A GENERAL SEMANTICS APPROACH TO SCHOOL-AGE BULLYING

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School-age bullying, from elementary to high school, is a major problem not only in America but throughout the world. Research indicates that school-age bullying is not confined to any national, religious, or ethno-cultural group.

Statistics show the extent of the problem in the United States:

- According to the U.S. Department of Justice, one out of every four children will be bullied by a peer in school this month.

- The American Association of School Psychologists reports that over 160,000 children miss school for fear of being bullied every day.

- A recent book states that teasing, bullying, and rejection tops the list of triggers in childhood attempted suicides. (Middelton-Moz and Zawadski, p.xi.)

This article uses ideas and techniques from general semantics that support the internationally recognized “Olweus Method” for bully prevention and in-

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intervention. It offers a concise theoretical framework for these strategies and then a number of practical suggestions for bully prevention and intervention. The authors have conducted numerous anti-bullying workshops for teachers, students, and administrators.

PART I:
A THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK — UNDERSTANDING THE PROBLEM ROLES OF “BULLY,” “TARGET,” AND “Bystander”

General semanticists pay close attention to how labels are used to identify people in our society. For example, some educators refer to children who have reading problems as “learning disabled,” and children who take honors classes as “gifted.” A general semanticist would find both of these labels too broad, since children with reading difficulties may be very able learners in other areas, and since it is doubtful that all honor class students would be good at everything. Instead, a general semanticist would make an effort to cite the students’ specific abilities and learning challenges. Similarly, a general semanticist would avoid labeling an individual a “bully,” preferring instead to look at specific bullying behaviors manifested by that individual.

However, Barbara Coloroso, an expert in the field of bully prevention, suggests that labels may actually be useful if we employ them as identifiers of certain roles that people may play at different times. She uses the terms “the bully,” “the bullied,” and “the bystander” to serve as descriptors for how a child may be acting at the moment, rather than to define or permanently label that child. In using these terms, the goal is to gain a clearer understanding of how the bully, the bullied, and the bystander roles operate. (Coloroso, p.4.) The Olweus bully prevention method prefers the use of the term “target” for “the bullied” role. The term “target” suggests that while a person may find themselves in the sights of a bully, it does not inevitably follow that the bully will be able to score a direct “hit.” Let us look more closely at these roles.

The Role of the Bully

Because bullying cuts across all national, cultural, ethnic, and religious groups, etc., bullies are not distinguishable by appearance or group identification, but by how they act. Bullies “bully” — a conscious, deliberate hostile activity intended to terrorize and harm others through the threat of further aggression. (Coloroso, p.13.) Once this terror is created, the bully is able to act without fear of recrimination or retaliation, because the target often feels so powerless that he or she will rarely fight back or tell anyone about the bullying.
Bystanders often remain silent or even “egg on” the bully, so the pattern of violence is easily sustained in the school environment.

Why do bullies bully? Research shows that children (and adults) take on bully roles largely due to the treatment they receive from authority figures in their lives, including parents and other relatives. As a result, bullies are taught to rely on only one belief and strategy to cope with daily challenges — bully or be bullied.

Bullies bully in three basic and often overlapping ways. Verbal bullying, the most common form, is favored by both boys and girls. It accounts for 70 percent of all reported incidents of bullying and includes name-calling, taunting, belittling, teasing, and using racist slurs and sexually abusive remarks. Verbal bullying is easy to get away with — it can even be murmured in the presence of adults or peers without detection or undo notice. If verbal bullying continues to be permitted or tolerated (which is generally the case), it becomes normalized and the target dehumanized. Once such a pattern is established, the targets are frequently excluded from playground games and other social activities — because no one wants to hang out with a “loser.” Verbal bullying is often the precursor to the two other basic types of bullying.

Physical bullying is the most visible of the three types, but it accounts for less than one-third of all incidents reported by children. It can take the form of punching, kicking, biting, choking, scratching, pinching, spitting, tickling, and destroying the property of the target and the target’s family. Bullies who use physical violence often attempt to rationalize their behavior when caught with statements such as: “I just wanted to shake him up”; “I didn’t mean to break his arm, we were just fooling around”; “It’s her fault. She made me do it”; “She started it, she gave me a haughty look.” Those who engage in physical bullying are usually the most troubled of all the bullies, and the most likely to progress to even more serious criminal acts. More boys than girls engage in physical bullying.

More girls than boys engage in relational bullying (or relational aggression). Bullies who use relational aggression attempt to demolish the target’s self-esteem through tactics such as ignoring, isolating, excluding, taunting, gossiping, writing notes, and spreading rumors. These kinds of behaviors can also include aggressive gestures such as stares, rolling eyes, sighs, frowns, sneers, and other hostile body language. Relational aggression is often the most difficult form of bullying to spot from the outside. It is most potent at the onset of adolescence, when young teens are trying to figure out who they are and how they fit into their peer group. When a target confronts a bully who uses relational abuse, the bully usually dismisses the target’s grievances with statements such as, “What’s your problem? You’re just too sensitive.”
The Role of the Target

Targets of bullies can be “large,” “small,” “bright,” “not so bright,” “attractive,” “not so attractive,” “popular,” “unpopular,” etc. What they all have in common is being the target of bullies. In addition to suffering the behavior of bullies, targets also suffer from certain injurious societal assumptions. Topping the list of these assumptions is the notion that most targets of bullies are frail, non-conformist, or insecure individuals — who therefore ultimately deserve to be blamed for the bullying. Being blamed for the bullies’ inappropriate and irrational behavior can add to the distress experienced by the targets. Over time, targets subjected to continual abuse can change emotionally and physically so that they do become frail and insecure — or bullies themselves.

The guilt, shame, and sense of failure felt by a target unable to cope with the brutalization contribute to the destruction of his sense of well-being. As he becomes more isolated from his peers, has trouble concentrating on schoolwork, and develops survival strategies instead of social skills, his life changes radically. (Coloroso, p.46.)

Neil Marr and Tim Field, in their book Bullycide, Death at Playtime: An Exposé of Child Suicide Caused by Bullying coined the term “bullycide” to describe the situation in which targets choose to kill themselves rather than face one more day of being bullied. Bullied children can also kill others. The Columbine high school shootings were committed by two students who left video tapes indicating that at least one member of the football team had verbally bullied them on an on-going basis.

The Role of the Bystander

“How bystanders respond to both the bully and the target have a tremendous influence on how emboldened the bully becomes and/or how weak the target gets.” (Coloroso, p.46.) Bystanders support bullies through acts of omission and commission. Bystanders take on bully roles themselves when they directly support other bullies. One study that examined the role of peer behavior in urban playground bullying episodes revealed that bystanders were involved in either teasing the target or egging on the bully in 85 percent of the incidents. (Coloroso, p.66.) However, in bullying incidents overall, bystanders usually do nothing, which can be equally problematic because it encourages the bullies to continue their behavior. “Doing nothing” also saps bystanders of self-respect because they have abandoned their ethical and moral responsibility
to their peers and school. The four most cited reasons for “do nothing” bystander behavior are:

- The bystander is afraid of being labeled a tattle-tale.
- The bystander is afraid of getting hurt or becoming a new target for the bully.
- The bystander is afraid of doing something that will make the situation worse.
- The bystander does not know what to do.

In the next section, we will examine “what to do” to prevent the character of the bully from taking over our schools.

PART II:
THE OLWEUS WHOLE SCHOOL APPROACH TO BULLY PREVENTION USING GENERAL SEMANTICS

The Basics of the Olweus Model’s Whole School Approach

According to the Olweus model, effective bully prevention and intervention needs to include the following steps:

1. Removing the veil of secrecy that enables most bullies to operate unchallenged in our schools. Creating, in its place, an atmosphere in which children and adults feel secure to help both the bullies and the targets by “telling.”

2. Replacing the standard either/or method for dealing with bullies — fight’em or ignore’em — with new scripts and ways to talk to bullies that challenge the bullies’ privileged position within our schools.


Using General Semantics to Support the Olweus Model

In his book for elementary and middle school children, Bullies Are a Pain in the Brain, Trevor Romain describes bullies as “Self-Esteem Vampires,” who drain the life’s blood and spirit from their schools as well as their targets. Most bullies operate undercover — that is, they will publicly humiliate their targets
only in front of small groups and almost never in front of adults, unless an adult has given them a clear signal that their behavior is acceptable. But, as with the mythological vampires, the best way to deter bullies is to expose them for their specific negative actions — to hold their behavior up to the light of day for all to see. If you simply punish one bully privately, or even publicly, you will most likely get another bully to replace the first — and so on. But if a school focuses on exposing the bullies’ strategies and tricks — and offers counseling, amends-making opportunities, anger management, and empathy training in addition to traditional disciplinary actions — the fully exposed and addressed bully problem, like the vampire, will begin to disintegrate.

**Step One.**

**Removing the veil of secrecy by using specifics instead of generalities:**

We begin our workshops in the schools for faculty, staff, administrators, and students by sharing some of our personal experiences and stories involving bullies. We then divide the participants into pairs or small groups and ask them to share their own stories in which they played the role of the bully, the target, or the bystander (without mentioning any real names). Following the group-share exercise, we use the various stories to discuss and process the basic steps of the Olweus method and the general semantics ideas and techniques that support it.

**Focusing on specifics rather than on generalities:** When students, teachers, administrators, and other school staff discuss their own bully experiences with one another, they move beyond the common but ineffective strategy of employing generalities and slogans (e.g., “bullies are bad,” “we should all get along,” “we should all respect one another,” etc.). Having as many people as possible share the details of their bully stories (whether as targets, bullies, bystanders, or a combination) exposes the specific tactics and tricks by which bullies operate. At the same time, the group-share strategy helps the current targets to feel less isolated, because it underscores the fact that a great many people have had to cope with school bullies. Encouraging the entire school community to discuss the bullying problem through specifics, rather than through generalities, lifts the veil of secrecy associated with it. It encourages students and adults to view themselves as multifaceted human beings acting and reacting within a complex environment.

**Indexing:** To further assist students and educators in recognizing how bullying behavior may vary, and how important it is to be flexible in one’s responses to the variations, we introduce them to the general semantics concept of “indexing.” Bully\(_1\) who uses verbal abuse, is not bully\(_2\) who engages in physi-
cal abuse, is not bully who engages in relational abuse. Indexing underlines the fact that different strategies may be needed to deal with different forms of bullying: one can learn how to control the conversation with verbal abusers; one can enlist the aid of adults and other authority figures to protect oneself and one’s peers against physical abusers; and one can defuse relational abuse by seeking friendships outside the circle of abuse.

**Step Two.**

**Replacing the old either/or “fight ’em or ignore ’em” method:**

The research conducted by the Olweus group clearly indicates that the standard either/or approach to bully prevention is actually the least effective set of strategies to use to address a climate of violence in the schools, or to help school-age bullies and targets individually. Resorting to fighting can turn targets into bullies, which often results in physical harm to both parties, and sometimes to bystanders as well. The strategy of attempting to ignore bullies usually gives bullies a green light to continue their reign of terror — and sometimes to even try harder to get a rise out of their targets.

**Moving beyond two-valued thinking:** The Olweus model suggests that after exposing the details of the bullies’ tactics and tricks through personal stories, and discussing the specifics of those stories in small groups and larger assembly programs, the single most effective strategy to use in the complex environment of our schools, is to firmly and unequivocally tell the bullies “NO” in as many ways possible every time they exhibit an inappropriate behavior. This repetitive, consistent, but varied chorus of “NO more bullying” messages (described shortly) needs to be carried out by all members of the educational community (e.g., teachers, teacher aides, counselors, parents, administrators, cafeteria workers, other students, etc.). This approach lets bullies know there is no safe haven and there will be no acceptance of such behavior from any quarter.

To make a school’s “NO more bullying” messages as effective as possible, we suggest that teachers, parents, and students create their own series of different “NO” statements or scripts. Students can practice their statements and scripts in the classroom and on their own, and then put them to use when confronted by bullies. Classroom rehearsals of the students’ work can be set up as “rescue” or “hero” scenes in which the characters of targets and bystanders successfully stand up to bullies in a safe environment. It is both gratifying and productive for a class to watch a child, who has taken on a bully role in real life, enthusiastically play the role of a bystander-hero who rescues a target, or a target-hero who stands up to a bully.
Developing an “Extensional Orientation”: In general semantics, an “extensional orientation” means that one focuses, as much as possible, on “factual information.” Its counterpart, an “intensional orientation,” involves employing a subjective world-view that relies on abstract and general verbal definitions. Not surprisingly, those who develop an extensional orientation to meet life’s challenges are more effective problem-solvers than those who rely on an intensional orientation.

An important goal in all of our bully prevention workshops is to help participants develop a more extensional orientation by paying attention to the words they use to describe other people and situations. Students and adults are asked to refrain from turning their “NO more bullying” messages and scripts into personal attacks against the bullies. Targets and bystanders who “get personal” (intensional) in this way run the risk of acting like bullies. Describing bullies or bullying behaviors to other children with words such as “mean” or “bad” can also backfire — because some children (and even adults) regard “mean” and “bad” as terms equivalent to “powerful” and “cool.”

To circumvent such problems, students are directed to keep their statements and scripts as neutral and factual (extensional) as possible. Their goal is to send the message that bullying is an “irrational” behavior — a behavior that is “not normal” to rational human beings. We recommend the use of such provisional phrases for the simple reason that terms like “irrational behavior” or “behavior that is not normal” to rational human beings, avoid making the character of the bully look “cool.” Finally, such phrases also avoid equating bully behavior with the person as a whole, underscoring that change and growth are possible (i.e., a child can choose to relinquish a bully role and start behaving rationally again, or to ask for help to gain the skills to do so).

When confronting bully characters in “real life,” students are directed to calmly and firmly state their various NO messages and then to purposefully walk away with heads held high to give the bully a time out. It makes no sense to attempt to have a conversation with someone who is acting irrationally. If a bystander sees another child being bullied, that bystander states her or his NO message to the bully and then purposefully escorts the target away from the bully.

Below are a few examples of extensional “NO more bullying” statements that children and adults have created to prevent bully characters from taking over their schools.

- That’s only bully talk — I (or we) don’t listen to bully talk because it’s not rational.
- Bullying is not allowed in our school — so cut it out.
• We can’t play with you if you bully other children. Stop it so we can play together.

• Bullying is not normal behavior for rational human beings — cease and desist!

• Bullying is irrational. We don’t want you to get into any more trouble by acting irrationally, so don’t do it.

• Bullying causes problems for everyone in our school, including you — stop it now so we can work things out.

Learning how to handle bullies through take-charge verbal interactions is the first choice of response. However, if a bully shows any sign of becoming physically violent, students are instructed to leave the scene as quickly as they can, to run away proudly if they must, and to take protection by finding and remaining with a group of people (preferably adults) until they are sure that the present danger has passed. This is the intelligent, extensional choice under the circumstances. It makes no sense to fight or attempt to reason with someone who is not acting normally. Once the targets and/or bystanders have reached a place of safety, they are instructed to immediately notify as many adults as necessary to take care of the situation — by calmly and firmly stating that so and so is acting irrationally and needs immediate help because so and so did or threatened such and such.

**Step Three.**

**Teaching self-management/anger management techniques to children and adults:**

Bullies delight in getting a rise or a “knee jerk reaction” from their targets. Self-management and anger management techniques teach targets and bystanders how to avoid overreacting to the bullies’ irrational behaviors. They protect targets from internalizing the abuses of the bullies. And they encourage bullies to address the underlying reasons for their inappropriate behaviors so they can learn to modify them. We also use general semantics ideas and techniques in our self- and anger-management workshops to defuse the bully problem in schools.

**Learning to delay one’s reactions:** General semanticists advocate using the technique of “the delayed reaction” to consciously engage one’s higher brain functions, and delay one’s impulsive or signal reactions. Impulsive reactions interfere with our ability to evaluate challenging situations or problems effec-
tively. Most self- and anger-management programs proclaim that one should stay calm in the face of difficult situations, but very few of these programs actually explain how to do so — other than counting to ten or taking several deep breaths, which may not be practical given the circumstances.

Psychologist Albert Ellis pioneered a specific technique to help his clients delay their reactions and manage their emotions and behavior. Ellis’s technique, the “‘ABC’s’ of Rational-Emotive-Behavior-Therapy,” is based on the ancient adage, “People are not disturbed by things, but by the view they take of them,” as well as general semantics formulations.

According to Ellis’s “ABC’s,” our emotional and behavioral reactions are the result of the following sequence:

A. We first experience an ACTIVATING Event (e.g., someone calls us a “bad” name).

B. We have BELIEFS or Thoughts about that Event (that person should not say things like that — it’s terrible that person called me a name — how embarrassing!, etc.).

C. We experience the Emotional CONSEQUENCES of our beliefs and thoughts (I hate that person! I feel depressed/angry/scared! I want to crawl into a hole! I want to get back at that person!), which often leads to Behavioral CONSEQUENCES (withdrawal, fighting, crying, etc.).

Ellis’s clear, simple model is particularly helpful to those who hold the mistaken belief that one’s first response to any outside stimuli is always emotional. Professional actors, whose trade is based on reproducing and controlling emotions, are well aware that this is not the case. Actors learn to quickly control and reproduce such strong emotions as anger by how they think — such emotional recall, sense memory, and using one’s imagination are, in fact, forms of critical thinking and self-talk.

We can learn to stay calm and make better choices for ourselves in the face of challenging situations by becoming aware of how our thoughts or self-talk can exacerbate or defuse our emotional response to a situation. For example, if we talk to ourselves about difficult activating events (e.g., bullying) using terms such as “should,” “have to,” and “must” (which are demands), or over-the-top descriptors such as “terrible,” “awful,” and “horrible,” chances are that we will be more upset than if our self-talk contains terms such as “prefer,” “would like to,” and “it would be better if” (which are preferences and wishes), and more temperate descriptors such as “irrational,” “annoying,” and “distasteful.”
One can experience the difference in these two methods of self-talk by speaking the following set of statements out loud:

“That person SHOULDN’T talk to me that way! It’s really terrible and embarrassing!”

As opposed to,

“I would prefer if that person did not talk to me that way. It’s distasteful and annoying.”

**Avoiding “allness statements”:** Another way to improve one’s self-talk and to remain calm when dealing with life’s challenging activating events is to avoid the use of “allness statements” (e.g. “I will never be able to solve my bully problems.” “I will never have any real friends,” etc.). Allness statements are, from the outset, inaccurate because such statements cannot account for all occurrences. We ask students to carefully examine their self-talk for any allness statements that may lurk there and then to reframe those statements according to the facts. Thus, one could rewrite the first allness statement in the example above to read: “I find bully problems hard to deal with, but if I use general semantics ideas and techniques, research evidence shows that it will help improve the situation.”

**Dating:** Another general semantics practice that encourages students to focus on the facts, rather than on inferences and generalities, is the technique of “dating.” Dating involves attaching actual dates to one’s evaluations of people, objects, and situations as a reminder that “things change.” We ask students to “date themselves” over a four year period (e.g., Mary_{2001} is not Mary_{2002}, is not Mary_{2003}, is not Mary_{2004}). Under each name and date, students write a short factual description of some of the things they enjoyed doing that year. This exercise provides a powerful reminder for students who worry they will always be targets of bullies that time is on their side, that things will change.

**The IFD Syndrome:** Teaching students and educators about the “IFD syndrome” offers additional relief for targets and bystanders who may become despondent over the bullying problem in their schools. Wendell Johnson originally coined the term in his general semantics classic *People in Quandaries*. The IFD syndrome describes a condition in which idealistic people, who are constantly bombarded by “unfairness,” cruelty, and other frustrations, move from a state of Idealization to Frustration to Demoralization. Typically those who suffer from the IFD syndrome quickly become hopeless and develop a “what’s the use” attitude. Learning about the IFD syndrome, and remembering its concise formula, can help targets and sensitive bystanders remain calm and
hopeful so that they can make more accurate assessments of their bullying problems and the actions they need to take.

**Step Four.**

**Teaching empathy training:**

Dr. Ross Greene, in his book *The Explosive Child*, calls empathy the access code to a child’s brain (and for that matter to an adult’s brain as well). Even when a student (or an adult) is “acting out” or “clearly in the wrong,” the fastest way to calm them down, so one can create a teachable moment or have a rational conversation, is to offer them empathy first and correction or discipline second. The two key operative words in empathy training for children and adults are *I understand*: “I understand how you feel — I’ve felt that way myself,” “I haven’t had your exact experiences, but I believe I’ve had similar ones,” “I think I can understand how you feel,” etc. When the offer of empathy has been accepted (usually indicated by a person’s immediate change in body language and behavior or by a verbal acceptance such as “thank you”) one can proceed to corrective or disciplinary action.

In our empathy training workshops for students, we stress the general semantics idea that we only see things as they are interpreted by our individual nervous systems. Since everyone’s nervous system is unique, it takes real effort and concentration for one nervous system to understand another.

Some additional ways for adults to help students develop greater empathy for others include:

- Modeling empathy and firm respectful discipline to children.
- Teaching students to expand their thinking/feeling vocabularies and express themselves more clearly by replacing curse words and non-verbal displays of frustration and anger with specific feeling words such as “angry,” “jealous,” “hurt,” etc.
- Establishing a making-amends program, in which students learn to say they are sorry by doing something positive for others.
- Encouraging students to examine different points of view on a particular topic through role-plays in which students research and act out characters from different cultures, religions, nations, etc.

**Conclusion**

During the past fifty years numerous studies have demonstrated that general semantics instruction has positive effects on student attitudes, behavior,
and learning. These effects include increased critical thinking, enhanced creativity, improved composition writing, improved personality adjustment, decreased prejudice, and decreased alienation. (Levinson, p.153.) The positive feedback that we have received from students, teachers, and parents on our bully prevention workshops indicates that this is yet another area where general semantics training has proven beneficial in an educational setting.

NOTES AND REFERENCES


Rigby, K. *Bullying in Schools and What to Do About It*. Melbourne: Acer, 1996.
