece, Lithuania, Romania, Greenland, Ukraine, Russia, and Australia, reported the highest rates of bullying among both genders. Bullying rates were found to be the lowest in both genders in eight of the bottom 10 countries, Hungary, Norway, Ireland, Finland, Sweden, Ireland, Czech Republic, and Wales.

The large discrepancies found in the three categories of bullying between the countries (fivefold for boys and sevenfold for girls) may reflect cultural and social differences in bullying or variations in how national programs and policies are implemented (Olweus & Limber, 2010). For example, countries with low prevalence rate, such as Scandinavia, had national bullying prevention programs already in place, while countries with higher prevalence rates in eastern Europe did not have programs campaigning against bullying (Craig et al., 2009).

Finally, both boys and girls in 50% of the countries in Craig et al's., (2009) study reported decreasing victimization rates as students increased in age, while similar trends were not found in the other half of the countries. Factors that may influence age differences in bullying include physical, cognitive, and psychological development, academic pressures, and changes in social activities and skills. The results of this study revealed that bullying involvement is widespread and not limited by cultural or geographic boundaries.

## **School Context in Bullying**

Schools in the United States are important settings for developing children and adolescents because that is where they spend nearly one-half of their time when they are awake (Brookmeyer et al., 2006). Furthermore, the school context plays an important role in aggressive behavior, because the social climate in a school can either encourage or diminish bullying behaviors (Wienke Totura et al., 2009). Although more research is needed on how teachers influence bullying and victimization behaviors, their role in the school's structure and value system is important.

According to Wienke Totura et al. (2009), teachers and students play an important role in diminishing aggression when they can agree on norms that discourage aggressive behavior. In contrast, when teachers and students tolerate aggressive behavior, they help to create a school environment that records higher rates of bullying. Murray-Harvey and Slee (2010) found supportive school relationships have a direct association on reduced rates of bullying and psychological problems and an indirect association with reduced rates of non-effective coping strategies and victimization. Lower elementary grade school students were more connected to their peers, teachers, and families compared to older students who viewed these relationships as more stressful.

### ***Bullying and School Size***

There is a general perception that schools with larger enrollments experience more violence and misbehavior among students than do smaller schools (Bradshaw et al., 2009; Klein & Cornell, 2010). Smaller sized classrooms seem to exhibit warmer, more personal environments, in which teachers have fewer students to monitor and supervise. Students in smaller schools may have more opportunities to be involved in school activities, such as sports or

leadership positions, which may give more students more opportunities to be recognized and to feel valued (Klein & Cornell).

Furthermore, peer groups may not be as diverse in smaller schools which may lead to fewer conflicts among students. Fewer incidences of negative social behavior (i.e., aggressive behavior, truancy, gang participation, classroom disruption, and substance abuse) occur in smaller schools (Klein & Cornell, 2010). In contrast, larger schools are believed to have more impersonal environments which lead students to feel less connected or safe and more likely to engage in aggressive behavior (Bradshaw et al., 2009).

However, the perception that larger schools experience more violence than smaller schools may be misleading. While searching for a link between the two variables, Klein and Cornell (2010) did not find any correlation between school enrollment size and *student-reported* rates of victimization, threats or attacks. As expected, higher incidences of bullying and teasing were reported by teachers and students in larger schools, although the discrepancy may be explained simply because there are more students in larger schools which provide more observable opportunities for bullying, not because the rate is higher.

Klein and Cornell (2010) stated the rate of bullying recorded by *school records* actually decreased as school enrollment increased which clearly contradicts the perception that students in larger schools are at greater risk for victimization. One possibility for this may be that bullying incidences are not as likely to be detected because it is more difficult to monitor students or enforce rules at larger schools. Or, it may be that school principals can only deal with so many discipline cases in a day in larger schools, therefore less serious infractions may be overlooked or handled in ways that are not formally recorded.

Small rural districts can no longer assume that violence is only an inner-city issue or that

they are immune to it (Skiba & Peterson, 2000). Studies have shown that bullying can occur in *any* school (Smith & Brain, 2000); therefore a better predictor of a school environment may be found in the ratio of the numbers of students to teachers, rather than in the size of the school (Bradshaw et al., 2009). More opportunities for bullying are likely to occur in schools where the student-teacher ratio is higher because it can be more difficult for teachers to effectively monitor student behavior (Koth, et al., 2008).

According to Wienke Totura et al., (2009), the association between externalizing and bullying behaviors was moderated when students observed adult monitoring in schools. High externalizing behaviors foretold bullying behaviors in schools where less adult monitoring occurred, and it appeared that greater adult supervision protected students.

### **School Programs Directed at Bullying**

Many prevention programs have been implemented in the attempt to reduce violence and to ensure safety in schools (Black, Washington, Trent, Harner, & Pollock, 2010). However, some of the most popular and widely used programs are ineffective (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2001, as cited in Black et al.) because many programs fail to incorporate theoretical knowledge or basic adolescent development into their prevention strategies (Black et al.). For example, many people support zero tolerance programs because they strongly forbid any type of violence (see below). However, Kajs (2006) stated zero tolerance policies are rarely implemented with common sense, and can create counterproductive results impeding the educational purposes for which they were intended. Furthermore, many students who committed offenses were not considered dangerous in their school environments.

Interventions that are effective in solving conflict among children may not be as effective in reducing bullying in schools because bullying differs from other forms of violence (Whitted &

Dupper, 2005). Bullying behaviors involve an imbalance of power, rather than a lack of social skills; therefore, strategies such as peer mediation, conflict resolution, and group therapy, aimed at increasing self-esteem, have not been found to be effective. Bullies engage in manipulative behaviors that require highly advanced social skills; they plan and anticipate how their victims will react and proceed in ways that are oblivious to adults (Whitted & Dupper). Since bullying behaviors are encouraged by social reinforcers (i.e. peer audiences) and tangible reinforcers (i.e. video clips), it is important to recognize these factors when developing and implementing effective bullying interventions.

### ***Zero Tolerance School Policies***

Without a doubt, schools have a responsibility to provide a safe learning environment because children cannot learn and teachers cannot teach in a chaotic, disruptive atmosphere (American Psychological Association (APA) Zero Tolerance Task Force, 2008). Although it is unlikely that anyone would argue with this notion, the methods used to provide a safe learning environment are very controversial. The *zero tolerance* philosophy was originally developed as a response to drug enforcement and has been highly endorsed across the nation in schools since the early 1990s (APA Zero Tolerance Task Force). When discipline is warranted, zero tolerance policies apply “a one-size-fits-all solution” (Chalk Talk, 2001, as cited in Kajs, 2006, p. 20).

Zero tolerance policies authorize schools to apply predetermined consequences, which are often severe and penalizing, to behaviors or circumstances regardless of the level of the infraction (APA Zero Tolerance Task Force, 2008). Zero tolerance policies assume that by removing a disruptive student, a more positive environment will be created and other students will be deterred from disruption. However, the controversy over zero tolerance policies in schools occurs during the implementation process (APA Zero Tolerance Task Force). For

example, Rice (2003, as cited in Kajs, 2006) stated:

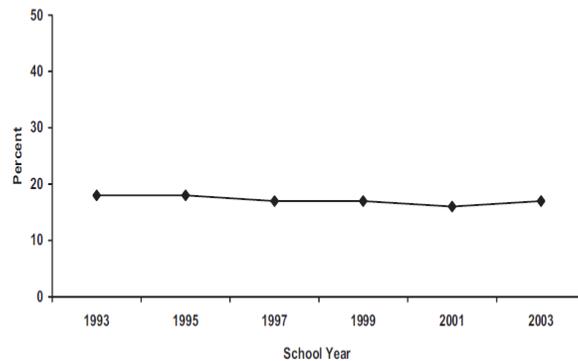
A 13-year old eighth-grade honor student was removed as student council president, ousted from the honor society, and required to attend a disciplinary class for seven days because she brought a pencil sharpener to school. The girl's mother bought the pencil sharpener in South Korea for her daughter. The sharpener had a two-inch blade folded into a handle, the kind that is used by students in South Korea (and had been used by the mother as a student). School authorities applied zero tolerance discipline in the case. The student's parents filed a suit in federal court, contending that due process was not provided (p.17).

In an era of educational accountability, the APA Zero Tolerance Task Force (2008) stated it is important to examine any widely implemented research-based policy, philosophy, or practice that contributes to educational goals. Therefore, the American Psychological Association commissioned the Zero Tolerance Task Force to examine the behavioral effects regarding zero tolerance school policies. Some of key findings in their review included:

(1) Incidents of critical and deadly violence remain a relatively small proportion of school disruptions, and the data have consistently indicated that school violence and disruption have remained stable, or even decreased somewhat since 1985 (p. 853).

Below is a figure that supports this statement:

**Figure 1**  
Percentage of Students in Grades 9–12 Who Reported Having Been in a Physical Fight During the Previous 12 Months on School Property: 1993 to 2003



Note. Adapted from *Indicators of school crime and safety: 2004* [U.S. Departments of Education and Justice, NCES 2005-002/NCJ 205290, p. 19] by J. F. DeVoe et al., 2004, Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office.

**Figure 2. Percentage of Students in Grades 9-12 Who Reported Having Been in a Physical Fight During the Previous 12 Months on School Property: 1993 to 2003.**

(American Psychological Association (APA) Zero Tolerance Task Force, 2008, p. 853).

- (2) Consistency, often defined as treatment integrity or fidelity, is an important criterion in the implementation of any behavioral intervention. There is no evidence, however, that zero tolerance has increased the consistency of school discipline (p. 854).
- (3) A key assumption of zero tolerance policy is that the removal of disruptive students will result in a safer climate for others. Although the assumption is strongly intuitive, data on a number of indicators of school climate have shown the opposite effect, that is, schools with higher rates of school suspension and expulsion appear to have *less* satisfactory ratings of school climate, to have less satisfactory school governance structures, and to spend a disproportionate amount of time on disciplinary matters (p. 854).

(4) Finally, a growing body of developmental research indicates that certain characteristics of secondary schools often are at odds with the developmental challenges of adolescence, including the need for close peer relationships, autonomy, support from adults other than one's parents, identity negotiation, and academics self-efficacy. Used inappropriately, zero tolerance policies may exacerbate both the normative challenges of early adolescence and the potential mismatch between the adolescent's developmental stage and the structure of secondary schools (p. 855).

There is no question that it is the duty of every school to provide a safe and positive learning environment for its students. However, evidence has shown that zero tolerance policies are not an effective system regarding school discipline. According to the APA Zero Tolerance Task Force (2008), effective school discipline programs need to include *primary prevention strategies* for all students, *secondary prevention strategies* for students at risk for violence or disruption, and *tertiary strategies* for students who have already been involved in disruptive or violent behaviors. The full task force reports found bullying prevention programs have been an effective primary prevention strategy in reducing the risk of disruption or violent behavior.

### ***Effective School Strategies***

Whitted and Dupper (2005) stated that researchers have gained valuable information on effective and non-effective bullying prevention programs due to many years of study. They found that school-based prevention programs were most successful when they looked beyond the individual child and focused on changing the climate and culture of the school. For example, successful programs incorporated broad, multilevel strategies that were directed at not only victims, but on bullies, families, bystanders, and whole communities.

Furthermore, Whitted and Dupper (2005) reported one very common mistake in many

prevention programs is the inability to fully implement the program because of time limitations. Also, modified programs may result in less effective interventions or in no change at all. Finally, it is important to implement school-based programs in the primary grades, because bullying among young children may lead to more violent behaviors as children age.

In understanding prevention in schools (i.e. bullying), it is important to consider both adolescent individual characteristics and how the school environment helps youth to be successful (Brookmeyer et al., 2006). However, there are many social contexts integrated in the adolescence stage, and Swearer et al. (2010) contended that a social-ecological framework helps in understanding the bullying phenomenon in schools.

### **Bio-ecological Model of Human Development**

Bronfenbrenner's (1979) bio-ecological model recognizes that human development involves transactions between growing human beings and factors in the environmental settings in which they interact. The developing person has an effect on changing environmental factors, and in turn, the environment exerts its influences on the individual in a reciprocal relationship.

Bronfenbrenner (1979; 1986) identified five system levels:

*Microsystem:* the roles, activities, and personal characteristics of the developing child,

*Mesosystem:* the interrelations between two or more settings (i.e., home and school),

*Exosystem:* one or more settings in which the developing person is not directly involved, but is affected by what happens in the setting (i.e., school board decisions),

*Macrosystem:* cultural values and belief systems that influence the individual,

*Chronosystem:* normative or non-normative transitions that occur in life, including many transitions that occur over the life span (i.e., starting school or winning the lottery).

Of the five system levels, Bronfenbrenner (1986) recognized that the family is the

primary setting where human development occurs, however, developmental processes occur in other settings as well because these processes are not independent of each other. For example, events at school can affect how a child interacts at home, and events at home can affect how a child performs in school. From Bronfenbrenner's bio-ecological perspective, bullying is an ecological phenomenon that is "established and perpetrated over time as a result of the complex interplay between inter- and intra-individual variables" (Espelage & Swearer, 2003, p. 372). A large amount of research has been conducted on bullying; however, a variety of ecological processes affect the bullying phenomenon, (i.e., peers, family members, bystanders, teachers, school and cultural environments, and community factors).

Brookmeyer et al. (2006) used an ecological approach to investigate how the combination of schools, parents, and adolescent characteristics contributed to changes in violent behavior over a period of time. They found that (a) students engaged in fewer incidents of violent behavior when they felt connected to their school, (b) violent behavior increased when students were exposed to prior violent incidences, (c) family and school connectedness were potential protective factors shielding adolescents from the effects of violent behavior (however, when students did not feel connected to school, parent connectedness did not provide protective services), and (d) it is important to understand how the multiple social settings in the adolescent's environment interact together and influence outcomes.

Epstein (1983a, 1983b, as cited in Bronfenbrenner, 1986) examined how family and classroom processes impacted approximately 1,000 eighth-grade students' attitudes and academic achievement during the transition between middle and high school. Epstein found:

Children from homes or classrooms affording greater opportunities for communication and decision-making not only exhibited greater initiative and independence after entering

high school, but also received higher grades. Family processes are considerably more powerful in producing change than are classroom procedures. School influences were nevertheless effective, especially for pupils from families who had not emphasized intergenerational communication in the home or the child's participation in decision-making. The effects of family and school processes were greater than those attributable to socioeconomic status or race (p. 727).

If family processes are indeed more powerful in producing change than classroom procedures, should there be a greater emphasis on family involvement in the bullying process?

# **THE PARENT'S ROLE IN REDUCING THE EFFECT OF BULLYING**

Research has shown that over a third (Fekkes, Pijpers, & Verloove-Vanhorick, 2005) and up to a half (Mishna et al., 2008) of parents did not know their child had been bullied, and many fail to support or protect their children when they are being bullied (Matusnaga (2009).

Furthermore, many parents do not know what to do to when their child has been bullied, and may react in ways that might be harmful (Wassdorp, Bradshaw, & Duong, 2011). Some parents may talk directly to their child (the most common response), their teachers, administrators, or school counselors, while some parents confront the bully or the bully's parents. However, talking to the bully or the bully's parents may actually make the situation worse in certain situations (Wassdorp et al.).

Swearer et al. (2006) stated that parenting styles and sibling relationships help explain how family dynamics are connected to bullying. Why are some children more likely to be bullies than other children? Do bullies share common family traits? The following information provides some insight into family characteristics of bullies.

## ***Parental Styles and Families of Bullies and Victims***

Generally, bullies have authoritarian parents (Ahmed & Braithwaite, 2004) who lack warmth, are less supportive, tend to disagree with each other, and use power-assertive methods to discipline their children (Baldry & Farrington, 2000; Bradshaw et al., 2009). Studies have shown that parents who combine physical punishment with inconsistent discipline techniques were more likely to have aggressive children (Bowers, Smith, & Binney, 1992). These authors argued that children who were exposed to role models of bullying and aggression and who lacked effective parental monitoring developed aggressive behaviors. According to Bandera's

social learning theory, parents can directly influence their children through social reinforcement and modeling behaviors and indirectly with personal attitudes and perceptions (Wienke Totura et al., 2009).

Children who reside in less than adequate home environments and who experience less school bonding have a higher risk of engaging in a bullying behavior, as a victim, a bully, or both (Wienke Totura et al., 2009). Disengaged family systems were more likely to produce bullies (Bowers et al., 1992). Parents who are overprotective and inhibit autonomy development, more so in boys, and who are threatening, intimidating, or intrusive, especially to girls, place their children at risk for internalizing problems, such as depression and anxiety, and later for victimization (Wienke Totura et al.).

Past studies have found that authoritarian parents (high in demandingness and low in responsiveness) were more likely to produce bullies, while permissive parents (low in demandingness and high in responsiveness) were more likely to have children who were victims (Georgiou, 2008). In contrast, Bowers et al. (1992) stated victimized children reported having overprotective mothers. Other studies have linked bullying and victimization in children to parental abuse (i.e., physical, emotional, and sexual) and neglect because maltreatment promotes emotional dysfunctions (Swearer et al., 2006).

Wolke and Samara's (2004) cross-sectional study in Israel involving over 900 students in the 7<sup>th</sup> through 9<sup>th</sup> grades investigated victimization by siblings and its association with bullying at school and behavioral problems. The authors found that children who were bullied by their brothers or sisters were at an increased risk (3.1 to 3.6 times) to have behavioral problems compared to children who had warm sibling relationships. Furthermore, children who were victimized by siblings were far more likely to be involved in bullying incidents at school than children who were not bullied by siblings.

Finally, families that lack warmth and support tend to produce boys who bully and girls who are both bullies and victims (Wienke Totura et al., 2009). In contrast, cohesive families, those with high levels of warmth and low levels of hostility, may not be as likely to have a child who is either victimized or bullied (Bowers et al., 1992).

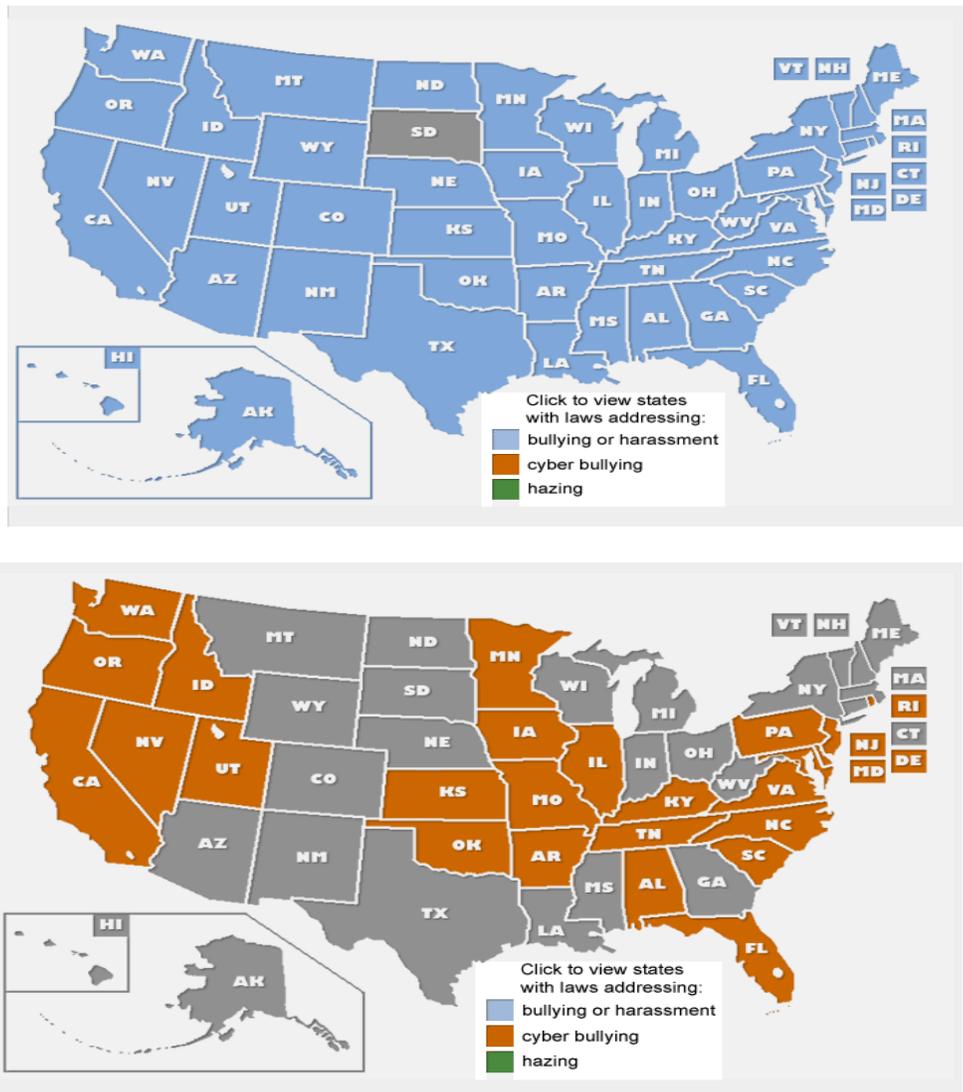
### ***Parental Responses to Bullying***

According to Swearer et al., (2006), there has been less research conducted on how parents respond to bullying than on how families affect bullies and victims. Although the media frequently reports on parental attempts to talk to school personal, parents are likely to transfer their children to another school or seek legal action if they think the school is not responding effectively to their needs.

Several factors that may influence parental responses to bullying include the child's ethnicity and gender (Waasdorp et al., 2011). According to the authors, past studies have implied that cultural differences influence how individuals perceive their environments and experiences, thus cultural differences may influence how ethnic minorities perceive bullying and victimization. Furthermore, ethnic minority parents may also perceive bullying and victimization in different ways. For example, non-White parents are not as involved as other parents in school activities which may be attributed to language barriers or differences in cultural values. This disconnection may lead to poor communication between the parents and the school; therefore, minority parents may be less likely to contact the school when their child is victimized. Furthermore, parents may think that bullying is more harmful for their daughters than their sons, or they may expect their sons to be tough and not ask for their assistance.

## It Takes a Village to Reduce Bullying

Daniel Olweus has invested years of research and time into reducing bullying in schools and in improving school climates. According to the *Olweus Bullying Prevention Program* (2011), the majority of states have laws in place to address hazing, bullying, and harassment in schools. The figures below highlights which states address bullying or harassment, and which states address cyberbullying:



**Figure 3. State and Federal Bullying Information**

(Olweus, 2011). Retrieved from [http://www.olweus.org/public/bullying\\_laws.page](http://www.olweus.org/public/bullying_laws.page).

Furthermore, the *Olweus Bullying Prevention Program* (2011) stated:

The *Olweus Bullying Prevention Program* (2011) has been more thoroughly evaluated than any other bullying prevention/reduction program so far. Six large-scale evaluations involving more than 40,000 students produced the following documented results:

- Average reductions of up to 50 percent in student reports of being bullied and bullying others. Peer and teacher ratings of bullying problems have yielded roughly similar results.
- Marked reductions in student reports of general antisocial behavior, such as vandalism, fighting, theft, and truancy.
- Clear improvements in the classroom social climate, as reflected in students' reports of improved order and discipline, more positive social relationships, and more positive attitudes toward schoolwork and school.

For students in grades 4–7, most of these positive results can be seen after only eight months of intervention work, given reasonably good implementation of the program.

For students in grades 8–10, it may take somewhat more time, maybe two years, to achieve equally good results (n. p.).

However, research has shown that it is best when intervention and prevention programs involve all levels of the ecological system including the students involved in the bullying continuum (i.e., bully, victim, bystander), the families, the schools and the whole community (Espelage and Swearer (2003).

## **What More Can Be Done to Reduce Bullying?**

Research has also shown that when parents talk to their children and are supportive, they provide them with valuable coping skills and resiliency (Matsunaga, 2009; Wassdorp et al., 2011). Connors-Burrow et al., (2009) found that all four bully status groups (bullies, victims, bully-victims and not-involved) reported fewer symptoms of depression when their parents were supportive; especially bully-victims, who have the highest risk for depression. Also, bullied children experienced less stress and found it easier to escape victimization when they turned to their parents for advice (Matsunaga, 2009).

### ***Personal Recommendations***

The literature review supports the view that bullying can start at home with certain parenting styles and family characteristics. Olweus initiated a large campaign to reduce bullying in schools, and I propose that families, specifically parents and guardians, actively join the campaign and not rely only on the school system to reduce bullying. Although parents are often unaware of bullying events and may misjudge the seriousness of the risks, these discrepancies are somewhat normative in parent-child relationships (Matsunaga, 2009). Fekkes et al. (2005) found that children were more likely to talk to their parents than teachers, and recent studies imply that the family plays a significant role in the coping process for victims of bullying (Matsunaga).

### ***Implications for Family Life Education***

Arcus, Schvaneveldt, and Moss (1993) stated most people become parents, most approach parenthood conscientiously and want to be successful parents, and most look for guidance in their parental roles. Parents, in all eras and cultures, have been informally educated in their roles as parents; however, it is being replaced by a more formal type of parent education.

Family Life Education is designed to “improve family living and to reduce family-related societal problems through family-focused educational opportunities” (Arcus et al., 1993, p. 2). Professionals in the field of family life education have many opportunities to provide education on bullying related behaviors to parents and families. Arcus et al. recognized several features, or *operational principles*, of family life education; some are descriptive (describing how family life education is practiced) while others are prescriptive (assisting family life educators with educating about family life). Several of the operational principles that are relevant to bullying behaviors will be applied here.

*Family life education is relevant to individualistic and families throughout the lifespan.* Bullying behaviors occur at various stages of the life cycle. According to Georgiou (2008), bullying begins at home because children can learn aggression by watching how their families interact on a daily basis. Stressed-out parents (i.e., having marital conflicts or financial problems) are more likely to be distant, hostile, communicate less effectively, and use more extreme discipline techniques. Furthermore, Georgiou stated research has shown that parenting practices, such as those using inconsistent and severe punishment, were precursors to aggression.

Family life educators should provide information about various parenting styles and the outcomes of each style. Holden (2002) stated parental use of corporal punishment “is the single most controversial and emotionally charged topic in parent-child relationships” (p. 590). Farrington (1993, as cited in Ahmed & Braithwaite, 2004) found that adolescents who were bullies were more likely to be adult bullies and have children who were bullies. Parents are likely to parent the way they were parented, and if those techniques were dysfunctional or abusive, that cycle may continue. Family life educators are able to provide factual and helpful parenting information in parenting classes.

*Family life education should be based on the needs of individuals and families.* Three personal experiences were given as examples in the introduction because they illustrated students and families who have experienced bullying and suicidality related to bullying. They showed the frustration, anxiety, anger, and fear that bullying behaviors inflict on victims and family members. Bullying is a serious health issue and affects many people; however, each individual, parent, and family is affected in different ways and has different needs.

Smith (2006) encouraged parents to listen to their children, to talk about the causes and consequences of bullying, to discuss strong and assertive but non-violent solutions, to help them determine clear, moral guidelines for bullying behaviors, to help nurture their self-respect and not give praise they have not earned, and to be good role models for compassion and nonviolent conflict resolution.

*Family life education should be offered in many settings.* Since schooling is normally compulsory, bullying occurs more often in school settings (Olweus, 1999). Schools are becoming more and more involved in the bullying phenomenon, and the Olweus Bullying Prevention Program (2011) reported a reduction in school bullying associated with their program. There are several ways for schools to involve parents in anti-bullying process efforts.

School administrators should inform parents about their school's anti-bullying policies and procedures and provide newsletters for parents that outline key concepts and skills and explain activities they can use at home (Frey et al., 2005). Also, parents should be encouraged to attend a school conference day on anti-bullying to raise their awareness of bullying, be included when anti-bullying policies are being formed, and be contacted when their child is involved as a victim or bully to increase direct interaction (Sherer & Nickerson, 2010).

Family life educators should also include bullying educational programs in faith-based

settings, community organizations, and workplaces because bullying occurs in many different settings and among adults as well. Parents should be informed that children model parental behaviors. For example, when parents gossip about co-workers or ridicule supervisors, they are modeling indirect forms of bullying to their own children.

*Family life education takes an educational rather than a therapeutic approach.*

According to Peters (1967, as cited in Arcus et al., 1993), education should be used to empower the learner, and individuals can use this knowledge to make informed choices based on reason. Parents may feel helpless or not know what to do when children are bullied; therefore, family life educators must encourage them to be vigilant and proactive. It is vital for parents to regularly monitor on-line activities in which their children are engaged (Patchin & Hinduja, 2006). It is also important for parents to respect their child's privacy; however, at times safety may overrule privacy issues.

*Family life education should present and respect different family values.* Bullying is viewed differently by individuals of varying ages, genders, ethnicity, and cultures. Ethnic minority parents may perceive bullying and victimization in different ways; some parents may think that bullying is more harmful for their daughters than their sons, or they may expect their sons to be tough and not ask for their assistance (Waasdorp et al., 2011). Furthermore, some individuals view bullying as a necessary part of growing up because they believe it builds character and prepares them for life (Smith & Brain, 2000).

Ethics, including ethical values, is one of the main topic areas in the content of family life education in the Framework for Life-Span Family Life Education (Arcus et al., 1993). Two ethical theories, *universalizability* (implies that an act is ethical only if it can be applied to all similar situations) and the *balancing principle* (an ethical decision that involves the least amount

of harm for all family members), help in determining that bullying is unethical (Zygmond, & Boorhem, 1989).

Based on past studies, many adolescents experience psychological and physical harm associated with bullying; therefore, bullying is not beneficial for all individuals. Some individuals may argue that it “toughened” them up and prepared them for life, but this concept cannot be applied universally. Also, bullying does harm adolescents (and other individuals) which supports that bullying is unethical and should not be tolerated.

## CONCLUSION

Bullying among children is a very old phenomenon, (Klein & Cornell, 2010), and it is likely (though in varying degrees) that it will always be an aspect of peer problems in schools. However, society, the media, schools, administrators, teachers, and parents have become more aware of bullying and the negative effects it has on children and adolescents in recent years.

### ***How Serious is Bullying?***

The Phoebe Prince case (placed in the introduction) has set the tone for bullying in schools for the entire country. According to *Today* (MSNBC, 2011b), if you are a bully, you can be charged by police and prosecutors with serious crimes. Prince, a 15 year old Irish immigrant girl, took her own life after she was tormented by students at school . After they called her names and screamed “Why don’t you just kill yourself”, she went home and hung herself in the family home.

*Today* (MSNBC, 2011b) reported that the six teenagers involved had been charged with a felony in the bullying incident. However, two of the teenagers’ charges were reduced to a misdemeanor—criminal harassment—and were sentenced to one year of probation and 100 hours of community service helping at-risk children. Three other students were expected to receive the same sentence, and the last teenager, a male, was charged with statutory rape and planned to fight his charge. Prince’s mother signed off on the agreement to avoid an excruciating trial, and her father wanted the students to acknowledge their actions and apologize. One of the dubbed “mean girls” tearfully apologized for her bullying behaviors towards Prince during her court session. This ordeal has sent the message that bullying can be a prosecuted as a criminal offense.

## **Where Do We Go From Here?**

The purpose of this report was to address the need for parental involvement as a way to help adolescents cope with bullying incidents which prompted my question to members on the middle-school site council, “What resources would be the most helpful for families dealing with bullying issues?” One member responded, “Perhaps parents could let us know. We’ve tried to have events in the evening for parents, but they’ve never been well attended.”

Arcus et al. (1993) stated “If family life educators wish to target families for communication and problem-solving educational efforts, marketing issues will need to be addressed” (p. 170). In these authors’ opinions, typically, white middle-class women attend family life education programs, and Arcus et al. stated change requires asking the following questions:

- What will attract family groups?
- Who are the gatekeepers of family activities?
- What factors limit whole-family participation and how can an educator anticipate these factors? (p. 170).

Furthermore, more attention needs to be given by family life educators to designing, collecting, analyzing, and reporting data that is significant to marketing family life education, especially education that involves communication and problem-solving (Arcus et al.).

In order for change to occur, individuals must first acknowledge that a change is needed. The literature review has established that bullying involves serious psychological and physical harm to those involved in the bullying process. Past studies have shown that it is best when intervention and prevention programs involve all levels of the ecological system including the students involved in the bullying continuum (i.e., bully, victim, bystander), the families, the

schools and the whole community (Espelage & Swearer, 2003). Most likely, bullying will always be an aspect of the social context in schools based on the biological, cognitive, and social-emotional development of adolescents. Due to the pioneering efforts of Daniel Olweus, students, families, schools, communities, and whole nations are now more aware of bullying in schools, and are taking pro-active measures to protect students in order for them to have a learning environment that is conducive for them to learn and thrive.

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