

The Social and Educational Contribution of the “School-Sports” Pair to Fight Bullying

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Abstract

The purpose of this research work is to highlight the contribution that sport and school can offer for a educational and social development against a negative social phenomenon as bullying. It is important to structuring sustainable educational paths able to exploit the potential inherent in the nature of the sports and school systems so that they can really represent a solution to the manifestations of bullying and cyberbullying that mark lots of young people.

Keywords

Sport; bullying, cyberbullying; School; Physical Activity.

Introduction¹

The phenomenon of bullying has expanded more and more in recent years, manifesting itself with episodes of violence that affect social contexts such as schools or sports centres, showing a critical social and educational framework. There is a clear need for these social systems to return to represent an opportunity for educational development that fully reflects the educational values inherent in the nature of the School and Sport.

In this regard, here we want to offer a short overview of the phenomenon of bullying and cyberbullying, and then carefully analyze the appropriate paths that school and sports offer to counter this growing phenomenon.

1. The phenomenon of bullying

In today's society, the phenomenon of bullying is spreading more and more, to such an extent that these manifestations have been emerging with a daily frequency, involving both children and adolescents (Sharp & Smith, 1995).

This phenomenon is very complex and multi-causal, and this is why it is difficult to eliminate it altogether, since we need to analyze the subject's singular peculiarities and the surrounding environment (Fonzi, 1997a).

The English term bullying is used in international literature to introduce this phenomenon between two or more people of the peer group.

It was Olweus who gave a definition of this event: "a student is the object of bullying, i.e. he is prevaricated and victimized, when he is exposed, repeatedly over the course of time, to offensive actions implemented by one or more mates" (Olweus, 2001).

Subsequently, this definition was improved by emphasizing the social nature of bullying, the duration of aggressive action, the intentionality in creating damage to the victim and the abuse of premeditated power towards one or more subjects (Besag, 1989; Björkqvist, Ekman, & Lagerspetz, 1982; Sullivan, 2010).

Although bullying may be present throughout life, some features of this phenomenon can be identified (Pepler et al., 2006):

- Intentionality, which indicates the intentionality of the bully to create damage to the victim through his behavior;
- Persistence, the meaning of which lies in indicating that the actions of the bully against the victim are not sporadic but continuous over time;
- The imbalance of power, indicating the different social, physical, intellectual, and family strength of those directly affected. (Fonzi, 1997b).

When we speak of aggressive behavior in the phenomenon of bullying, it is necessary to point out the existence of three types of the same:

- That of physical type, which includes those behaviors manifested clearly with kicks, punches, and that usually is the most common bullying mode.
- That of verbal type, which, like previous behaviors, are also frequently evident.
- That of relational type, which are hidden and underhanded forms of behavior implemented by bullies especially by exploiting the psychological component of the victim, with the aim of isolating the latter from the group (Menesini, 2003).

These three behavioral variables also change according to age and sex; in fact, female bullies usually adopt exclusion behaviors, while the victims of this same sex usually react by

¹ The manuscript is the result of a collective work of the authors, the specific contribution of which is to be referred to as follows: Giulia Torregiani: Introduction, Paragraphs n. 1 and n. 3; Davide Di Palma: Paragraphs n. 2, n. 4 and Conclusions

denouncing bullying or depression; on the other hand, male bullies prefer aggressive physical behaviors, while the victims of the same sex employ a complex and silent type of behavior.

The phenomenon of bullying can be defined as an aggressive behavior, specifically as a new form of increasing deviance among adolescents; it is possible to place it inside the DSM (Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders) between a conduct disorder and an oppositional-defiant one.

Conduct Disorder is characterized by a repetitive and persistent behavioral modality, which can generate a clinically significant damage of social, school or family functioning, thus harming the fundamental rights of others or the norms that regulate society.

Children and adolescents involved in the phenomenon of bullying show a compromised emotional sphere; in fact, they manifest a behavior of an overbearing, threatening or intimidating type, and can be physically aggressive both with people and with animals, without the presence of remorse or empathy towards the victim.

Instead, the Oppositional Defiant Disorder manifests itself with a defiant, disobedient and hostile attitude towards adults or those representing authority. It presents characteristics like hostility, provocation, stubbornness, resistance to directives, little willingness to make compromises, to surrender or negotiate; it is less serious than the Conduct Disorder but it can turn into it.

There are various theories that have tried to explain the phenomenon of bullying, including:

- A purely environmentalist approach establishing that the cause of deviant behavior is due to socio-family factors;
- A genetic-biological approach that assigns the risk factors to the individual's constituent components.

Both these two theories and others assert that the child's personality is initially generated by the relationship with his parents, who, in this context, have the important role of facilitators of the conventional values, and consequently of the acquisition of the control functions. The above is also validated by Bowlby's attachment theory, which states that if the child/parent relationship is not healthy, it can generate difficulties in the growth process. This leads us to think that it is the family distress to generate harassing behavior for learning reasons, and revenge against the family itself (Ferraris, 2008). Research has shown different types of aggressiveness based on severity and, above all, on age, proving that the highest levels of severity occur during adolescence (Loeber & Hay, 1997).

The manifestations of aggressiveness by adolescents have the aim of showing a role and a position, even if limited in time, within the group (Vitaro, Tremblay & Bukowski, 2001).

Therefore, bullying is also and above all a group phenomenon, within which bullies, victims and all those who support one or the other, or who do not seem involved in it, play an important role.

This is why the group, especially in adolescents, plays a fundamental role, since it becomes a unitary place nourished by the need of its members to support and share the anxieties of all. This sharing becomes the primary condition of the group, thus generating a constant relationship between the members in order to generate threatening actions towards the surrounding environment, so as to push away internal frustration and vent it on other subjects: the victims (Fonzi, 2006).

- Bullies

Bullies are impulsive people, not empathetic and very aggressive both with their peers and with adults, and it is precisely for these characteristics that they have a good opinion of themselves, and thanks to these attitudes, they boost their self-esteem (Olweus, 2001). They are attracted by violence as they believe that, thanks to it, they can get what they want, justifying it with indifference towards the others and little sensitivity with respect to the victims (Menesini, 2003).

Some research has shown that the aggressive behavior of bullies is not due to any cognitive or social deficiencies, but on the contrary, to a high knowledge of the social context, as it is

thanks to it that it is possible to attack the victim and/or manipulate and subdue other subjects who must play the role of a bully.

Other research has shown that bullies are not all equal, and therefore they do not develop only in disadvantaged social conditions. Four types of bullies can be identified (Lawson, 2001):

1. Aggressive or dominant bully, who plays the role of negative leader of the group; he is very popular in the context in which he “operates” and is very strong from a physical and psychological point of view. In fact, he is a skilled manipulator but, at the same time, he is very aggressive and careless of the consequences.
2. Anxious bully-victim, who looks like an unpopular and unfriendly person among his peers, with an insecure personality, low self-esteem, anxiety and emotional instability. Despite this, he is a very provocative and aggressive subject, just to try to focus all the attention on him.
3. Passive or gregarious bully, who joins the leader and does not act on his own initiative, but what he does, is just to feel part of the group by removing the risk of becoming a victim.
4. Temporary bully, who plays this role only for a certain period and because of an emotionally traumatic event.

Victims

There are two types of victims:

1. Passive victims, who are weak both from a physical and psychological point of view; they do not have a good social life, are not able to respond to the offenses they receive and, consequently, if attacked, they react by crying and closing in on themselves, resulting even weaker to others.
2. Defiant victims, who are usually hyperactive subjects, annoying towards others, and it is why their social relationships with the peer group are scarce. They tend to provoke to look for attention, and at the same time, they cannot control their emotions; in fact, they are impulsive, and, as mentioned, they tend to react to the attacks of the bullies, even if not very effectively.

- Group

The group is among the various actors of the phenomenon of bullying. It reduces the responsibility and the gravity of the actions of the bully on the victim, since a gesture, if made by several people, tends to make the victim blame on him and not on others. The bully/leader is admired by the group; moreover, he usually tends to support and strengthen the bully’s behavior.

Within the group, it is possible to find different actors responsible for the phenomenon of bullying, both in a negative and in a positive sense:

- Bully helper;
- Bully supporter;
- Mediator;
- Defender of the victim;
- Spectator;
- Comforter.
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2. Cyberbullying

With the technological advances, the phenomenon of bullying has evolved into cyberbullying, which uses the new technology to spread and it is difficult for others to move away from it. The term cyberbullying has been recognized internationally, and has had various definitions:

- A repeated and long-lasting aggressive act that uses electronic, group and individual means of communication (Smith et al., 2008);

- An intentional and non-episodic damage implemented through electronic means of communication.

As in bullying, in cyberbullying various types of behavior can be found:

- Cyberstalking: continuous and repetitive threats to persecute the victim;
- Trickery: deception or fraud against the victim;
- Flaming: sending aggressive and vulgar messages by e-mail or online groups;
- Exclusion: excluding the victim from online groups;
- Denigration: publishing any rumors concerning the victim, in order to blacken his reputation, and consequently isolate him from the group;
- Masquerade: using and taking possession of the victim's digital identity in order to blacken his reputation;
- On-line harassment: sending offensive messages continuously and repetitively through messages only.

Furthermore, since cyberbullying is a recent phenomenon and is therefore under study, four main categories of behavior have been set (Nocentini et al., 2010):

1. Visual category: using mobile phones or personal computers, internet, in order to send or disseminate photos or videos that may harm the person's dignity;
2. Written-verbal category: using mobile phones (messages, chat), personal computers, internet (mail, websites), with the aim of compromising the person's dignity;
3. Impersonation category: using an account in order to take and disseminate personal and confidential information;
4. Exclusion: voluntarily excluding the person from an online group.

Although cyberbullying, compared to traditional bullying, is a phenomenon that has been spreading in recent years, it has some distinctive features:

- Anonymity: the bully feels even more protected because he acts by means of a computer or a cell phone, and therefore by not exposing himself;
- Unrepeatability: by acting through the internet, it is difficult for the bully to be discovered by the victim;
- Cockiness: feeling safe thanks to anonymity and the fact of being difficult to be found, the bully completely removes any moral reservations that may have against the victim;
- Spatial-temporal expansion: when any action or wording is spread on the web or through mobile phones, it will spread rapidly, thus amplifying the damage to the victim.

In addition to these characteristics that are typical of cyberbullying, in this phenomenon it is possible to find, even if with different methods and values, some peculiarities of bullying:

- Intentionality: the bully is not fully aware of the value of his attack on the victim and his reaction, because there is no physical and verbal contact between the subjects involved;
- Repeatability: in fact, in this case, the action can be performed even once, but what makes the difference is the ability of the internet to reiterate it (Kowalski et al., 2014);
- Asymmetry of power: in the phenomenon of cyberbullying, it is clear and can be defined as the ability to master an information medium (Shariff & Gouin, 2006).

As in the phenomenon of bullying, even in cyberbullying the group plays a fundamental role but with a different responsibility, because the gravity of the bully's action depends on the relevance of the "visualizations" of the group itself.

Ultimately, it is possible to state that the virtual world turns out to be attractive to bullies, since they can express themselves by inhibiting their emotions and using aggressive behavior more easily (Ybarra & Mitchell, 2004).

3. The role of the School to fight against the phenomenon of Bullying

Bullying can be considered a social phenomenon that involves also the school community, understood also and above all as a group, which, as a whole or in part, can support the dynamics and

the rules to be used so as to employ a persecutory behavior towards the victim and the remaining part of the group, acting as spectators (Menesini, 2003, Peluso Cassese, Di Palma & Tafuri, 2017).

- Specifically, when there is a bully and a victim, the atmosphere of the class is such that perverse mechanisms are implemented, like:
- Social influence;
- Weakening of control or inhibitions against aggressive tendencies;
- Diffusion of responsibility;
- Gradual cognitive changes in the victim's perception, which appears increasingly as deserving of harassment (Fonzi, 2006)

Some studies have shown that about a 15% of a sample of 130,000 boys, aged between 8 and 16, are involved in the phenomenon of bullying (both as a bully and as a victim) at school (Olweus, 2001). Subsequently, these studies have been updated, and in Italy, it has been found that, out of 1,379 students aged between 8 and 14 years, about 42% in primary schools and 28% in secondary schools of first grade, have declared to have undergone acts of bullying (Menesini, 2003).

These studies have shown that the educational institution can be considered as a place of violence and persecutory actions towards children (Petroni & Troiano, 2008), highlighting the importance of school in intervening to fight and reduce this constantly increasing phenomenon.

Some scholars believe that it needs to establish well-defined guidelines and objectives to be included in the teacher's programs, in order to increase the awareness of this phenomenon in young people themselves. In order for this to be possible, it needs to involve students, parents, teachers and non-teaching staff; later on, it needs to promote and inform about the project to those directly involved. Specifically, during class lessons, it may be useful to argue some concepts related to the phenomenon of bullying. For example, in the literature, we could use the cultural knowledge of students as a stimulus to arouse reflections on this phenomenon; in history, we could mention the various abuses of power that have occurred over time (Nazism, the Balkan wars) to have points of initial discussion and subsequently expand them (Torrego, 2000).

Teachers must discuss the issue as it is of common interest to all school subjects, and it must be dealt with continuously. The contents proposed during the lessons must be targeted and proposed with interactive methods and with a final participative evaluation such as to actively involve the students. These interventions are intended to make people understand the importance of grasping any ideas coming from any discipline, since they all have one purpose: the training of learners as citizens. What has been said is of fundamental importance as these activities can develop the emotional awareness of children, both cognitively (understanding of emotions) and affectively (emotional response to others). The education and strengthening of feelings, and therefore of emotional awareness, is significant to understand oneself and others, generating positive effects on both bullies and victims:

- Promoting integration and psychological well-being;
- Use of prosocial and supporting behavior by the group towards the weaker mates.

Some studies have shown that bullies are less likely to participate in group activities, because they are not so empathetic and are hostile towards others, highlighting a lack of social acceptance. In this regard, the role of the teacher is fundamental, who must be able to create the right conditions for the students to cooperate with the whole class group to achieve the final objective, and that, in this case, takes on a double value: he must contribute to reducing the difficulties of learning and integration of problematic children, but above all, he must help change the climate and the quality of relationships in the classroom.

4. The importance of Sport to limit the expressions of Bullying

Sports activity practice offers many occasions for socializing, thus becoming a real social network, which, depending on the context, takes on various roles: of confrontation, support or

competition, which are fundamental for the creation of the subject's identity (Di Palma et al, 2018; Di Palma et al, 2016; Isidori & Fraile, 2008).

The phenomenon of bullying can be found in all social meeting environments, such as schools or sports realities. Sports can be defined as an educational agency, which has the task of showing values such as respect for the rules, spirit of sacrifice, tenacity, sportiness, humility, characteristics that tend to educate and coexist with others in a peaceful manner. It is clear that sports activity has intrinsic values that can be enclosed in a single term: fair play. It can be defined as one of the main cornerstones of the "sport structure" and, besides being a value, it can also be defined as a mental attitude from which the way of doing sport derives (Di Palma, Ascione & Peluso Cassese, 2017).

Therefore, sports practice seems to be a sort of representation of society, as it has clear rules with roles and social statuses to be respected, so as to simplify the social relationship among individuals, generating recognition and appreciation by society itself also for who was recognized and interpreted exclusively the role of the bully.

In sports venues the competition between athletes becomes often "sick", meaning that every athlete wants to demonstrate his skills while being sure to be the best, and consequently, thinking of having a sort of right over others. Frequently, the cause of all this lies in the bad coaches who, despite having the skills own of the discipline, do not possess those useful to deal with children and adolescents.

Sports, in general, and sports association with its coaches, in particular, have the important role of building a sports ethics against bullying, and the young people must understand and internalize these values. The presence of a person who uses arrogant attitudes such as to bring them back to the phenomenon of bullying must be stopped and made aware that, what he has done, goes against the values and moral principles of sports (Benedetti, 2003, Di Palma, Ascione & Peluso Cassese, 2017).

This approach is based on morals and reflection, as an opportunity to internalize the rules, but unfortunately it is not always useful to dissuade the bully from acting aggressively again. For this reason it needs that the bully learns and understands a set of rules in order to send clear signals to the athletes and define acceptable and unacceptable behaviors, and in this last case, it needs to define and apply the penalty, which may be mild, moderate or severe depending on the severity of the action, all this while always considering that its effectiveness depends on the perception that the bullies have.

A further type of approach to this phenomenon depends on the will and the ability to listen, and therefore to establish a valid communication promoted by the coach towards the bully. This empathic relationship is intended to cause changes not only in behavior, but also and especially in the bully's feelings and way of thinking. In addition to individual interviews between bully, instructor and victim, the group is also involved in order to stop bullying acts and help the victim. Logically, this successful approach depends very much on the quality of the relationship of the people involved, in fact, if the instructor can establish a good communication with the bully, this promotes collaboration and the achievement of positive outcomes.

Conclusions

In this paper, we have had the occasion to tackle the phenomenon of bullying and cyberbullying by describing and analyzing its causes, characteristics, dynamics, critical elements and consequences. The result is that it mostly occurs in an age group between 8 and 16 years, and has emerged how often it occurs in specific educational contexts such as schools and sports centers; consequently, the factors of the teacher's or coach's role in fighting this phenomenon could not be neglected.

The study led to the evidence of the importance of the school institution, which, by improving the plurality of knowledge, and by supporting a flexible investigation process open to the

analysis of every problematic situation, is able to promote the understanding, by the student or by the athlete, of the low ethical and social value of the phenomenon of bullying or cyberbullying, in favor of the physical and sports activity based on moral values, on the spirit of competition, on one's own physical abilities, on commitment and willpower. Furthermore, as for sports, we analyzed how it has enormous potential from the point of view of social, educational and cultural development; therefore, its formative value, also in the fight against situations of bullying, was also reassessed thanks to advances in scientific research in recent decades, considering the field of action of the corporeal experience and highlighting its close relationship with the emotional dimension and the cognitive processes.

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