Social Media: The New Playground for Bullying Students with Disabilities

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Bullying in schools has been around for a long time. Years ago, “school bully” conjured up images of an older student teasing a student on the playground and taking his lunch money. Today bullying still occurs on school grounds and during school hours, but it has evolved into much more and the image and tactics of a school bully have changed greatly. Times have changed, technology has changed and the policy of students with disabilities educated in a separate school or classroom has changed. “Bullying consists of a series of repeated, intentionally cruel incidents between the same children who are in the same bully and victim roles. Bullying is not limited to, but can include: harassing someone because of perceived differences, (e.g. a disability, sexual orientation: and being physically attacked/assaulted or abused)” (Hoover & Stenhjem, 2003).

Prior to the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (renamed the Individuals with Disabilities Improvement Act), students with disabilities did not have access to free and appropriate public education in a general education classroom. Today, students with disabilities are educated in their least restricted environment. For most, least restricted environment means the general education classroom. This inclusion, although positive, exposes students with disabilities to peer-to-peer bullying. Students with disabilities are now interacting with more students than in the past. These “special education programs and inclusion efforts have opened doors for thousands of children with special needs. Yet, those very doors may have also made them vulnerable to bullying. Special classes, extra help and visible assistance given to such students makes them different from other students. As a result, other students too often characterize children with special needs as not smart or too different to be included” (Shriver, Shriver, Sinkhorn, Speier & Torlakson, 2011). Students with disabilities are more vulnerable to bullying and are
frequent targets. According to Shriver et al., students with disabilities are often bullied for the following reasons:

- Students with disabilities may be labeled as ‘different’ when they have a meltdown.
- Lack of social skills may make it difficult for students with disabilities to hold conversations with their peers.
- Motor skill difficulties are often targeted.
- Assistive technology may be viewed adversely by their peers.
- Students with physical impairments may be viewed as slow, weak and more vulnerable to bullying.

“Simply put, students with disabilities stand out by virtue of behavior, vocal or physical challenges” (Shriver, et al., 2011).

Some students with disabilities have a higher risk factor for bullying. According to Young, Ne’eman and Gelser, students with a wide range of disabilities such as ADHD, stuttering and visible and non-visible disabilities have a higher increase of bullying. In 2002, a study of United States mothers, “found that 94% of children with a diagnosis of Asperger’s Syndrome faced peer victimization, including emotional bullying, gang attacks and nonsexual assaults to the genitals” (Young, Ne’eman & Gelser. p. 74). The social skill challenges make students with Asperger’s Syndrome more susceptible to bullying.

While there has been much research on peer-to-peer bullying in relation to students with non-disabilities, there is a shortage of research on bullying in regards to students with disabilities. As of 2009, “only 10 studies have been conducted in the
United States on bullying and developmental disabilities. All studies found that children with disabilities were two to three times more likely to be victims of bullying than their nondisabled peers” (Shriver, et al., 2011, p. 12). According to Shriver, et al., for a student with a disability, bullying can take three forms:

- Manipulative bullying, “occurs when a child with special needs is actually being coerced and controlled by another student” (p. 15)
- Conditional friendship “occurs when a child thinks that someone is being their friend, but the times of friendship are alternated with times of bully” (p. 15).
- Exploitive bullying “occurs when the features of the child’s conditions are used to bully them either by other classmates or via technology and social media networks” (p. 15).

Social networking sites such as Facebook, Bebo, and MySpace, video sharing sites such as YouTube, photo sharing sites such as Flickr and texting have added a new dimension to bullying—often referred to as “cyber bullying.” According to The National Crime Prevention Council, cyber bullying occurs when an individual uses the Internet, cell phones or other devices to send or post text messages, videos or photos intended to hurt or embarrass another person.” “Cyber bullying involves harassing someone or spreading rumor about an individual through e-mail, chat rooms, text messages instant messages or social networking Web sites” (Shriver, et al., p. 19).

Cyber bullying affects both students with disabilities and students with non-disabilities. It is not confined to the boundaries of the student’s school or classroom or the hours that the student attends school and thus, cyber bullying has increased the instances of bullying.  Cyber bullying occurs 24 hours a day, seven days a week. It is
often shared through numerous social media websites and cyber bullying is often conducted anonymously. “Cyber bullying is especially insidious because of its anonymous nature. Moreover, it allows participation by an infinite audience. In the school context, it is dangerous because it most often takes place outside school hours on home computers, making it difficult, if not impossible to supervise” (Shariff & Hoff, 2007, p. 77). A recent study found that 4 to 9% of students with intellectual and developmental disabilities reported cyber bullying (Didden, Scholte, Korzilius, de Moor, Vermeulen, O’Reilly, Lang & Lancioni, 2009). Cyber bully tactics include the creation of derogatory Facebook pages, Twitter posts and videos on YouTube.

Bullying impacts learning, social emotional development and self esteem among students with and without disabilities. Depression, lowered self-esteem and “less favorable perceptions of school” (Bradshaw & Waasdorp, 2009, p. 43) are all by-products of bullying. The U.S. Department of Education cites “lowered academic achievement and aspirations, increased anxiety, loss of self-esteem and confidence, depression and post-traumatic stress, deterioration in physical health, self-harm and suicidal thinking, suicide, feelings of alienation, absenteeism and other negative impacts, both educational and health related. While both students with and without disabilities face significant negative emotional, educational and physical results from bullying, students with disabilities are both uniquely vulnerable and disproportionately impacted by the bullying phenomena” (Young et al, 2011, p. 73).

What are the solutions to bullying and cyber bullying? There are anti-bullying programs in effect today. But according to Shriver, et al., these programs are not effective as they “focus on symptoms instead of causes and short-term interventions
instead of the needs and capacities that emerge throughout the long arc of a child’s growth and development” (Shriver et al., p. 39). Shriver et al., recommend programs that focus on a child’s growth and development. Examples include social and emotional learning curriculums, inclusive community programs and organizations such as Special Olympics and Best Buddies, along with communication at home.

Young, Ne’eman and Gelser, (p. 78) recommend the following measures for schools and classrooms:

- Parental notification if their child is either the victim or perpetrator of bullying.
- Addressing bully prevention in a student’s individualized education program (IEP).
- Holding schools accountable for severe, persistent and pervasive bullying and harassment.

Young et al., also argue that addressing the bullying of students with disabilities is lacking. Their policy recommendations include a federal research program on bullying prevention that includes students with disabilities. They state that “the executive branch should ensure that disability is included in federal research efforts on bullying through encouraging the involvement of disability-oriented agencies with mandated broad research and policy missions, like the National Institute for Disability and Rehabilitation Research (NIDRR) and the National Council on Disability (NCD), in broader federal bullying prevention efforts such as the Federal Partners in Bullying Prevention Task Force” (p. 79).
The awareness of bullying of students with disabilities is beginning to be addressed. For example, in North Dakota, the state legislature is taking a closer look at it. A recent Youth Risk Behavior Survey was conducted in the state with disability related demographics included for the first time. The analysis of the data showed a “dramatic increase in bullying by disability status for both middle and high school students in all areas. That includes bullying on school property, bullying away from school and bullying in social media” (kxnet.com).

In closing, society must take a closer look at bullying, especially in regards to students with disabilities. More research must be conducted, and strategies for coping with and eradicating bullying must be developed and implemented. At a minimum, we must promote the understanding of the prevalence and impact of bullying on students with disabilities.
References


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