Perspective

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Burden of peer-to-peer bullying in Sri Lanka: A call for action!

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Peer-to-Peer bullying, it is defined as a specific form of aggression which is intentional, repeated over time to bring negative actions on a part of one or more other persons and involves disparity of power between the bully and the victim (1). Different forms of bullying are physical or/and verbal aggression, cyberbullying or exclusion from specific social groups or activities. In Sri Lanka, the Global School Health Survey 2024 revealed that 18.9% of students were bullied over the past one year with nearly 6% going through cyber bullying (2). Further, a significant number of school children reported not having close friendships and being lonely (2).

Cyberbullying might have a slightly higher impact on suicidal behaviours and child and adolescent mental health than traditional forms of bullying, such as physical or verbal forms (3,4). Most children face more than one type of bullying (5,6,7). The impact of mental health has been more severe in cyber and verbal forms (4,7). With the advancement of technology, the duration of bullying may be unlimited since it may continue after educational hours with significant challenges around tracking down the bullies and controlling online harassment. The defenders of the victim were at a higher risk of getting bullied in subsequent sessions (3,4). A majority had revealed being victims to either school or family. Bullying behaviour may not surface due to stigma, fear of reporting and other psychosocial factors. Only 4% of victims have confided in and revealed during health care settings (3).

Impact of bullying

Bullying has been a significant predictor and a risk factor of suicidal ideation, attempt and mental health distress among children and adolescents (3,4). The victim and the bully may have serious mental health problems (4). It can aggravate suicidal ideation, anxiety, depression, helplessness, social isolation, and poor school performance (5). The victims perceived themselves more negatively and felt unsafe and insecure. Victims were also at a higher rate of showing impulsivity, resorting to substance use and likely to drop out from schools (3,4).

Preventive measures

Multisectoral collaboration to formulate clear guidelines and policies related to antibullying is much-needed. Clinicians working with children may take a minute to inquire about any forms of bullying and related mental health issues in their assessment (3,8). Comprehensive awareness of the nature and forms of bullying and the victim – and the bully mentality, especially in educational settings, would guide children to understand their feelings and behaviours more and seek help when appropriate. Developing a free and safe communication space during school will facilitate children to seek help more towards a trustworthy adult or a carer (3,8). Actions to mitigate the impact of poverty on families, such as ensuring sustainable methods to provide food and clothing, may help reduce victimisation (3,8).

Sri Lanka has laws relevant to combat bullying at schools and higher education institutions (e.g. the Prohibition of Ragging Act, recent amendments to penal code and corporal punishment, the Online Safety Act). Gaps lie within its practical implementation. Need for comprehensive guidelines and directives nationally is essential to identify, intervene and prevent bullying. This ensures safe school environments, along with child rights, mental health priorities, and educational outcomes.

Schools can create a safe and secure environment by implementing various policies or protocols such as anti-bullying laws, zero-tolerance policies for violence or abuse, and disaster preparedness regulations (9).

Few studies have investigated the factors that act as barriers to or facilitators of school bullying policy implementation. Barriers to implementation included incomplete understanding of the policy by school members, poor agreement among personnel about what constituted bullying, bombardment of media attention about the policy, inadequate faculty and staff training, limited staff knowledge about bullying intervention strategies, lack of coordination among staff regarding protocols, lack of consistent follow-through by school personnel, lack of support from parents and school leaders, time constraints, and competing needs of students (10).

Preventive measures such as empathetic school culture where respect and empathy will be promoted with anti-bullying values are included in the curriculum, is necessary (8,10).

Social emotional learning (SEL) is a structured way to improve a wide range of students' social and emotional competencies and impact bullying at the individual and peer levels of the school social ecology. SEL has been shown to be an effective component in comprehensive bullying prevention interventions (1,8,9,10).

Peer support within schools can create opportunities for children and young people to be proactive in challenging bullying when they observe it. Peer supporters can play a part in this process by monitoring social interaction during break times to support victims by reporting abusive behaviour (8).

School staff with parents and youth must play a role in preventing bullying at school. One mechanism for engaging parents and youth, a school safety committee which can bring the community together to keep bullying prevention at school active and focused (1,10).

Students should be provided multiple routes to report bullying which ensure all pupils feel safe and empowered to speak up in a way that suits their individual needs. Different pupils may feel comfortable using different reporting channels. Offering multiple options removes barriers to reporting and encourages early intervention. This aids the school to respond more effectively to incidents, fostering a safer and more inclusive environment for everyone (1,8).

Legal and disciplinary measures are essential to combat bullying. Discipline must be supported by positive discipline and behavioural management and avoid corporal punishment. Online safety education with clear reporting of cyberbullying is needed (1,8,10).

Resource allocation for training, awareness with monitoring mechanisms and evaluation mechanisms is also part of comprehensive antibullying policies.

Conclusion

A national anti-bullying policy is not just about ensuring discipline; it's central to ensure good mental health, child rights, and quality education. While directives such as child friendly school programmes and establishing positive discipline in the school setting is taking place nationally, this issue will need to be dealt with a holistic approach with multisectoral collaboration.

Sri Lanka can significantly reduce the harms of bullying and build safer, inclusive schools by providing legal support, resource commitment, stakeholder engagement, and monitoring.

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