YOUTH VOICE PROJECT

Why youth mistreat others and how we can use this understanding in our interventions

As we travel around the United States helping adults who work with and care for children, we find ourselves still pondering the motivation behind varying forms of peer mistreatment and the ways we can use the answers to this question to improve our work in reducing peer mistreatment. Interestingly, some of the educators and therapists we have worked with seem to see bullying and other forms of peer mistreatment as a dyadic interaction. Many people seem to believe that the target of peer aggression does something that invites the aggression. A similar and common point of view holds that the target's actions in response to the mistreatment encourages the aggressor to continue or expand the aggression. Yet respondents to our Youth Voice Project survey report that their own actions toward the person mistreating them were rarely effective in making things better. They told us that telling or the person mistreating them to stop or telling them how they feel rarely helped them. This research finding regularly provokes disagreement among adults. Several experienced bullying prevention trainers have insisted that the kids in our study must have asked the aggressor to stop in a whiny, irritating way that provokes more mistreatment. Another asked, "Why don't you bullying prevention people want kids to stand up for themselves?" Another said, "When kids react emotionally to mistreatment they are signaling that they are easy targets." We disagree.

Based on the data and our experience in the field, we propose an alternative set of motivation and reinforcement for peer mistreatment. Looking outside the behavior of mistreated youth allows us to stop blaming them for someone else's actions. It also helps us see what we can do to reduce peer mistreatment more effectively.

Some youth who mistreat peers are imitating the behavior of adults and of other youth they admire and/or are reflecting perceived peer social norms.

Most educators are familiar with Alfred Bandura's Bobo doll experiment (Bandura, Ross, & Ross, 1961). In his now infamous experiment, children watched a video where they witnessed an adult behaving aggressively toward a plastic clown (the Bobo doll). Bandura described the adult actions in this way: "...the model pummels it on the head with a mallet, hurls it down, sits on it and punches it on the nose repeatedly, kick it across the room, flings it in the air, and bombards it with balls..." (Bandura, 1973, p. 72).

After viewing the video, children were led to a room where they have the same toys they saw in the Bobo doll video. The question was: Would the children imitate the aggressive behavior they saw earlier? The answer was yes. Study findings showed that the majority of children modeled the aggressive behavior of the adult pummeling the doll. Moreover, eight months later 40 percent of those same children reproduced those behaviors.

Bandura (1977) coined the term, "observational learning" to describe the use of modeling to learn new behaviors. His work focused on how television and adult role models influenced children's aggressive behaviors. Today, however, identifying significant influences on children's behavior is not that straightforward. The fact is that children and adolescents are growing up in a very different social environment than they did 30 years ago—one that is much more complex. No longer is television the most significant influence on children and adolescents' behavior.

Youth are bombarded with millions of images, texts, and sounds every day via electronic devices and social media sites. In essence, our children and adolescents are playing on a virtual playground—one where adult monitoring is limited at best. This is an important cultural shift to address given the positive relationship between involved parenting (including parental monitoring) and positive adolescent adjustment (Fletcher, Steinberg, & Williams-Wheeler, 2004). Put simply, digital technology has exposed our children and adolescents to a whole new venue of models, ones that are not necessarily prosocial or altruistic. For adolescents, the increasing influence of social media is decreasing parental control and support during a time when they need it the most as they journey across the difficult passageway to young adulthood.

Social media is changing the landscape of our social norms. In fact, recent researchers have found that norms related to alcohol use communicated through Facebook through images of older teens drinking and comments such as, “you were so drunk last night” made younger adolescents’ have more positive attitudes toward alcohol use and made them more likely to use alcohol, as compared with those adolescents who viewed high school students on Facebook who were not shown drinking alcohol and were not commenting about drinking (Litt & Stock, 2011).

Understanding the pervasive power of social networking sites, we can begin to think about using digital technology to change attitudes towards how we treat people. Imagine the power of random “pop up” images of young people supporting others, of comments posted related to positive peer support, or of short, dynamic video clips of inclusive behavior.

Teens’ media diet often includes a wide range of “reality” shows whose plots are largely made up of people hurting each other. Those people who hurt often follow up by explaining to the camera why their mean actions were needed or justified. Even very young children are affected. Research by Martins and Wilson (2012) helps us understand the effects on children of watching social aggression on television. The study found that 92 percent of the top 50 programs for children ages two to 11 showed characters involved in social aggression, such as mean gossiping and manipulation of friendship. On average, there were 14 incidents of social aggression per hour. One of the researchers, Nicole Martins, was quoted in a Science Daily summary as saying, “Social aggression was more likely to be enacted by an attractive perpetrator, to be featured in a humorous context and neither rewarded or punished…In these ways, social aggression on television poses more of a risk for imitation and learning than do portrayals of physical aggression.”

Research conducted by Jamie Ostrov at the University of Buffalo and his colleagues (Ostrov, Gentile, & Crick, 2006) showed that for young boys, increased hours of television watching was related to increased physical aggression; for young girls, increased hours of television watching was related to increased relational aggression.

One way we can address these issues of social imitation is through media education. We can help young people see that books, television, and movies often present a skewed view of teen and adult actions to get viewers’ attention. We can help youth to analyze and understand the patterns of behavior they read about or see. We can also help young people understand the power of social norms on their own behavior, including the influence of social networking sites such as Facebook. We can help youth understand the power of images and words on their behavior and

encourage them to think about what they want to be exposed to. None of us wants to be exploited; adolescents included. Through education, we can let young people know that the media is doing just that. We can help youth reflect on their own values and goals and choose not to imitate characters and people who are living lives that do not fit their goals.

At one middle school Stan visited, students were asked to complete a simple but effective writing exercise. They made a list of television shows and then were asked which convey positive messages that encourage them to work toward their own positive goals. The teens in the health classes where this activity took place could think of very few shows to list as positive influences. Some found none. This led the group to fascinating and productive discussions about how they can live the lives they want while watching shows that run counter to their goals and values.

School staff need to be cognizant of the power of their own modeling behavior. It is important for staff to work toward positive adult-adult and adult-student interactions at school. Social norms interventions can also be used to help students gather an accurate picture of their peers' positive values and beliefs.

Some youth who mistreat others are motivated and reinforced by the increased social status and connection that results from their mean behavior.
Like Draco Malfoy in the Harry Potter books, some youth mistreat others to gain the approval of their peers. This peer approval often leads them to feel they belong. We have seen this pattern of motivation in many young people. They pay attention to the ways in which their peers encourage and admire their mean actions. The more clever and funny their taunts, threats, or physical actions are, the more admiration they receive.

These young people are unlikely to pay much attention to the way targets react to them. Indeed, they may have little awareness of targets as individuals. The target may be a member of a group that has low social standing in the school.

Youth Voice Project data shows that some subgroups of youth are more likely to be mistreated than others. In some schools African American youth are much more likely to report being targets of peer mistreatment. In other schools students who get help from Special Education report higher rates of mistreatment. When mistreatment is reinforced primarily by peer approval and peer status, youth who mistreat others will be more likely to choose members of low status groups as their targets. Changing the behavior of the target will not influence the frequency of the behavior. Instead, what we need to change is the status differential. Since, despite our best efforts, there will likely always be some groups lower in status than others, we can also work to encourage peers to be kind and inclusive and reduce the social reinforcement they provide their peers for mistreating behavior.

One of the most notable findings from Stan Davis and Chuck Saufler's Maine survey (unpublished, 2011, available from Davis on request) was the pattern of dramatically increased rates of physical aggression toward youth in Special Education. One middle school in this survey did not show increases in aggression toward youth in special education. In discussing this positive finding with the counselor at that school we found that their health teacher spends

significant time with her classes each year discussing what learning disabilities are, building empathy and connection with youth in Special Education, and helping students see that youth who get help from Special Education need and deserve inclusion, belonging, and support just like everyone else.

Some youth who mistreat others are motivated and reinforced by the sense of power they get from dominating or controlling others.

Domestic abuse and child abuse may flow from similar motivations. As Dorothea Ross points out in *Childhood Bullying and Teasing (1996),* preventing mistreatment which is based on a wish to have power over others requires that adults and schools use their own power to block this reinforcement. Adults can use their power by intervening consistently and effectively when they see or hear unacceptable actions. Schools can use small, fair, consistent consequences to counterbalance the perceived power youth may receive through mistreating others.

Peers can also decrease the amount of power youth get from mistreating others. One middle school student in New England wrote to Stan that she realized that she felt bad about herself when she spent time with a group of friends who did mean things to others. As a result of this realization, she began spending time with other peers instead. When a friend from that first group asked about the change, this girl told her friend what she had realized. The girl wrote to Stan that her friend also stopped cooperating in the mean behavior.

Efforts to reduce the power that comes from mean behavior will be most effective within the context of helping youth build relationships with adults and peers, positive modeling of social interaction by school staff, and helping youth experience the power of participating in meaningful work and positively contributing to others' welfare.

Some youth who mistreat others are expressing rage or hurt that comes from their own histories.

Some youth have been abused at home. They may have witnessed spouse abuse or community violence. They may have been targets of racism. They may have experienced traumatic losses. We need to help these youth deal with the pain they carry with them and learn new skills and behaviors for dealing with others without hurting them. Doing this often involves helping youth think about what has been done to them and setting goals for their own actions toward others. These students may need to learn to identify signs that they are becoming angry or that they are being triggered by difficult situations, and to leave those situations. It can be very helpful for these young people to track their own positive actions and those actions' effects as they continue to work toward the behavioral goals they have set for themselves. For many of these youth, their own growing positive self-control provides an important sense of empowerment.

Some youth who mistreat others lack crucial social, emotional, or cognitive skills.

Some youth have deficits in self-control, anger management, empathy, emotional self-regulation, play skills, or other components of healthy social functioning. Helping these young people requires that we teach and reinforce skills for positive social behavior. These youth need more than anything else to learn to get their needs met in effective and positive ways, without hurting others. As with angry or traumatized youth, these young people often benefit from tracking their own positive actions and from understanding their successes.

A few youth who mistreat others consciously choose targets and aggressive actions by deciding who they can hurt the most and how they can do the most harm. It is important to note that these young people make up a very small fraction of the population of peer aggressors, and youth should not be identified as members of this group without detailed evaluation. Changing these young peoples' actions is a crucial yet difficult challenge. The work of Stanton Samenow, Paul Frick, and many others address specialized strategies for working with these young people. A recent summary of the research in this field was published in the New York Times Magazine in May, 2012. These youth may have severe deficits in social cognition and empathy. They may also perceive the emotions of others accurately yet still act to hurt others. They are likely to need more fundamental interventions than social skills training. They may also have neurological or other physical impairments, which make caring for others difficult. Regardless of interventions used, any work with such students should include the investment of significant supervision and protection to prevent and mitigate the harm they are capable of doing to others.

In summary, instead of looking to the behavior patterns of mistreated youth to find the causes of peer mistreatment, we believe we should examine the behavior patterns of youth who mistreat others and their peers. When we do so we can find a wider range of effective interventions, without further traumatizing targets by telling them that their actions caused the mistreatment. Some of the most promising interventions include the following:

- Work with concerned peers to help them stop reinforcing mean actions.
- Build inclusion for all groups of young people, so no group is seen as an appropriate target for mistreatment or exclusion.
- Work systemically in schools to reduce the amount of power that results from peer mistreatment.
- Work to remediate trauma, hurt, and loss for youth.
- Build social, emotional, and cognitive skills for all youth, and provide remedial education in this area for youth who find them hard to master and implement.
- Identify and intervene with the very small group of youth who truly wish to hurt others.

References

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