

SMS: A Youth Empowerment Program New Approaches to Transform Bullying and Empower Youth

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Short Communication

A study conducted by the U.S. Departments of Education and Justice (2010) found that in 2007, 32 percent of students expressed that they were bullied at school and 4 percent of students stated that they had been cyber-bullied [1]. Other studies have cumulatively found that 9-73% of students reported that they have bullied another child and 2-36% of students said that they were the victim of bullying behavior [2]. These statistics are increasing rapidly, and it is alarming, because there are many negative consequences associated with bullying both for the victim, the bully, the community at large, and humanity at large around the globe. This article will address bullying as it impacts youth, and will present few ideas on programs to integrate within school system.

The negative consequences for victims include both long-term and short-term negative impact and can range in severity. These consequences include many psychological issues, such as anxiety, depression, psychosomatic symptoms, difficulty sleeping, suicidal ideation, suicide attempts, and suicides. In addition, these consequences also impact the physical body, including and not limited to scars, damaged property, and behavioral issues, such as avoidance of school in general or particular areas of school, which can later lead to issues with academic functioning [3,4].

There are a variety of negative outcomes predicted for those that bully. Bullies were found to be at increased risk for substance abuse, troubles with police and law, and to have significant increases in criminal behavior by age 23. Another study found that bullying predicted antisocial personality, introversion, self-esteem issues, and depressive and anxiety disorders. Furthermore, in this same study, bullies that were also victims were predicted to have antisocial personality and anxiety disorders [5].

SMS: Students for Meaningful Solution, is a program developed as an immediate resource for students in the New York City and Tri-state area that can occur in conjunction with the White House's National Anti-Bullying Campaign that stresses bullying interventions at the individual level, and state and federal levels. Additionally, we recommend adding the global levels, starting with governmental leadership who tend to act in bullying manners.

The main goals for the Meaningfulworld Youth Empowerment Program (YEP) are to diminish bullying, increase awareness about the harmful consequences of bullying, to promote positive growth and empowerment through relationship building, non-violent communication (NVC), Emotional Intelligence (EQ), nurture empathy, improved self-esteem, mindfulness, and meaning-making. The YEP provides students ages 7-16 with useful tools to cope as a victim, bully, and/or bystander. Other goals include developing skills

for empathy, increasing trust, improving relations among the students in each class, and empowering students to seek help when faced with a difficult or challenging situation [6].

The Youth Empowerment Program is designed as a weekly or bi-weekly program in New York City schools that began with a 5-week summer program in 2011, and due to a big demand has extended into other academic years. The program offers psychosocial education, mindfulness, 7-Step Integrative Healing Model [6], through conversations and activities engaging students, covering topics such as: prevention of bullying, improvement of self-esteem, expression of emotion, empathy, team building, bystander intervention, assertiveness, listening skills, sharing, and healing. Additional topics may include body image, suicide awareness/prevention, stress management, coping with academic pressures, and peer pressure. Sessions are tailored to the dynamics of each specific classroom as well as the needs of individual students.

Each session consists of a combination of discussions, activities, crafts, role play, physical release, and occasionally PowerPoint lectures and films. The schedule and topics are tailored to the needs of each individual class, with a focus on increasing awareness of the dangers of bullying and promoting positive growth and empowerment through relationship building, non-violent assertive communication, and increased self-esteem.

The first sessions are geared towards team building, developing trust, and improving relations within the class as well as building rapport between the students and the facilitators. The following sessions focus on expressing feelings and developing empathy, later sessions focus on the importance of bystander intervention, and non-violent communication. Mind-body activities focusing on mindfulness, breath work and physical release to regulate stress and anger are incorporated within each session. This holistic integrative approach is based upon the seven-step Integrative Healing Model focusing on biopsychosocial and eco-spiritual areas [2]. The model integrates seven different theoretical approaches for healing, and meaning-making. The model has been incorporated in ATOP Meaningfulworld's monthly certificate trainings, as well as in over 45 calamities around the globe in response to trauma and conflict and has been modified for children.

The YEP program has been successfully implemented in three public schools in the New York City area. All schools are self-contained special education schools, in which the majority of children display attention difficulties, emotional disturbances and learning disabilities. The children in the schools range from first through eighth grade. The majority of these children are of low socioeconomic status and nearly all of the children are of Latino or African-American descent. The children in this program have suffered from a very young

age the hardships of poverty, abuse, abandonment, and neglect and some of them currently live in shelters or foster homes. Their life experiences, in addition to a myriad of other factors, have shaped their behavior, sometimes in negative and destructive ways. Despite these challenges, the children are able to reach out to their teachers and counselors for support and guidance, which is so desperately needed. The desire for these children to be heard and understood has come through within the 5-week pilot summer program and thus far in our year-long program. Initial challenges of fleeting attention and disruptive behaviors eventually gave way to meaningful discussions about bullying and shared feelings, completing the majority of planned activities [6].

The first session of our 5-week program was mainly an introduction to the program and the overall topic of bullying. We began with a pre-program assessment that measured empathy and self-esteem. Results from the assessment showed a generally low level of empathy, while self-esteem generally fell either in the high range or the low range with few scores in the middle. After the assessment was given, we opened up a discussion about what bullying is and asked for the children to share experiences of bullying that they had witnessed, participated in or had been victims of. The majority of the children shared experiences of witnessing bullying and some of them stated that they had physically intervened when they saw another peer being bullied. This led to a brief discussion about alternative actions that the students could take if they saw someone being bullied; telling an adult and using words instead of fists, were a few suggestions that came up. While several of the students participated, there always seemed to be one or two students that dominated the conversation. It's interesting to note here that the school personnel later stated that these students were the ones that were actually the bullies. We ended our first session with a drawing activity where students could draw their first hand experiences related to bullying. Many of the students drew pictures of other individuals being bullied [6].

The second session was geared toward activities that would be helpful in enhancing empathy. In the first class, which was a 6th grade class, we asked students to write down experiences that they have had that generated any type of strong negative feeling. The activity then involved one of the group leaders reading the student's expressions and having the class discuss how that individual might have been feeling. Overall, this activity resulted in acting out behaviors such as cursing, name calling, straying off task, saying inappropriate comments, laughing nervously, etc. It quickly became evident that this group was extremely uncomfortable to share their negative feelings, so they acted out or laughed off their frustrations. Despite these issues, there were still a couple of students that expressed their feelings appropriately and in a rather eloquent manner. The following is an example of what one student wrote: "One experience that I felt when I was bullied was rage. When I felt rage I felt like breaking everything I saw. I even disrespected my father because he was tickling me trying to make me laugh." While this activity was challenging for some students, it allowed others to practice identifying and expressing their emotions (EQ).

Within the third session, group leaders explained the importance of identifying one's feelings, improving one's Emotional Intelligence (EQ). For the next class, index cards with pictures of various facial expressions were distributed and each child then was asked to identify the emotion and provide a rationale as to how they came to that conclusion.

In the first group, a group of fourth and fifth graders, the children shared some scenarios, e.g., someone being hit or a parent being taken away. Some of the children had difficulty identifying emotions, which may have been partially due to their developmental and cognitive challenges. Both groups derived synonyms for emotion words with ease. Afterwards, the children drew or wrote about a situation incorporating a strong negative feeling. While the goal was to focus on a personal experience, many drew or wrote about a hypothetical one.

For the second group, a group of sixth graders, the exercise was focused on a bullying situation. Some of the situations mentioned were about someone stealing a bike, someone hitting another person, etc. The discussion also brought up the possibility of experiencing more than one negative emotion simultaneously. In recalling a situation of bullying, children were encouraged to take on the perspective of both bully and victim in order to facilitate an understanding of empathy, physical role playing was used to illustrate this point [6].

Another session focused on various ways the children respond if they were a victim or bystander of bullying. While some students mentioned telling an adult, many students talked about physically beating or punching the bully and running away without thinking of consequences. Positive and negative consequences of these actions were then discussed. Students were encouraged to come up with more healthy, non-violent ways of responding. They then came up with more socially acceptable behaviors such as being assertive or getting help from different types of authority figures, such as teachers in school setting, or the police during off school hours. Students were forthcoming in providing examples of bystanders responding to bullying situations in their neighborhoods. In addition, students were asked for strategies they would implement to decrease their anger or frustration in order to prevent themselves from bullying others and continuing the vicious cycle of violence. Children mentioned such strategies as listening to music, playing in the playground, taking deep breaths, walking away, and counting. Diaphragmatic breathing and muscle relaxation was taught, modeled, and practiced with the students. At the end of the five-week semester, students were given the empathy and self-esteem questionnaires once again for comparison [7]. The feedback from the teachers and students was overwhelmingly positive and the children reported that they enjoyed the discussion topics, role plays, and rewards for healthy behavior.

The school year long program began in mid-September and our sessions so far have included assessment of the severity and types of bullying that currently occurs in each of the schools, a discussion about empathy and expression of personal emotion, and a discussion about suicide related to bullying. The story of Jamey Rodemeyer, a gay teen from Buffalo, New York who had committed suicide as the result of incessant bullying, was shown to students to illustrate the dangers of bullying. Information on suicide prevention and how to get help was also provided to each student. Our sessions have also included exercises for physical release through movement, such as yoga stretches, dancing, and laughter yoga, that the students have seemed to enjoy.

We assessed the severity and types of bullying students have experienced by giving each student a questionnaire. It seemed that many of the students were able to accurately identify themselves as the bully, the victim, or the bystander. Many of the students that identified themselves as bullies were honest about how often they engage in it and how they feel about it. One student said "I don't know why, but I just like to bully." Other students that identified themselves as victims or bystanders made comments, such as "bullying is wrong and will not

get you anywhere in life” and “if you bully, a bigger person will bully you.” Overall, it is clear that the students are very aware of the role they play in the bullying continuum. This is a promising place to start because it shows that these students are insightful (not in denial) about their role.

Our suicide prevention discussion had a positive impact on many of the children, learning the lessons from the Jamey Rodemeyer case. Students shared their own personal experiences with suicide. One boy discussed his own feelings of suicide that he had a couple of years ago because he was bullied, but he stated that the bullying has stopped and he no longer has those feelings. Another boy discussed how his brother committed suicide because he had been bullied so much and went on to explain how it has affected his behavior. In another class, we found that even the students with the most problematic behavior were able to empathize with Jamey and could articulate what he must have been going through. In this discussion, we also reiterated the idea of tolerance and respect for all people reinforcing the United Nations Declaration for Human Rights.

We have received several other calls from different schools for similar outreach. With support and more interns, Meaningfulworld will be ready to take on more schools and communities, as well as expand the support to teachers, and parents. Our observations also revealed that many teachers were extremely stressed and were reactive at times, while others were very empathic and supportive. Monthly supportive groups are recommended for parents and teachers.

Based on aforementioned experiences, we added an ongoing program in high schools, called SMS, Students for Meaningful Solutions as a project of YEP at Meaningfulworld.

SMS - NYC is a unique opportunity for high school students in grades 9-12 to see current global issues through lenses not typically applied in the classroom. SMS is an after school club program. Upon

successful completion and adherence to the program’s requirements and guidelines, representatives from high school chapters convene for a summer summit and discuss solutions to the topic in focus; for the next school year, the topic of the summer summit is Race Relations and the Epicenter of Prejudice in America. Students and advisers will be provided with a multitude of resources to ensure that each high school chapter has an equal opportunity at success in time for the spring summit. A number of research projects will be due prior to the culminating summit, which will be applied on a greater scale throughout summit sessions and the final presentation. The summit will take place at the United Nations.

For more information kindly visit www.meaningfulworld.com.

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