The secret to stopping a bully?

After decades of research, no one has yet found a way to reduce bullying in US schools. But in the shadows, you just might find the solution.

By Neil Swidey | May 2, 2010

She looks as you expect she would. Straight blond hair, pert nose, complexion as perfect as her clothes. She can say a lot with just a surgical flick of her head and can stretch simple phrases like “shut up” and “totally” to twice their natural length. Tess Tyler is the privileged, beautiful-but-brittle, mean-girl bully who torments Mitchie Torres, the working-class, wide-eyed, good-girl protagonist. In this case, the bully and victim come from the Disney Channel tweener franchise Camp Rock, which will pump out a sequel this summer. But you can find similar pairs driving the drama in many popular kids’ TV shows and movies.

For proof, I recently watched – or, in some cases, endured – a host of youth-oriented movies, ranging from Princess Protection Program, another Disney vehicle for its teen stars of the moment, to The Longshots, a sports-oriented movie starring rapper and actor Ice Cube, to Chrissa Stands Strong, a movie produced by doll maker American Girl. While there are some clear surface differences, the overall dramatic patterns are remarkably similar. For much of the film, the bully is in control, and intimidation reigns. But in the final scenes, one of two things happens: Either the bully experiences an epiphany and begins engaging in more pro-social

behavior or, more often, the bully's sidekicks realize they'd given up their souls in exchange for social standing and choose to make a clean break, a move that isolates the bully and helps the victim triumph. That's exactly what happens in Camp Rock, when one of Tess's two sidekicks, Peggy, confronts Tess minutes before the big show, yelling, "Stop telling us what to do!" and storming off. Ella, the other sidekick, follows suit, with both lending their support to good girl Mitchie en route to a happy finale.

Despite their uplifting endings, I doubt these pop-culture products do much to discourage bullying among their young viewers, since 95 percent of the movie's running time is spent reinforcing the awful behavior, and the conversions that spark the last 5 percent come across as contrived. Still, this form of entertainment can be useful in a different way. Although these tidy resolutions are wrong, the overall depictions are often right. Stock bully characters, from mean girls like Tess Tyler to rough boys like Nelson Muntz of The Simpsons, have held up surprisingly well in descriptive studies conducted by bullying-prevention researchers. So maybe the Peggys and Ellas of the world deserve a closer look. Could anti-bullying programs be more successful if they dropped their primary focus on bullies and victims and instead took aim directly at the sidekicks and other key members of the bully's posse? After all, if a supportive audience is what fuels the bully, wouldn't the sidekicks be the most logical place to try to choke off that oxygen supply?

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There's been lots of talk lately about anti-bullying programs. How could there not be, after all the horrifying details that emerged following the suicide of South Hadley teenager Phoebe Prince. And there will be lots more talk now that the Massachusetts Legislature has approved a bullying bill requiring schools to implement prevention and intervention programs. The available programs vary

widely, as do the people behind them, who range from self-promoting, self-proclaimed experts, offering little more than buzzwords, bromides, and books for sale, to thoughtful, committed educators determined to do the hard work to protect other kids like Phoebe. But here's what has gotten lost amid all the legislation and finger-pointing: None of the current anti-bullying programs, despite their fanfare, have been successful in reducing actual bullying among American students in any meaningful way.

Researchers from the University of Oregon, led by Kenneth Merrell, conducted a meta-analysis – a review statistically combining the results of many earlier studies – that examined the effectiveness of bullying intervention programs in the United States and Europe across a 25-year period. Their results, published in 2008, could hardly have been more depressing. While they found that some programs produced modest improvements in students' attitudes about bullying and in their feelings of social competence, they found none that demonstrated a significant reduction in bullying behavior. In fact, the researchers found that "the average teacher actually reported more bullying after intervention than before."

A separate meta-analysis by the Swedish National Council for Crime Prevention found better results, but that 2008 report was less rigorous than Merrell's. In general, European researchers have reported more optimistic findings, particularly in Norway, the nation that pioneered bullying studies and intervention. But Dorothy Espelage, a professor of educational psychology at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, says there's no scientific evidence to show that strategies developed for Norway's homogeneous population actually work for the population here, especially given its diversity. Nonetheless, the Norwegian model has somehow become the gold standard for federal officials evaluating bullying prevention programs in the United States.

Espelage is a leading American authority on bullying and definitely

someone who falls into that category of thoughtful, committed educators. Yet, after 17 years in the field, she admits, “It’s a mess. I want to bang my head against the wall.”

Still, she remains on the hunt. The Phoebe Prince case is just the latest evidence of the deadly consequences that bullying can have – consequences that have led to homicide as well as suicide. Research has shown that bullying victims are more likely to bring weapons to school, and many of the students behind school shootings like Columbine had been repeat victims of bullying.

Defined as deliberate and repeated acts of aggression and intimidation against someone less powerful, bullying has traditionally intensified during the middle school years, when a child’s peer groups tend to become more influential than parents or teachers. While bullying is certainly not new, and researchers debate whether it’s more prevalent, there’s no question that the chances of it escalating are now higher, thanks to technology. A generation ago, a seventh-grade girl might have dreaded walking into school, convinced that all of her classmates would have instantly heard about some embarrassment she had suffered. Of course, that was just adolescent paranoia at work. Today, her paranoia is justified. By the time she steps off the bus, everyone has been able to read the embarrassing details on somebody’s Facebook wall.

The speed and ferocity with which rumors and cutting remarks are now spread, thanks to social networking, has transformed cyber-bullying from an ancillary concern to something entwined with the core problem. Yet most bullying prevention programs are based on research and thinking formulated during the era before the Internet, or at least before social networking tools took hold, says Elizabeth Englander, who directs the Massachusetts Aggression Reduction Center in Bridgewater. That’s like trying to develop strategies to reduce highway deaths based on data from horse-

and-buggy accidents.

So we need to think a lot more creatively and rigorously about how to combat bullying. One strategy gaining a good deal of traction involves bystander training. The thinking is that we can reduce bullying by encouraging uninvolved students to step in to protest when they see it happening. You can understand the logic just by imagining a school corridor scene: A bully taunts another student as a thicket of classmates looks on, the laughter and hoots mounting. The bully has no incentive to change, since he derives social status from putting on this display of power. The victim has little ability to change, since he is too intimidated by the taunting. The bystanders would seem to hold the power to change the dynamic. If the bully were suddenly to lose his audience or see the crowd turn on him, he would seem much more likely to pull back.

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Steve Tower is wearing a navy suit, but the 6-foot-2 guest is flying around this fifth-grade classroom with the same intensity as when he's wearing sweats on the practice court, coaching a college basketball team. Tower is a youth health coordinator with Massachusetts General Hospital. The 41-year-old has come to the colorfully decorated classroom in the Warren/Prescott K-8 School as part of a pilot anti-bullying curriculum launched this year in Charlestown. Wisely, he doesn't use the word bullying until two-thirds of the way into his presentation.

He divides the students into four groups, unleashing the din of desk chairs being dragged along a linoleum floor. He hands each group a copy of the same photograph. It shows a handsome boy wearing the uniform of his youth football team. The smiling boy is 11 and would easily fit into this Charlestown classroom. "Write down as many things about what you imagine that person in the picture is like," Tower tells the kids. "Be as creative as possible." The kids start with obvious characteristics. "He's African-American."

“He likes playing football.” Soon they move on to assumptions. “He likes video games.” “He has lots of friends.”

Knowing a fast pace is the way to keep the attention of 11-year-olds, Tower quickly shifts into a discussion about how leadership means making smart choices. Then comes a role-playing exercise in which he whips out his cellphone and pretends to text nasty things about one of the teacher’s aides. He goes to the chalk board to point out the arithmetic behind bullying: one bully, one victim, and, after counting heads in the class, he writes “25 bystanders,” circling the last data point for emphasis. Just by their sheer number, he says, the bystanders hold the key to stopping bullying, if they do the right thing.

“Is that easy?” he asks.

“No,” comes the chorus from the class.

One girl pipes up: “The bully could turn on you.”

They talk about the options for intervening, from telling the bully to stop to letting a teacher or parent know. This segues into another exercise called “Agree-Disagree.” Tower makes a statement – “Some kids deserve to be picked on or teased” – and tells the fifth-graders to walk to the left side of the room if they agree and the right side if they disagree. He’s not surprised to see a few unlikely boys among the handful of students lining up on the “Agree” side. When he gave the same presentation to a different class, he watched as a boy sheepishly crossed the room to the “Agree” side, prompting one of the girls in the class to ask him, “Why are you going over there? You’re one of the kids being bullied.” Some victims can become so intimidated by bullies that they have to pretend publicly to support their victimizers. He tries to expose the flaws in each rationalization for the “Agree” argument.

As the minutes wind down, Tower tells the students, “Remember

that picture I gave you in the beginning?" He holds up the photo of the 11-year-old boy in the football uniform and begins rattling off the many descriptions of him that the kids had come up with. "He likes pizza, dogs, loves birds, hates the rain – I hate the rain – he loves outdoors, he's strong, he hopes to play in the NFL when he gets older, he's a cool kid." Tower waves around the photo once more. "All of these things are very true. This is Carl Walker-Hoover. He's actually from Springfield, Mass. He's a great kid."

Then Tower holds up a different photo, one that causes several of the fifth-graders to gasp. "This is him." The photo shows a silver casket.

"He's dead?" one of the boys asks.

"Yes."

"How'd he die?" asks a girl.

"He was bullied," Tower says, explaining that some boys accused Carl of being gay, even though he wasn't, and then mercilessly taunted him. "And no one, no one, did anything. There were no leaders in that bystander group. And because no one did anything, this great kid hung himself."

More gasps. "All of you are bystanders," he says. "All of you can be leaders."

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As an example of bystander training, Tower's presentation did several things right: He established a strong connection with the kids and managed to open their eyes. Crucially, he also acknowledged that intervening isn't easy. Too often, bystander intervention is preached without any real recognition of the high social costs that bystanders risk by choosing to get involved. As a

result, the whole approach can seem hopelessly simplistic. Take, for example, the bullying materials the Massachusetts Medical Society puts out for parents. “Teach your child how to help without getting hurt,” the materials advise. “Your child might say, ‘Cool it! This isn’t going to solve anything.’ ”

Really, can you imagine any better guarantee for turning a bystander into a victim than by encouraging him to yell “Cool it!” to a bully in a crowded corridor? And when was that last time you even heard that phrase come out of the mouth of someone under the age of 34? More realistic and practical advice might simply be to get the bystanders to walk away, denying the bully an audience without drawing a target on their backs.

Espelage, the University of Illinois researcher, agrees with the notion that bystanders can play an important role by getting involved, or even by walking away, but she points to data suggesting that “adolescents rarely intervene to assist victims.” That could be the bystander approach’s Achilles’ heel. For a better understanding of the forces at work, Espelage and two colleagues recently completed a fascinating study that examines middle schoolers’ willingness to intervene, with a particular eye on whether they had a bully within their circle of friends. Their paper, which is under review, offers some sobering results. They found that if a boy had a bully within his circle, his willingness to intervene was close to zero. Interestingly, they found that girls’ willingness to intervene appeared to be unconnected to whether they could count a bully as one of their friends.

Understanding this gender gap was beyond the scope of their paper, but work by other researchers on gender norms among middle schoolers offers some possible clues. Girls now vigorously compete with boys in sports, academics, and other pursuits, so the definition of being female and the range of gender-appropriate behavior for them are wider than they’ve ever been. But

sociologists Barbara Risman and Elizabeth Seale have found that the range of socially acceptable behavior for boys among their peers is narrower than ever, perhaps because they're more motivated to protect their remaining turf as a result of the increased competition from girls. And boys who don't conform to those standards of masculinity are likely to be labeled gay. Homophobic-fueled bullying is the most devastatingly effective tool that boys use to enforce these restrictions on one another. And any boy who steps in to defend a classmate being bullied for acting "queer," or who even just declines to cheer on that taunting, instantly makes himself vulnerable to those same slurs.

Where does this leave us? Back to sidekicks. We know that with bullying intervention, the least effective programs are the most generic. Even in a field where nothing much is working, the broad "whole school" assembly-type approaches are notable for their abject failure. And we know that, although it happens far too rarely, when kids around the bully intervene, the bullying is much more likely to stop. So the real goal must be to boost those willingness-to-intervene levels among students. Following the premise that the more targeted the approach, the better, it stands to reason that converting the kids closest to the bully would have the biggest effect. After all, even if other bystanders step in, as long as bullies maintain the support of their sidekicks and other close friends, that should be enough oxygen to keep fueling their behavior. And there is more hope for reforming the behavior of sidekicks than the bullies. Bullies derive power from their behavior, but like the girls in those Disney flicks, sidekicks often base their support for the bully less on principle than on fear.

At this point, there's not a lot of science to back the sidekick approach. But when I ran it by Espelage, she agreed, saying, "It would be more fruitful to target those bystanders who are actively contributing to the bullying in a different way than those who are less integrated and just looking on." And there are some promising

signs, notably in Finland. Researchers there have developed a program called KiVa, which identifies the various roles students play and then targets those students actively involved in bullying – ringleaders, sidekicks, and victims – putting them through a series of discussions. Admittedly, Finland, like Norway, lacks the diversity of the United States. But psychologist Christina Salmivalli, a KiVa co-leader, says one large-scale Finnish study found KiVa had reduced bullying more than any other program evaluated as rigorously. Researchers from the University of Kansas plan to test KiVa in US schools to see if its positive results hold up here.

Granted, it won't be easy to change the behavior of sidekicks, especially boys, given their particularly low willingness to intervene if they can count a bully among their friends. But since the anti-bullying programs now in circulation have thoroughly failed to move the meter, a sidekick strategy seems like a smart investment.

Doing it well would require a school staff acutely attuned to the social landscape in its corridors and willing to confront bullying head-on, with a fearless focus on the ring of students most closely orbiting the bully. The next Phoebe Prince will need that support.

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