Bullying and Autism Spectrum Disorders

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Bullying

- "...when one person picks on, harasses, or pesters another." (Olweus, 1993)
- "repeated negative actions with negative intent towards a targeted individual over time, with an imbalance of power." (Gray, 2004)
- Bullying behavior is distinguishable from aggressive behavior per se as it has to be a repeated action that occurs regularly over time, and it usually involves an imbalance in strength, either real or perceived. (Dautenhahn, Woods; retrieved 10/3/10)
- Related to "...type of power imbalance, intent to harm, a distressed target, and repeated negative actions." (Heinrichs, 2003)

Power Imbalances

- Physical size
- Presence of friends (for bully); being alone (for target)
- Social status
- Lack of social awareness and skills on the part of the target to effectively deal with negative peer interactions (whereas the bully may be quite capable in this area)
- Social naïveté and social communication deficits
- Target may be prone to stereotypic behaviors, low frustration tolerance, or meltdowns when under stress
- Exceptionalities—cognitive, intellectual, physical differences

Intent to Harm

- Intent to harm: the desire to cause emotional, psychological, social, and/or physical damage to another individual
- This can be a very challenging thing to determine if the child with ASD is identified as the "bully"
  - May not associate behavior with consequence
  - May see behavior as "justified" based on the actions of the other person involved
  - May "intend" one thing in the moment, that they are "regretful" for later on

Intent to Harm

- Whether or not a specific intent to harm can be identified, any behavior that a student engages in that is harmful to another student needs to be taken seriously, documented, and a plan needs to be developed on how to: 1) reassure and protect the individual who was the target of the behavior, and 2) work with the individual engaging in the behavior to attempt to prevent future

Types of Bullying
(Heinrichs, 2003)

- Physical (includes: hitting, pushing, tripping, etc…)
- Verbal (includes: name calling, verbal threats, making fun of someone, etc…)
- Social (includes: isolating or excluding, shunning, manipulating relationships, etc…)
- Educational—different from others because involves adults or staff (any time an adult uses their power to intentionally or unintentionally harm students including: use of sarcasm, humiliating students, favoring students, being overly critical or controlling, etc…)

Bullying Continuum
(Field, 2007)

Social banter
Hurtful teasing
Mean, subtle body language
Aggressive physical behaviors
Malicious gossip
Sexual, gender, racist, religious harassment
Social exclusion
Mobbing
Hazing
Extortion/bribery
Phone/Cyber abuse
Damage to property
Physical violence
Use of weapons
Criminal act
Murder

General Characteristics of Bullies
(Heinrichs, 2003; Field, 2007)

- Inappropriately perceive hostile intent in actions of others
- Aims to dominate, command, and control
- Have often been exposed to models of aggressive behaviors
- Chronically repeat aggressive behaviors; quick to anger and more apt to use force; angry and revengeful
- Tend to have little empathy for targets
- Control others through verbal and physical threats
- Denies responsibility for behavior; limited remorse

- Offer devious and dishonest answers/explanations
- View aggression as the way to preserve their self-image—(in ASD, aggression may be that individual's "best" response in a particular situation {Stillman, 2003})
- Focus on angry thoughts
- Perception of physical image is important to their sense of power and control
- Exhibit obsessive or rigid actions
- Frustrate peers and create resentment
- Have an inflated self-opinion
- Superficially nice—"sucks up"

General Characteristics of Targets
(Heinrichs, 2003)

- Have ineffective social skills, poor interpersonal skills, and/or difficulty relating to peers
- Less popular
- Believe that they cannot control their environment
- Have underlying fears of personal inadequacy
- Socially isolated
- Afraid of going to school
- Physically younger, smaller, and weaker than peers
- Poor self-concept, given labels suggesting inadequacy, feelings of inadequacy

- Blame themselves for their problems
- Limited communication skills under stress
- Physical mannerisms associated with depression
- Perform self-destructive actions
- Believe others are more capable of handling things
- Feel external factors have a greater impact than internal control
- Have over-involved family members
- Perceptions of progressive failures

General Characteristics of Children with ASD That May Increase Risk of Being Bullied
(Heinrichs, 2003; Field, 2007; Attwood, 2007)

- Frustrate peers
- Rejected by peers
- Clumsy; may be ineffective in play, sports and fights
- May have difficulty engaging in team sports
- Difficulty engaging in age-expected social interactions
- May not demonstrate age- and gender-appropriate fashion sense
- Emotionally vulnerable--meltdowns, emotional outbursts may be elicited by other children

- Difficulty with emotion regulation
- Anxious
- Inflexible
- Tendency to be sedentary
- Socially naïve
- Difficulty telling the "good guys" from the "bad guys"
- Viewed as easy targets—may be easy to set up
- Issues with self-esteem
- Attention seeking
- Seek out, and need, solitude

Bullying and ASD—Statistics

- Bullying is the most common form of violence that many of our students will come into contact
  - Bullying is a common reason that parents identify related to why they want their student to attend LGA
- Nationwide, as many as 160,000 students may stay home any given day because they're afraid of being bullied (Heinrichs, 2010)
- 88-94% of children with ASD have experienced some bullying at school (Massachusetts Advocates for Children, 2009; Little, 2002)
- Peer and sibling assault rates were eight times higher for children with ASD (Little, 2003)

Bullying and ASD—Statistics

- Montes, Halterman; 2007—children with ASD and ADD/ADHD are 4 times more likely to bully than the general population
  - Some factors which may increase the likelihood include: young age, hyperactivity/impulsivity, difficulties with social interactions, perspective taking and/or empathy challenges
  - One factor our parents at LGA stated for bringing their children to LGA is to get them away from bullying they experienced in the mainstream

Bullying and ASD—Statistics
(van Roekel, Scholte, Didden; 2009)

- Adolescents who scored high on teacher and self-reported victimization were more likely to misinterpret non-bullying situations as bullying
  - They may be more biased in their perception and interpret neutral or even positive situations as negative
- The more often adolescents bullied, according to teachers and peers, and the less developed their ToM, the more they misinterpreted bullying situations as non-bullying

Bullying and ASD

- Factors which may place the student with ASD at greater risk of being either a victim or bully (or at times both):
  - Physical meltdowns
  - Difficulties with Central Coherence
  - Impulsivity control
  - Lack of social awareness

Characteristics of Bullying Behavior in Children with ASD

- Children with ASD tend to bully more in specific types of situations than children who are neurotypical
- Children with ASD may try to assert control over their environment to make it more predictable
- Children with ASD may have less well-developed ToM, so they may struggle taking the perspective of the person they are targeting
- Some children with ASD do not associate their behavior with the consequences
- Some children with ASD show difficulties with emotion regulation, including aggressiveness, meltdowns, etc…

Some Additional Patterns Noted at LGA Around Bullying

- Typically, individuals who bully are not anxious or insecure. Students who we have noted to engage in bullying activity at LGA often are experiencing some insecurity or anxiety around the situation

- Fewer bullying situations "of convenience" where there isn't an adult around—more bullying situation-specific incidents where one student is "bothering" another student (according to the bully)

- Our students most prone to either bullying or being a target are those students with the least connections—lack of connection to others was more likely in both groups

- Both our students who are more likely to be identified as bullies, and those who are more likely to be identified as targets, demonstrate difficulties with perspective taking, ToM, and/or empathy

Some Additional Patterns Noted at LGA Around Bullying

- Some correlation between the students identified as "bullies" and other behaviors that might be classified as oppositional, defiant, noncompliant, etc…
- An increased identification of any unwanted "conflict" as bullying by the targets
- More incidents reported by students, parents, and staff related to "verbal bullying"
- Overall, in a survey, 78% of students had indicated that they had not been bullied in the past two week period

Characteristics of Victim Behavior in Children with ASD

- Children with ASD may not be aware that they are being bullied, taken advantage of, etc… (social naïveté)
- Children with ASD may have fewer friends to stick up for them
- Children with ASD may engage in social faux pas', stereotypic behaviors, meltdowns, etc…, that make them higher profile for being bullied
- Some children with ASD demonstrate an increased level of anxiety
- Some children with ASD are less resilient and have a greater difficulty dealing with "teasing," even when it is "friendly"

Problems with Addressing Bullying in Students with ASD

- Some conflict between students, particularly those situations where both students have struggles with social interactions, may be related to their mutual struggles (the disabilities of the two individuals may come into conflict with one another)

- Bullying often implies an intention to harm—at times, individuals with ASD can lack the awareness of the impact of their behavior on others, as well as the emotional impact of their words on others

- Bullying is subjective—at LGA we frequently have more than one student in the interaction who identifies that he/she was bullied (often by the other student who also indentifies that they have been bullied)

- Traditional consequences/punishment may be ineffective tools for eliciting the behavioral change sought when addressing "bullying"—consequences and/or punishment may elicit the opposite response (an increase in the targeting of the other student)

Problems with Addressing Bullying in Students with ASD

- The term "Bullying" is a loaded term in our society
  - Some parents may want to avoid the application of this term to their child's behavior
  - Some staff may see the only "appropriate" response to "bullying" behavior as punishment and consequences
    - They may struggle at seeing what underlies the student's "bullying" behavior—they may have difficulty taking his/her perspective
  - Some staff may not want to apply this term to a student because they are a "favorite" student
    - Some staff may be more likely to apply this term to a particular student because that student isn't as well liked

Problems with Addressing Bullying in Students with ASD

- **TIME**
  - The issues underlying the "bullying" behavior are often things that may take time to be able to address (i.e., emotion regulation, ToM, frustration tolerance, etc…)
  - Working with the student who is the target of the "bullying" behavior may also take time (the anxiety and stress involved in dealing with the "bullying" may make working on any underlying factors that may make the individual more vulnerable to bullying take a longer period of time)
  - There may be a need for an "immediate response," as well as the need for the development of a "long-term" plan for how to address the "bullying" behavior

Some Interventions LGA Has Begun to Implement

- Staff education around bullying and response to bullying behavior
- Character education—focus on respect, cooperation, tolerance, community, etc…
- Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports--built on four pillars of respect for self, others, community, and property
  - Initial implementation of three-tiered response to behavior, including: school-wide interventions, supplementary interventions, and intensive interventions
- Early identification of problem behaviors—development of plan with case managers, behavior support team, parents, students, and administration to work with students identified as bullies and/or targets/victims
  - Identification of the factors (i.e., ToM, history of being bullied, difficulty associating own behavior with consequences, social vulnerability) that may underlie a student's bullying or risk of being a target
  - Development of behavior contracts/plans with a focus on skill development
- Manipulate the environment for classroom success (i.e., change seating, putting students by more helpful peers)

Some Interventions LGA Has Begun to Implement

- Increased supervision in areas identified by surveys in the Spring as high-risk areas (i.e., hallways and lunchroom)
  - Staff work with students in the naturalistic environment (hallways and lunchroom) on skills to promote prosocial interaction
- Formative consequences (consequences that teach or help the child think in a different way or that challenge and change behavior as opposed to mere punitive measures {Heinrich, 2003})
  - Participation in skills groups
  - Making amends to target
  - Parent involvement to identify a way for student to perform a "caring act" as a consequence of behavior
  - Meeting with identified adult to process through incident, identify target emotions, and explore more appropriate choices

Some Staff Responses to Bullying

- Four "R's"—Recognize the situation, Respond to the bully, Reduce the likelihood that the behavior will happen again, Model Respect
  - (Heinrichs, 2003) 1) Stay calm and use a firm but straightforward style, 2) Give a brief, clear summary of the unacceptable behavior, 3) Develop a plan for addressing the behavior/making amends to the target, 4) Model respect and look for opportunities to pay attention to positive behaviors.
- Look at the function of the behavior—respond to the function of the behavior and develop plan for how the individual might respond in the future
  - Correct thinking errors
  - Avoid getting into power struggle, long-drawn-out conversations, and/or arguments about what has occurred
  - If a student is engaging in the behavior because they find the other student annoying, teaching them to ask for a break, request headphones, etc…
  - If the student is engaging in the behavior to enhance his/her status, providing methods student can use to gain status in a more prosocial fashion

Some Staff Responses to Bullying

- Reassure the target emotionally, and reassure that bullying behavior is not tolerated
  - We stress avoiding blaming the target of the bullying
  - Reassure the student that we take any reports of "bullying" seriously
- Communicate to case manager, behavior team, and administration about the occurrence—document the occurrence

Some Interventions LGA Has Begun to Implement

- Social competence focus—working with both bullies and targets on underlying social competency factors
  - Working with the student on the development of empathy/ToM
  - Relationship development—focus from an identified adult (either Case Manager, Social Worker, Behavior Support, or Autism Specialist) on developing an attuned relationship with the student
- Identification of, and addressing with the assistance of outside providers, underlying mental health issues that contribute to the individual being at risk for being a target and/or bully (including, emotional regulation, depression, anxiety, anger, etc...)
- Student/peer mentoring program
- School rules and expectations
- Addressing "Bullying" in IEP
- Conflict resolution and mediation

Future Directions We Are Exploring at LGA

- Increased community and parent involvement
- Peer mediation program
- Support groups for targets of bullying
- Incentive program
- Mental health programming—including anger management groups, groups to address anxiety, etc…

Resources

- Attwood, T. The Complete Guide to Asperger's Syndrome

- Dubin, N. Asperger Syndrome and Bullying: Strategies and Solutions

- Field, E. Bully Blocking: Six Secrets to Help Children Deal with Teasing and Bullying

- Heinrichs, R. Perfect Targets: Asperger Syndrome and Bullying