California **CASA**
Court Appointed Special Advocates
FOR CHILDREN

Bullying

Introduction

Unfortunately, bullying is all too common among children. As high as 25% of pre-teens and teens in the general population are estimated to experience bullying, and among marginalized populations, such as LGBTQ and foster youth, that figure is much higher – up to 80%. It is highly likely that the child or youth that you are working with has been bullied, is at risk of being bullied, or is bullying others (these are not mutually exclusive categories). Bullying can have serious, lifelong consequences, including death. As an advocate you must be equipped to help your youth deal with this problem.

The Facts

"For children involved in the child welfare system, bullying and teasing may be not only a more prevalent, constant, and serious problem, but they may have fewer supports available to help them deal with these issues." (National Resource Center for Permanency and Family Connections, 2013, p. 2)

Bullying:
- is meant to harm or disturb
- occurs repeatedly

There are three types of bullying:

Verbal bullying is saying or writing mean things.
Social bullying, sometimes referred to as relational bullying, involves hurting someone's reputation or relationships.
Physical bullying involves hurting a person's body or possessions.

Bullying

Also, cyberbullying has dramatically increased in prevalence over the past 5-8 years. Cyberbullying can be both verbal and social/relational. Some online bullies are actually bullied themselves in-person.

Prevalence:

- Nationwide, 20% of high school students (grades 9-12) in a 2011 national survey reported being bullied on school property in the past 12 months.

- Bullying at school is even more prevalent for LGBTQ youth (2011 GLSEN National School Climate Survey)

  - Sexual orientation
    - Approx. 82% reported being verbally harassed
    - Approx. 38% reported being sexually harassed
    - Approx. 18% reported being physically assaulted

  - Gender expression
    - Approx. 64% reported being verbally harassed
    - Approx. 27% reported being physically harassed
    - Approx. 12% reported being physically assaulted

Victimization is linked with depression and low self-esteem

80% of transgender students reported feeling unsafe at school

60% of LGBTQ students never reported harassment or assault to school personnel

6 in 10 LGBTQ students reported feeling unsafe at school because of sexual orientation and **4 in 10** reported feeling unsafe because of gender expression

Foster Youth and Bullying

In an informal FosterClub survey of 61 current and former foster youth (CWLA):

- **29** reported being bullied for being in care
- **34** said they had heard about other youth in care being bullied
- Several said bullying happened in group homes and foster homes

Not only are children in the child welfare system more at risk for bullying, but they also likely have fewer supports available to address this issue. (NRCPFC, 2013)

Bullying

There are some differences between those who engage in bullying behavior and those that are victims of bullying:

Those who engage in bullying are likely to:	Victims are likely to:
• Engage in substance abuse • Engage in fighting behaviors • Engage in criminal misconduct • Have lower academic achievement • Lack adult role models • Have parents/caregivers who use punitive forms of discipline	• Suffer from feelings of loneliness • Have low self-esteem • Suffer from anxiety • Be less popular than other children • Have greater rates of absenteeism • Have parents who allow few opportunities to control social circumstances

Adapted from NRCPFC Information Packet: Bullying and the Child Welfare System, which cites Dake, Price, and Telljohann (2003)

But despite their differences, those who engage in bullying and those who are victims of it are similar in many ways. Youth in both groups are likely to:

- Suffer from symptoms of depression
- Experience suicidal ideation
- Suffer from psychiatric problems
- Suffer from eating disorders
- Have less-responsive & less-supportive parents
- Come from harsh home environments
- Have suffered child abuse
- Have lower school bonding
- Have lower school adjustment

In fact, those who engage in bullying and victims are often the same youth, and youth in foster care are more likely to have many of these risk factors. Children with special health care needs are more likely to experience bullying, and studies suggest that at least 1/3 of youth in foster care have disabilities.

Starting a CASA Conversation

As an advocate, it is part of your role to know how your child is doing in school. You find this out by speaking with his teachers, counselors, and most importantly the child himself. It is crucial to know about not only the child's grades and attendance, but also how they are generally faring in school. Open-ended, general questions are often best, such as:

- **How is school?** • **What was your day or week like?** • **Do you have friends at school?**

- **Who are they? What do they like to do? What do you like to do with them?**

- **Is there an adult at school with whom you feel safe?**

- **Are there youth/children at school with whom you feel safe?**

Ask questions on a regular basis about how the child/youth is doing at school. In addition, be attentive to cues, such as an unwillingness to interact with certain children in the neighborhood or family, reluctance to go to school or out to play in the community, or dropping out of activities they previously enjoyed. A child/youth who is avoiding situations in which bullying is occurring needs to replace them with other activities, and children in out-of-home care may need assistance in finding appropriate substitutes.

As you get more of a picture about how your youth is doing, pay attention to whether she mentions anything that sounds like harassment or bullying. **If so, you must take follow-up action**. When children tell adults about bullying or harassment and the adults don't take action or don't believe them, this is tantamount to saying they deserve this treatment and aren't valuable enough to be treated fairly.

Some things you can do:

Contact the school. Make an appointment to discuss the specific bullying or harassment problem. There are state laws that cover bullying and each school must have a policy outlining procedures to handle bullying. You may involve the youth/child as much as they wish, or as seems appropriate, based on their age and comfort level.

Talk to the youth's caregivers. Develop a plan that keeps her safe and supported. This may include picking her up at school instead of having her walk home, planning for someone to walk home with her, or changing her bus.

Talk with the case-carrying social worker to devise a plan to help the child/youth be safe, particularly if the bullying is happening where the child/youth lives.

Pitfalls to Avoid

Do not wait to act if the youth tells you about bullying or harassment, or if what she describes to you sounds like bullying or harassment. By the same token, if it sounds like your child/youth is engaging in bullying behavior, making sure she understands the consequences of her behavior. She may need tools to get her needs met that do not hurt others, and you can help her generate empathy and awareness of what bullying is and how it hurts others.

Additional Resources

Advocates for Youth Tips and Strategies for Addressing Harassment
http://www.advocatesforyouth.org/publications/487?task=view

Child Welfare league of America
http://66.227.70.18/newsevents/news2011039bully.htm

Gay, Lesbian Straight Educational Network: National School Climate Survey
http://glsen.org/nscs

Health Resources and Services Administration
http://www.stopbullying.gov/

National CASA: Effects of Bullying on Children
http://podcast.casaforchildren.org/effects-of-bullying-in-children

National Resource Center for Permanency and Family Connections (NRCPFC)
http://www.hunter.cuny.edu/socwork/nrcfcpp/info_services/bullying.html

Queer and Loathing: Does the Foster Care System Bully Gay Kids?
http://www.motherjones.com/print/79416

What if Your Child IS the Bully?
http://www.pacer.org/parent/php/PHP-c109.pdf