

Allen, Laura

Writing Sample

Who is Responsible for Bullying at Schools: Kids or Adults?

The issue of bullying in schools can hardly be disputed. The advent of the internet created an entirely new theater for bullying to occur, one without physical boundaries, knowing no time constraints, relentless in its anonymity, and access to an unlimited audience. It is estimated that 28% of children experience some form of bullying between grades 6-12 (Dryden-Edwards 2019), and statistics show an alarming increase in bullying activity as early as elementary school. There is a direct correlation between bullying and suicide, self-harm, and substance abuse (Fekkes 2004).

While bullying does still occur within the context of a school day, it is no longer confined to school hours and physical proximity. So where does the responsibility fall for policing bullying, both on-site and online?

The obvious answer is adults, given their obligation to not only teach children academically but also set the example for what behavior is appropriate, identify signs of potential bullying and initiate interventions. Indeed, public school systems now have a legal obligation to address instances of bullying effectively and run the risk of being found liable in court if they fail to do so (Harper 2018). The laws and expectations vary from state to state, but the shift in perception from “kids just being kids” to being held legally responsible for what occurs on school grounds, and more broadly, in cyberspace, speaks to the breadth and depth of the problem.

Anti-bullying training programs for school staff abound and are considered mandatory. Instilling appropriate social skills early on plays a significant role in the reduction of bullying behaviors. While teachers and school staff cannot control a child's home environment, they can use their influence in school to present students with positive social skills and address behavioral problems with a variety of services at their disposal. Developmentally, children are works in progress and products of their environment. It is neither practical nor reasonable to expect them to take responsibility for navigating the issue of bullying upon themselves, although it is fair to expect them to contribute positively to an inclusive and accepting culture at school. A culture that is created, and nurtured by the adults charged with their education, should not draw the line at curriculum alone.

Interestingly, the COVID-19 pandemic has created an entirely new facet to the issue with schools suddenly finding themselves learning "on the fly" how to teach remotely. Remote learning has socially isolated students and illuminated the need to address the broad spectrum of learning abilities within a given population. Abilities that range from adapting smoothly to an online environment to being woefully left behind and not supported at home. This has given a sense of urgency to the relatively new concept of "digital citizenship" which, while again promoted by adults, also places some autonomy of choice and therefore responsibility on the students as well. It will be interesting to see what benefits and challenges this may have on school cultures when students can attend school in person again. At the end of the day, however, it is adults who set the tone and provide the framework for children to develop into functional adults, neither bullies nor victims.

Works Cited

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