

Erasmus-von-Rotterdam-Gymnasium in Viersen

The Olweus Bullying Prevention Program

Overview

Since the beginning of the year 2000, at the initiative of parents, the problem of violence has been the subject of intense and proactive discussion at a school in Viersen. As a first step, a working group consisting of parents and teachers was established by the school principal to explore the subject in greater depth. Through its contacts with the local Prevention Commissariat, the school became aware of the Olweus Bullying Prevention Program and introduced it for all grade levels in the fall of 2000.

In light of the positive experience – a marked decline in the number of disciplinary conferences and an improved social climate at the school –, one out of five schools in the county of Viersen has meanwhile incorporated this bullying prevention strategy into its school program.

According to Lösel & Bliesener, based on the incidence of frequent (weekly) aggressive behaviour manifesting itself not only in mild verbal form, between 4% and 10% of the pupils at a given school can be projected to engage in bullying. The observed aggressive behaviour largely takes the form of verbal and mild physical aggression; severe physical violence and the use of weapons tend to be rare (Lösel & Bliesener 2003: p. 26).

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The Olweus Bullying Prevention Program

In the 1980s, working on the basis of longitudinal studies, the Norwegian psychologist Dan Olweus developed a violence prevention and intervention program for schools. The program facilitates the creation of conditions conducive to the reduction of direct and indirect forms of violence among pupils. As a result, these measures also improve the social climate at the school and solidarity among the pupils.

Programs for the prevention of bullying are directed against so-called bullies. The term “bully” refers to persons who torment, mob or exhibit aggressive or violent behaviour towards others, put them under pressure, fleece them, etc.

The program targets three levels: the schoolwide, classroom and individual levels. At each of these levels there are specific intervention options. Examples at schoolwide level include cooperation between parents and teachers, closer supervision during break periods or a hotline. At classroom level they can consist of classroom rules and consequences for infractions as well as classroom meetings. Options at individual level include talks with the persons involved. The aim is to intervene at an early stage in order to prevent undesirable developments. Parents, pupils and teachers are all involved.

If a case of bullying is reported, i.e. if a pupil feels threatened or attacked or if a parent or a teacher learns about an incident, a procedure with which all are familiar can be activated. This starts a chain of interventions that make it possible to constructively address the act of aggression.

Core components of the program

- Determination of whether teasing or violence was involved, whether the act in question was a joke that was carried too far or already a violation of an individual's personal sphere, is not up to the perpetrator but rather to the victim. Attention is thus diverted away from the perpetrator, who has previously usually been the centre of attention, and is instead focused on the victim. It is the victim who decides whether he/she feels mobbed, for example, not the perpetrator (“I was only kidding”). This very shift in perspective serves to strengthen the position of the victim.
- If a case of bullying occurs, the victimized pupil approaches a teacher in whom he/she has confidence, either directly or indirectly through another pupil, or his/her parents approach such a teacher. The perpetrator is then called upon to state his/her view of the incident in writing. The victim likewise describes the incident in writing from his/her perspective. The teacher jots down a brief record of the incident, insofar as he/she was a witness thereto, adding information from other witnesses if available. Thus the statements of all the pupils involved are taken into account, yielding a differentiated picture of the facts of the case.
- The various statements are then forwarded to the parents of the perpetrator, who are in turn asked to respond. Not until afterwards is there a meeting of the parties involved or, depending on the severity of the incident, a class conference.
Aim of this procedure: By making the incident public, the perpetrator is to be deprived of the protection and invisibility he/she enjoys when others keep silent or look the other way. At the same time, the victim is given the certainty that subsequent intimidation attempts by the perpetrator will likewise immediately be made public.

- Through these measures a victim can be confident that his/her “cry for help” will not only be heard but also prompt consistent and resolute action by the school. This increasingly encourages victims to speak up and thus defend themselves.

Evaluation of the program

According to Hanewinkel & Knaack, scientific evaluations of the program have been conducted inter alia in the Scandinavian countries by Olweus, in the United Kingdom (Whitney & Smith 1993) and in China (Ekbal & Olweus 1986). In Germany the program was translated for introduction in schools in Schleswig-Holstein, and a statewide evaluation was carried out (Hanewinkel & Knaack 1997) that originally encompassed nearly 15,000 pupils at 47 schools. Ten of these schools did not participate in the second survey. In the first survey, between 10% and 20% of the pupils stated that they had already been a victim of mobbing at one time. The results of the evaluation can be summarized as follows:

- Reduction of direct forms of mobbing by as much as 7.5% up to grade 10.
- Tangible and measurable improvement of the social climate at the school (determined from questionnaires filled out by pupils, parents and teachers).
- Improved cooperation among the faculty.
- Organizational changes such as new rules for break periods and redesign of the area used during break periods.

The authors were unable to obtain any measurable results concerning indirect forms of mobbing (exclusion/isolation) and attitudes towards mobbing (Hanewinkel & Knaack 1997).

Implementation of the bullying prevention strategy at Erasmus-von-Rotterdam-Gymnasium

- Parents receive information about Erasmus-von-Rotterdam-Gymnasium (EVR-Gymnasium) bullying prevention strategy at the time they register their child for 5th grade. Teachers and pupils sign an agreement to help prevent bullying. The issue is addressed in depth during classroom instruction in grade 5, and classroom rules are drawn up in cooperation with the pupils.
- The strategy is again addressed in classroom instruction in grade 7. Pupils' knowledge of the issues associated with bullying is refreshed and broadened to encompass criminal aspects and criminal responsibility. The Prevention Commissariat provides support in the form of instruction modules oriented towards particularly timely topics such as fleecing or shoplifting. The classroom rules are revised and adapted.
- The school administration approaches the student body representatives on a regular basis and thus obtains feedback on the social climate at the school and possible irregularities. The principal explains that in the case of problems involving a number of pupils, for example, a special event on the subject may also be held for a specific grade level.
- Regular evenings or conferences on the subject are scheduled for the faculty, and the bullying prevention strategy is firmly entrenched in the school program.

Five years of experience with the strategy at EVR-Gymnasium

With just a very few exceptions, experience with the EVR-Gymnasium bullying prevention strategy has been overwhelmingly positive. The social climate at the school has improved. The number of disciplinary conferences has declined markedly, from 5 – 6 per year in the years 1990 – 2001 to an average of one per year today. In the course of implementation, however, it has become clear that this strategy is not the panacea for every situation and should not be used in minor cases because it otherwise tends to lose its effectiveness. In each case that is reported, a decision is made as to whether the bullying prevention strategy or another option such as the mediation program is more appropriate.

Experience at the school has shown that the very knowledge of this comprehensive and transparent procedure prompts many pupils, especially younger ones, to clearly distance themselves from bullying and violence.

Some criticism has been voiced in regard to the amount of writing involved. In view of the central importance of writing for the strategy, however, this cannot be avoided. Assistance is offered to parties who have difficulty expressing themselves in writing.

The police crime statistics for the county of Viersen show that the number of violent offences reported to the police declined 20% in the year 2003. 57% of all violent offences in the county of Viersen are committed by school-age young people (see Devries 2004).

Advantages of the strategy from the standpoint of EVR-Gymnasium

- The written form of expression more strongly encourages pupils to think seriously about their behaviour.
- Description of the incident in writing fosters greater objectivity and an ability to view events from a distance.
- Each of the parties involved can present his/her point of view without interruption or influence.
- Through the written form of expression, the school learns considerably more about the background and circumstances of the incident.
- During the subsequent or final meeting, the parties involved must look each other in the eye and either endure this tension or dispel it through reconciliation.
- In the event of a recurrence, a written record already exists to which disciplinary measures can directly refer.
- Parents are also expected to shoulder responsibility and are above all informed.

Points to be heeded

- The Olweus Bullying Prevention Program reaches the limits of its usefulness in particularly difficult cases, for example when there is also violence in the family or when a behavioural disorder such as pathological aggression is established.
- In such cases it has become apparent that a combination of several types of responses can prove successful, such as implementation of the Olweus Bullying Prevention Program and a commitment to participate in an assertiveness training program.
- Effectiveness is compromised if parental support is lacking or denied.
- There is a risk that teachers will cease to speak directly with pupils because they believe that the problem has been resolved once and for all by setting everything out in writing.
- There is a risk that pupils will apologize too readily and unconvincingly, swearing to “never do it again” without demonstrating a corresponding sense of wrongdoing.
- The Olweus Bullying Prevention Program should not be implemented mechanically because there is otherwise a risk that it may be seen as an end in itself and that the effectiveness of this instrument may be dulled (“Oh no, here they go again!”).

Steps to introduce the Olweus Bullying Prevention Program at school

1. Creation of a common awareness of the problem.
2. Circulation of a questionnaire to ascertain the current incidence of aggressive behaviour and violence at the school; the precise content should be jointly developed and agreed by teachers, parents and pupils.
3. Presentation of the Olweus Bullying Prevention Program and the results of the survey at a teachers’ meeting.
4. Organization of a parents’ evening on the subject.
5. Decision by the school conference to introduce the program.
6. Incorporation into the school program.
7. Involvement of the pupils through written agreements.
8. Publicity in the school newspaper, in the press or at an informational evening for parents registering children for 5th grade, for example.

Links

Olweus Bullying Prevention Program:

http://about.preventiondss.org/html/documents/select_programs/sa/BullyingPrevention.htm

OECD, International Network on School Bullying and Violence:

<http://oecd-sbv.net/Templates/Article.aspx?id=353>

Deutsches Forum für Kriminalprävention, *Primäre Prävention von Gewalt gegen Gruppenangehörige - insbesondere: junge Menschen*. Einführung und Empfehlungen der Arbeitsgruppe. Kurzfassung. Empfehlung 5.

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(19 January 2006)