

Letter to The Editor:

Teaching children to ignore teasing: A cognitive behavioural family strategy for dealing with teasing and reactive bullying

Dear Editor,

I very much enjoyed the article "Changing the Social Contexts of Peer Victimization" by Leadbeater and Hoglund in the Feb 2006 edition of this journal.

I would like to report on a program designed to assist the "sensitive teased child and their family that utilises a cognitive behavioural approach that might be seen as complementary to the school based program described by Leadbeater and Hoglund.

The PZW technique was developed to assist patients and their families deal with verbal teasing from other children that were "pressing the child's buttons". It has been of particular relevance to children with ADHD who initially have been targets because of their tendency to have a "short fuse" and be impulsive and reactive when teased. These children often progress to become reactive bullies. This clinical observation is supported by recent epidemiological findings (Kumpulainen et al 2001) that suggest that the diagnosis of ADHD is one of the commonest disorders and is often present in both victims and bullies.

The technique involves the cooperation of the child by giving the child a coping tool that gives a clear behavioural plan focused on increasing their sense of control of the situation. The child's experience of being bullied is described to them by the therapist "as if they are a video machine having their buttons pressed by the people who are teasing them". This analogy often produces an immediate recognition in youngsters. I support them in their feelings of frustration and anger and define the task at hand as one of taking control back by "pulling out the plug from the video machine so the bully can no longer control them by pressing their buttons".

The technique involves a detailed plan for structured ignoring of the teasing with specific behavioural injunctions. The plan is not to be used for physical intimidation or physical bullying but only for verbal teasing. I emphasize that the child is attempting to change the other person's beliefs about how they are "a video machine who can be turned on and off at will". I specify that it often takes at least six weeks of consistent change behaviour on his or her part before seeing a significant response that can be identified.

The core of the program involves the practicing of three structured ignoring tasks. I have abbreviated these to **P. Z. W. P** represents "**play it cool**". This involves taking careful note of their own facial appearance and body posture and presenting a relaxed and no aggressive appearance. The **Z** stands for "**zip the lip**". This essentially involves not responding with any verbally aggressive response. **W** stands for "**walk away**". I stress that this can be done either physically in a playground situation or mentally in a classroom situation where diversionary techniques, such as reading a book or using some cognitive distraction techniques or mental imagery could be used.

I predict to youngsters that initially the people who are teasing will respond by an **increased** frequency of teasing, as they do not yet understand that "the video machine is no longer plugged in". The normal response from the teasers' perspective would be to tease even harder to get the faulty machine to work. This seems to help them understand that an immediate positive response may not be forthcoming.

Prior to describing the technique, I get the child to rate his or her prediction of success on a ten-point scale. I repeat the rating after explaining the technique and will often obtain an increased level of optimism from the child. The plan is rehearsed in the presence of the parents so they can understand the technique and help reinforce it via repetition and discussion at home. The technique is summarized for the family with the mnemonic P.Z.W. – with which the parent or teacher can cue the child to practice.

Whilst this technique has not been formally evaluated it is my clinical impression based on feedback from both families and schools professionals that it has been helpful. The optimal use of stimulants with this group of children with ADHD who are both victimized and then become reactive bullies is important in terms of facilitating this cognitive behavioural approach and allowing the child a more reflective approach prior to introducing this technique.

Yours sincerely,
Dr. Laurence Jerome

References

- Leadbeater, B., Hoglund, W. (2006). Changing the Social Contexts of Peer Victimization. *Journal of the Canadian Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry* 15(1), 21-26.
- Kumpulainen, K., Räsänen, E., Puura, K. (2001). Psychiatric Disorders and the Use of Mental Health Services Among Children Involved in Bullying. *Aggressive Behavior* 27 102-110.