

SWEAT THE SMALL STUFF—IF IT’S AGGRESSION AND BULLYING

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Mr. Wardell is in the hall of the high school doing his assigned hall duty. He notices that one of the students pokes a pencil in the arm of one of the female students. He debates on whether he should say something to the student but decides it was really no big deal and ignores the behavior. The next day he sees the same student engage in the behavior with another student. He again ignores the behavior. The next day the student hits, with significant force, a student in the arm. Mr. Wardell decides he shouldn't ignore that behavior and the school's policy says he must report this behavior to the principal. The principal then calls the police on the student. The student tries to downplay the event; after all he was just kidding and it was "no big deal." The student may be thinking to himself "I was poking at students on other days and nobody said anything." This is an example of how low level aggression turns in to high level aggression.

I have often spoken and written on the topic of ignoring inappropriate behavior; but have always stressed that any form of aggression should never be ignored. When ignoring behavior, the behavior will escalate. Such is indeed the case with aggression. When I have spoken on this topic, I have stressed that behavior of students can quickly get out of control when administrators and teachers ignore these behaviors. In some instances, I will see a light bulb go on with some staff who are concerned that they are seeing a lot of aggression within the school and can't figure out why. It then occurs to them that it is because they were ignoring a lot of the "small stuff" and that "small stuff" turned into "big stuff" and the school then had major issues with control. When students see that they can get away with the small stuff, they escalate the behavior. They are testing the limits to see with how much they can actually get away. The old saying of "Nip it in the bud" applies to low-level aggression.

Staff will often ignore aggressive behaviors exhibited by young students. They think that the behavior may be “cute” or “funny.” The student engages in the behavior as a 5 or 6 year old child; when the student reaches 8 or 9 the behavior isn’t cute anymore. The student is confused; after all he engaged in the behavior when he was younger and staff laughed about it. Once the aggressive behavior is learned; it is much more difficult to unlearn it because it has become a pattern in the student’s repertoire.

Arnold Goldstein (1999), in his excellent book on low-level aggression referred to it as: “First steps on the ladder to violence.” Goldstein wisely said: ...we as a society have far too often ignored the very manifestations of low-level aggression that, when rewarded, grow (often rapidly) into those several forms of often intractable high-level aggression that are currently receiving a great deal of society’s attention.” (p. 2).

School officials will take much greater steps in curbing school violence by dealing with low level aggression than with adding more metal detectors and security officers.

Let’s look at just a few specific examples of how low-level aggression can turn into high level aggression.

SEXUAL HARASSMENT

Many years ago I heard a speaker on the topic of sexual harassment. The speaker commented that schools were a breeding ground for rape. I was really bothered by that comment. The speaker’s point was that school personnel often ignore students who make inappropriate sexual remarks to other students. They also ignore some inappropriate touching between students. When those behaviors are ignored, school personnel are sending a message to the students that such behavior is permissible. Students then escalate that behavior.

About a year after I heard that presentation, I can remember an administrator contacting me with a concern that a fifth grade boy had inappropriately touched a girl while they were out on the playground. The administrator did not want to make a big

issue about the occurrence. I talked with the individual and explained ways to deal with this situation; the ways did not include ignoring the behavior. The administrator decided that she would think about it and later I learned that she decided to ignore the behavior. Two weeks later the same boy attempted to rape the girl.

THEFT

There may be times when school personnel ignore students who take other students' belongings because they feel they may be accused of overreacting or being too strict. Yet theft of small items can indeed lead to major theft. If students believe that staff will allow them to steal items they will continue the behavior; because the message they see is one of permission to take items from other individuals.

Here is a sad true story of a young man who was sentenced to time in the penal system for behavior that began occurring in kindergarten. At five, Jason began taking pencils from other children. It became a game to him. His teacher thought he was just playing and didn't consider the behavior as stealing. When Jason was in second grade he started stealing small amounts of money from the teacher's desk drawers and when the teacher caught him, he said he was sorry and the teacher let the incidents go. By the time Jason was in 4th and 5th grade he was stealing more money. The school staff didn't want to accuse him of stealing so just decided to watch him more closely. Interestingly enough, Jason by then had become skilled in stealing money when no one could catch him in the act. When Jason was in 7th grade, he stole his parent's car and drove it to a neighboring community and then brought it back. Jason's parents called the police and reported what had happened but decided not to press charges against Jason. Jason said that he was sorry and they believed the situation was under control. A year later, Jason broke into a car and drove it to another community and back and deserted it. Jason was caught and accused of stealing the car but the car owner did not press charges because Jason did apologize for taking the car. Within 6 months, Jason took several more cars and ended up in the Department of Corrections. Jason was actually very confused about why he would face such a harsh consequence for his behavior; after all he had been

engaging in this behavior for years and had always gotten away with it or talked his way out of it.

BULLYING

Problems with bullying are being reported throughout the country. An article in the October 7, 2004 *Detroit Free Press* was entitled: A Mean Trick: When homecoming elections turn cruel. This article focused on one of the latest and cruelest bullying techniques where high school students vote unpopular students or students with weight problems or special education students on the homecoming court. They then tease the students during the homecoming activities. Such behavior is indeed appalling and even more appalling is the fact that it is allowed. At the first indication that a student is being made fun of, those students who engage in the bullying should be stopped and should face significant consequences; certainly they should lose the privilege of participating in homecoming activities.

Some children may be afraid of going to school because they are intimidated by other students. Some children are ostracized by other students. Some students are made fun of by other students. Bullying behavior, if ignored, will continue and will escalate.

School personnel may hear students making fun of other students and ignore the statements. Playground supervisors may witness children ostracizing other children but choose not to do anything about the behavior. Bus drivers may witness students calling children hurtful names. Schools can become unsafe places for children to be if such behaviors are ignored. When school personnel see such behaviors occur, they must intervene. They must deal with the student who is doing the bullying privately. They need to provide an appropriate consequence for the behavior. They need to offer support to the victim of the bullying behavior. They must also report the incident to the administrator so that the administrator can determine, based on the nature of the behavior, whether to notify the parents of the bully and the bullied.

At the same time, students need to be recognized positively when they are engaging in acts of kindness. Students also need to be taught valuable social skills lessons on respect for each individual and what behaviors constitute bullying. Students also need to be taught what they should do when they see another student being bullied. A number of curriculums are now available to work on this major problem facing schools today.

PROPERTY DAMAGE

The teacher sees a student drop a piece of paper on the floor. The student does not pick it up. The teacher decides to just wait until after class and pick up the piece of paper herself. In the cafeteria, another student finishes his lunch and empties his lunch tray into the trash. Some of it falls on the floor instead. The cafeteria worker sees the incident, as does another staff member. Neither says anything thinking that it is someone else's responsibility. In both of these incidents, staff condoned behavior that can cause a disorganized and messy environment. Staff also taught the students that such behavior is acceptable and that it is not necessary to respect property. If several students would engage in the same behavior, the building would quickly become an environment that would not be a pleasant place for students and staff to be.

Students and some staff may have the attitude that it is the custodian's responsibility to clean up and they shouldn't have to pick up after themselves. This is an unfortunate attitude because we need to teach students that we take pride in our school environment, respect it, and want it to look as nice as possible. From the time that students are very young, they should be taught to respect their environment; otherwise these students learn a very poor lesson that it is okay to destroy property.

These are just a few of the examples of how low-level aggression can turn into high level aggression. Low level aggression can also be seen in behaviors such as swearing, cheating, and lying. When students are allowed to engage in any of the behaviors discussed here they escalate the behaviors and become desensitized to them; sadly seeing that there is nothing wrong with the behaviors. The students who made fun of other students on the homecoming court were desensitized to the needs of other

individuals. Students can become confused when the behaviors escalate to such a point that they do get into trouble.

It is very difficult for staff to understand that they must deal with the “little issues.”

They may believe they are being too strict or are making a big deal out of nothing.

However, all educators have an obligation to teach children appropriate behaviors and it is much easier to teach those behaviors at the first sign of a problem; rather than letting behavior get “out of hand” and turn into high level aggression.

WHAT CAN EDUCATORS DO TO DEAL WITH AGGRESSION AND BULLYING

1. All staff should develop clear expectations that any form of aggression is not acceptable within the school.
2. Establish systems of positive recognition for students who engage in appropriate behavior and train staff on how to utilize those systems.
3. Recognize students who engage in acts of kindness within the school.
4. All staff are role models for kind and caring behavior.
5. All staff must learn to look for and deal with exhibits of low-level aggression.
6. Establish a reporting system for everyone to utilize in reporting incidents of low-level aggression.
7. Stress that “we are all in this together” and encourage all staff to support each other in reporting such incidents.
8. Establish a system of clear consequences for incidents of low-level aggression.
9. Provide close supervision of students and keep ears and eyes open to reports of incidents of low-level aggression.
10. Teach appropriate social skills. Do not assume that students know how to behave. We must teach them how to behave.
11. Collect data on incidents of low and high level aggression, share that data with colleagues, and brainstorm solutions to the problems.

References:

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