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How to Help a Bully: Recommendations for Counseling the Proactive Aggressor

Initiatives to stop school bullying often prescribe counseling for the bullies. However, specific strategies for the counseling of bullies are not well defined. To succeed in stopping the aggressive behavior of bullies, school counselors must first understand the needs and motivations behind the behavior. This article distinguishes the characteristic type of aggression displayed by bullies—proactive aggression. Type-specific recommendations are presented for maximizing school counselors' effectiveness in their direct efforts to help bullies change.

Bullying is one of the most widely practiced forms of aggression in American schools. It is broadly defined as the actual or attempted infliction of injury or discomfort by one student on another student that is intentional, abusive, and based on an imbalance of power between bully and victim (Olweus, 1994; Sullivan, Cleary, & Sullivan, 2004). According to the National Center for Education Statistics–2002, almost one third of public schools have reported daily to weekly occurrences of student bullying (Hall, 2006). Research suggests that nearly half of today's students will experience some form of bullying during their education; however, rates of bullying as high as 81% for school-aged males and 72% for school-aged females have been reported in some studies (Casey-Cannon, Hayward, & Gowen, 2001; Charach, Pepler, & Ziegler, 1995; Farrington, 1993, as cited in Sanders, 2004). In a survey by the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, 1.7 million children (one in five) in grades 6 through 10 admitted bullying their classmates (Cole, Cornell, & Sheras, 2006). On the basis of current statistics, Hall has concluded that school climates nationwide have been dramatically altered by the actions of bullies.

Bullying affects students academically, socially, and psychologically. Bullying victims cannot learn effectively in an ongoing climate of fear. In addition to the possibility of physical injury, they are at increased risk for absenteeism (Limber, 2006), loneliness (Nansel et al., 2001), and lowered self-esteem (Hodges & Perry, 1996). Bystanders to bullying

often fear becoming victims themselves and are further encumbered by conflicting emotions ranging from guilt over not helping bullying victims to lowered image among peers for being a “snitch” if they alert authorities to the problem (Clark, 2002). Bullies face risks of escalating behavior, further emotional injury, and punishment for harm to others unless their aggression is stopped. They are less likely to perform at full potential at school and more likely to engage in criminal behaviors after leaving school (Marsh, Parada, Craven, & Finger, 2004). Students who bully in middle school have been found to be up to four times more likely to be involved in later criminal activity than those who do not (Cole et al., 2006). Left unchecked, bullying attitudes and behaviors in children appear to become more serious and more difficult to prevent and may be carried into adulthood where their potential dangerousness and consequences increase exponentially (McAdams & Lambie, 2003).

Teachers have reported that they feel unprepared to recognize and handle the kinds of bullying that they are encountering in the classroom (Newman-Carlson & Horne, 2004). As a result, they feel they are more likely to overlook serious bullying behaviors or to ignore those behaviors they recognize but feel inadequate or afraid to deal with. In a national survey, school administrators reported that a trend toward increasing aggression among students has diminished their roles from educators to disciplinarians and stifled their vision and creativity as school leaders (McAdams & Lambie, 2003). They strongly agreed that bullying has profoundly impaired educational processes and programs at multiple levels.

Serious incidents of school violence have brought national emphasis to the problem of bullying and prompted research initiatives in the areas of bullying prevention and school safety (Pichler, Urban, & Bockewitz, 2005). It is evident in the research and professional literature that counseling for identified or suspected bullies is a necessary component of comprehensive programs aimed at preventing or stopping bullying behavior (Davis, 2006). Less evi-

dent in the literature, however, are specific strategies for school counselors to apply in their direct work with bullies. Increasingly, school counselors are apt to find themselves face-to-face with students referred for bullying. To succeed in helping these students stop their harmful aggressive behavior, school counselors must be able to recognize and appropriately address the underlying needs and motivations behind the behavior. Toward that objective, the remainder of this article will distinguish the characteristic form of aggression displayed by bullies—proactive aggression. It then will draw from current understanding of proactive aggression to make seven recommendations for maximizing counselor success and avoiding pitfalls in counseling intervention to help school bullies change.

REACTIVE AND PROACTIVE AGGRESSION

Professional literature distinguishes generally between two types of youth aggression—reactive aggression and proactive aggression. Reactive aggression is characterized as a “hot-blooded,” automatic, defensive response to immediate and often misperceived threat (Hubbard, Dodge, Cillessen, Coie, & Schwartz, 2001; Wood & Gross, 2002). Youth exhibiting reactive aggression are characterized as seeking but lacking close interpersonal relationships with significant adults such as parents—relationships they need to learn how to effectively attend to, understand, and take into account others’ intentions (Dodge, 1991). Real or perceived rejections in past relationships with caregivers have caused reactive aggressors to maintain high levels of internalized anger and insecurity and rendered them vulnerable to excessively emotional and forceful responses to even minor immediate stressors or personal threats. Once the presenting threat is relieved, reactive aggressors are likely to be remorseful for any harm that was done by their reflexive, violent response. Teachers and caregivers often refer to them as having “a short fuse” because they tend to be intolerant of frustration, easily threatened, impulsive and over-reactive in response to any source of stress or fear, and unpredictable in their tantrums and outbursts (Sterba & Davis, 1999; Vitaro, Brendgen, & Tremblay, 2002).

Unlike reactive aggression, proactive aggression does not characteristically occur as an emotion-laden, defensive response to immediate threat. Instead, it is described as organized, purposeful, and often premeditated rather than automatic (Galezewski, 2005). Aggression for proactive aggressors has, over an extended time, become an internalized means of achieving personal security, competence, and control in their lives (Cottle, 2004; McAdams & Lambie, 2003). In the real or perceived absence of

affirmation from significant others (parents, in particular), they have come to derive a sense of self-efficacy from their ability to succeed without, and often at the expense of, others. The propensity of proactive aggressors toward generalized hostility and antisocial behavior appears to have two origins: one being an overt manifestation of internalized resentment and anger over frustrated needs for security, and another being a mechanism by which they keep others far enough at bay so as not to endanger their desired autonomy and self-sufficiency (Arsenio & Lemerise, 2004; McAdams, 2002).

Proactive aggression is used consistently as a tool for personal gain (status, control, self-confirmation, gratification, etc.) (Vitaro & Brendgen, 2005). It is applied strategically, methodically, subtly, and with increasing intensity until the desired goal is achieved (Hubbard et al., 2001). Proactive aggressors initiate aggressive acts without provocation and against those whom they see as the most vulnerable and least threatening targets for exploitation (McAdams & Lambie, 2003). Consequently, it is proactive aggressors who peers and caregivers most commonly refer to as bullies (Hubbard et al.). Due to its predatory, remorseless, and internalized nature, proactive aggression is often considered the more serious of the two subtypes (McAdams, 2002).

A recent survey of public school principals and assistant principals revealed that between 1982 and 2000 (their collective range of years on the job), there was a significant increase in proactive aggression in all school settings (McAdams & Lambie, 2003). Using the eight criteria shown in Table 1 to distinguish reactive from proactive incidents of aggression, these school administrators reported that about one fifth of all the student aggression they observed in 1982 was proactive; whereas by the year 2000, the percentage had increased to one third. Strikingly, the most substantial increase in proactive aggression was observed at the elementary level, where its incidence had nearly tripled, often reaching levels comparable to those reported for middle and high school. According to school officials, the observed increase in proactive aggression was not attributable to any unique population, setting, or circumstance but, rather, reflected a gradual and continuing trend in the school-age population. This trend seems likely to continue in the future if its antecedent and supporting conditions are not addressed.

THE PROACTIVE AGGRESSOR: A BEHAVIORAL PROFILE

As noted above, proactive aggressors find personal validation in dominance over those around them. Those who are physically large and powerful will achieve that dominance through threats or acts of

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Table 1. Distinguishing Characteristics of Reactive and Proactive Physical Aggression

Reactive Aggression	Proactive Aggression
1. Aggression is impulsive, not preplanned	1. Aggression is preplanned and calculated
2. Aggression is employed to relieve the aggressor's frustration, anxiety, or fear	2. Aggression is employed as a tool for the aggressor's personal gain
3. Aggressor is remorseful for the aggressive behavior at its conclusion	3. Aggressor shows no remorse for the aggressive behavior at its conclusion
4. Aggressive behavior is emotionally driven (frenzied, chaotic)	4. Aggressive behavior is intellectually driven (planful, methodical)

In addition to the possibility of physical injury, bullying victims are at increased risk for absenteeism, loneliness, and lowered self-esteem.

physical intimidation. Those lacking physical superiority (i.e., the majority) will turn to deception, coercion, and manipulation to gain the control they need for a positive self-image (Larke & Beran, 2006; Salmivalli & Nieminen, 2002). Applications of rationality and logic, verbal proficiency, emotional control, calculation, and patronization tend to be the common tools of their trade.

Lacking remorse for hurtful behavior, proactive aggressors can be expected to excuse their behavior by finding rational excuses for why aggression was justified and unavoidable (Brendgen, Vitaro, Tremblay, & Lavoie, 2001). They may be similarly adept at devising logical reasons why measures taken by authorities to deal with their aggressive actions also were unjust (Sanders, 2004). Over time, proactive aggressors may develop considerable verbal proficiency at defending the self-constructed logic of their aggressive behavior to themselves, to authority figures, and even to their victims. Through convincing argumentation they may be able to minimize or avoid consequences for their behavior, thus making them appear additionally powerful and ominous in the eyes of their peers (Sutton, Reeves, & Keogh, 2000). Proactive aggressors can be expected to manipulate others' emotions in their drive for personal gain. Their strategies for emotional control will include pressing sensitive buttons to elicit desired affective responses from others and displaying false emotions themselves (e.g., crying, remorse) to deceive others of their aggressive intentions (Halberstadt, Denham, & Dunsmore, 2001; Sutton & Keogh, 2001). An intrinsic need for control may preclude any concern for how their behavior will affect the feelings of others who stand in their way (Horne, Orpinas, Newman-Carlson, & Bartolomucci, 2004).

Proactive aggressors are likely to calculate the times when their aggressive acts are least likely to be recognized and deterred (Dodge, Lochman, Harnish, Bates, & Pettit, 1997; Woodworth &

Porter, 2002). Unlike reactive aggression that typically occurs without notice, the timing of proactive aggression has often been preplanned to produce maximum gain and minimal consequence for the aggressor. Skillful proactive aggressors also may use patronization to win the favor of those perceived as either enhancing or standing in the way of their personal advancement. Disingenuously saying exactly what others want to hear, they open the door for undeterred aggression by first winning the trust of those who would be most likely to suspect and intervene (Coloroso, 2002). Proactive aggressors may seem as two very different people in the eyes of authorities and their victims.

While heuristically useful, the perils of behavioral profiling to identify violent students must be emphasized here. The predictive validity of behavioral profiles for violent individuals rarely exceeds 50%; thus, there is always a danger that behaviors will be misinterpreted, and that students will be wrongfully identified (Fey, Nelson, & Roberts, 2000; Harris & Rice, 1997). Misinterpretation can lead to unwarranted discrimination against certain groups of students that labels them and alienates them from other students and educators (Fey et al.). There is not a fool-proof behavioral profile for the proactive aggressor. Consequently, the preceding behavioral profile is not intended to be the definitive framework for identifying proactive aggressors but, rather, should be applied as part of a comprehensive assessment protocol that examines each student's unique history, context, and behavior.

THE NEED FOR INTERVENTION

Proactive aggression can be expected to continue until proactive aggressors develop genuine empathy for others; until their aggressive behavior ceases to satisfy their appetitive needs; or until they have access to more satisfying, pro-social, ways to maintain positive self-esteem. However, none of these

counteracting conditions is likely to occur spontaneously and without intervention, for several reasons. First, a concern for others appears to occur as the result of a developmental process through which moral reasoning (i.e., a sense of “conscience”) has, over time, become an intrinsic, regulating factor in behavioral responses (Arsenio & Lemerise, 2004). Research suggests that moral behavior in children is not acquired automatically; rather, it is initially and mainly influenced by others’ instruction, supervision, correction, establishment of rewards and punishments, and modeling (Berkowitz & Grych, 1998; Woolfolk, 2001). A second reason relates to an absence of motivation to change. Because proactive aggression is an internalized, automatic behavior, proactive aggressors are not likely to evaluate its harmful consequences as negative. Provided that aggression achieves its self-serving objective, they will see no reason to change, even if others are being hurt (Crick & Dodge, 1996; Kimonis, Frick, Fazekas, & Loney, 2006). The final reason has to do with accessibility; easy opportunities for dominating others are one reason why individuals denied other sources of personal power and control turn to proactive aggression in the first place (Sutton, 2001). As long as vulnerable targets for domination remain readily available, proactive aggressors are likely to remain satisfied with their current pattern of aggressive behavior.

The optimal goal of interventions to address proactive aggression is for proactive aggressors to develop a level of empathy for others that effectively restricts their willingness to hurt others for personal gain. The ability to empathize with others has been directly related to the acquisition of pro-social behaviors and the prevention of aggressive ones (Espelage, Mebane, & Adams, 2004). Empathy development occurs most readily when caring for others is both modeled and valued at home by a child’s parents or caregivers (Swick, 2005). As such, current trends in schools toward strengthening and collaborating with students’ families stand to support the development of empathy in potential and identified proactive aggressors (Sullivan et al., 2004). School-based interventions aimed at promoting higher levels of moral reasoning likewise show potential for helping aggressive students develop a concern for others (Goldstein, Gibbs, & Glick, 1995). Regrettably, empathy development, like all developmental change, occurs gradually over time, whereas the necessity of stopping aggressive student behavior is immediate. Bringing an immediate halt to proactive aggression during the more gradual course of developmental intervention is the challenge that school counselors often face when students are referred to them for chronic bullying behavior.

COUNSELING IMPLICATIONS

To change the behavior of appetitive, self-serving individuals, those individuals must be convinced that a desired change is in *their own* best interest. Thus, counseling interventions to arrest the proactive aggression of bullies must convince the bullies that the personal benefit of their aggression is outweighed by *both* its negative consequences and the tangible benefits of pro-social behavior (Brown & Parsons, 1998; Pellegrini & Bartini, 2001). At the same time, intervening school counselors must avoid becoming victims themselves of a proactive aggressor’s manipulative tactics. Seven specific recommendations for counseling intervention emerge in the professional literature that have particular relevance to the success of school counselors in their work to achieve these conjoint tasks.

Recommendation #1: Provide Clear Behavioral Expectations That Are Free from Loopholes or Ambiguity

As noted previously, proactive aggression is less likely to occur when its costs in terms of negative consequences outweigh its benefits to the aggressor. To achieve this condition, schools must have a structured system of behavioral expectations that explicitly defines responsible student behavior, that effectively exposes students’ failures to fulfill those responsibilities, and that specifies consequences for irresponsibility (Cole et al., 2006). The consequences of aggressive behavior must be significant enough to eliminate its utilitarian appeal, and there must be no loopholes through which the proactive aggressor can talk his or her way out of responsibility and appropriate consequences for bullying behavior.

School counselors can use their understanding of proactive aggression skills to help ensure that their school’s behavior management system is as sensitive as possible to all forms of aggressive behavior. Within such a system, school counselors can directly effect positive behavior change in actual and suspected bullies by clarifying and helping them to realize the personal costs of their aggressive acts toward others and the personal rewards of compliance with behavior standards. School counselors should anticipate and be prepared to discount a proactive aggressor’s efforts to excuse and justify aggressive behaviors, accepting nothing less than his or her full compliance with assigned consequences. For example, in an effort to avoid consequences, proactive aggressors may claim that they were provoked by their victims and left no other choice but an aggressive response. Such an attempt to blame the victim for their actions would appropriately be dismissed by the school counselor, and the assigned consequences

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upheld on grounds that alternatives to violence can *always* be found by those with a genuine desire to do so. Holding proactive aggressors consistently and firmly to the consequences of noncompliance with behavioral expectations increases what James (1995) has referred to as the *disciplinary currency* value of the consequences—that is, their significance in the eyes of the aggressor as a potential deterrent to future aggressive acts.

Recommendation #2: Avoid Debates and Arguments

It is important to remember that proactive aggressors are driven to control the definition of their interpersonal situations in order to satisfy basic needs for personal validation and positive self-esteem. To support this intrinsic drive, they will become practiced and proficient in avoiding and defending against interventions that would seemingly deny them their basic needs. When confronted, they often can be skilled (perhaps more skilled than those confronting them) in explaining their aggressive acts as necessary and/or unavoidable, thus, avoiding or minimizing consequences for their behavior (Sutton et al., 2000). Convincingly arguing point for point every accusation of irresponsibility or wrongdoing, they may attempt to neutralize or minimize intervention efforts directly, or they may attempt to do so indirectly by simply wearing down their accusers.

School counselors working with proactive aggressors must avoid becoming entangled in factual debates (Coloroso, 2002). After identifying proactive aggression (through direct observation or reasonable suspicion) and assigning clear and appropriate consequences, it is best to hold to that position against the aggressor's protests, because any form of compromise regarding guilt or the severity of consequences is likely to be viewed positively by a proactive aggressor as an endorsement of his or her control over the situation. Processing the incident is necessary for new understanding, but that should occur only after the aggressor has complied with behavioral directives. As illustration, consider a student serving a two-day in-school suspension penalty for an act of bullying who argues that her exceedingly good behavior on the first day in suspension should allow her extradition from the second day. To avoid induction into the student's attempt at control, the supervising teacher or school counselor would be advised to (a) refrain from debating the issue, (b) acknowledge the first-day effort and encourage continued success, and (c) follow through with the disciplinary action as assigned. An immediate reduction in proactive aggression will be most likely when, through being held firmly accountable for what they do, proactive aggressors

learn that there are negative consequences (i.e., costs) associated with their aggressive behavior that they cannot argue or explain away.

Recommendation #3: Avoid Repetitious or Standardized Responses

Standardized, predictable responses to bullying behavior (e.g., “When you do this, this is [always] what will happen”) enable proactive aggressors to plan their offenses so as to maximize personal benefit and minimize personal cost. When consequences for bullying are static and predictable, proactive aggressors can be expected to calculate in advance at which times and places and with which people the rewards for their appetitive behavior will outweigh the potential consequences of getting caught (Woodworth & Porter, 2002). Driven by their intrinsic need for control, they will seek (and usually find) certain times, places, and interpersonal situations in which the gratification derived from their aggressive behavior is seen as worth the price of its associated consequences. Keeping proactive aggressors uncertain about the specific consequences of aggressive behavior through the use of variable response protocols denies them opportunities for advance planning on the basis of anticipated cost and reward. It also decreases their opportunity to calculate loopholes in established policy that will enable them to avoid responsibility for their planned offenses.

To reduce the utility (and, thus, the desirability and incidence) of bullying for a proactive aggressor, school counselors must first gain an accurate understanding of the individual aggressor's view of behavioral cost and reward and then work to develop disciplinary responses to aggression that, in the aggressor's eyes, outweigh its rewards. Applications of the principles of natural and logical consequences have shown to have considerable utility in changing child behavior (Pryor & Tollerud, 1999). School counselors should be prepared to turn to these principles to ensure (and help others in their setting to ensure) that disciplinary responses have maximum impact in teaching proactive aggressors that appetitive actions are not worth their consequential price. In doing so, they must remember that the currency value of their responses as a deterrent will differ from one individual to another. For example, the loss of recess would seem to be an appropriate, logical consequence for a student caught bullying others on the playground; however, it also could serve as a reward for a proactive aggressor who derives a sense of control from being able to command the individualized attention of the teacher who must remain behind to provide supervision. School counselors cannot rely on standardized, comfortable responses to proactive aggression, but, rather, must be prepared to expand their repertoire of responses to encompass a broad range

of individual needs and motivations (Smith, Larson, & Nuckles, 2006).

Recommendation #4: Reinforce Positive Achievements, but Cautiously

As noted previously, proactive aggressors are less likely than others to be motivated by the anticipation of adult praise and approval. However, they have no less need than others for ongoing reinforcement of their personal worth and capability. Eliminating coercive control as a source of validation for proactive aggressors necessitates replacing it with alternative means for fulfilling this essential human need. One way that school counselors can effectively work to reduce proactive aggressors' reliance on aggression for personal validation is by seeing to it that they receive sufficient validation for the pro-social things that they do (Cole et al., 2006; Malecki & Demaray, 2004). When respect from others is achievable through positive behavior, proactive aggressors will have less reason to risk the potential consequences of coercive behavior in order to gain the respect they seek (Horne et al., 2004).

Individually and in collaboration with other school personnel, school counselors should work to ensure that all students have opportunities for success and self-esteem building within their social group. In doing so, however, they must not lose sight of the fact that the observed accomplishments of a student prone to proactive aggression may have possibly been achieved through coercion. For example, in a student election, other students may have felt compelled to elect the proactive aggressor in fear of physical or emotional retaliation. Public recognition of the student for a victory achieved in this manner would serve only to reinforce his or her continued use of such aggressive tactics. When in doubt as to the legitimacy of a proactive aggressor's observed achievement, school counselors are advised to further examine the source of their concern and eliminate the doubt before unwittingly reinforcing appetitive behavior in the presence of those who may have been victim to it.

Recommendation #5: Don't Drop Your Guard

When students have internalized the use of aggression to satisfy needs for self-esteem, they can be expected to act aggressively at any available opportunity. Their quest for personal control and validation through threats and acts of manipulation, coercion, and physical force has become automatic in their relationships with others and, as such, should be anticipated whenever they are not pressured to relate to others in a different way. Effectively, their appetitive behavior can be expected to continue until *they* determine that the risks and costs of getting caught outweigh the potential for personal gain

(Sutton, 2001). Thus, an important step in helping proactive aggressors change their behavior (and ultimately, their perspective) is to ensure, through careful and continuous monitoring of their activities, that their risks of getting caught are high.

To achieve this, school counselors and other school personnel must identify and remain at all times alert for conditions in their setting that are conducive to bullying behavior (e.g., vulnerable targets, limited supervision) (Coloroso, 2002). Wherever predisposing conditions exist, school counselors should (a) presume that proactive aggressors will take advantage of those conditions, (b) increase vigilance for aggressive behavior, and (c) be prepared to intervene or summon intervention as soon as aggression is suspected or observed. Students with a history of proactive aggression need to know that they are especially subject to the watchful eye of school authorities in their interactions with others. Maintaining an air of suspicion with suspected proactive aggressors can be tiring and unpleasant for school counselors and educators who seek trust in their relationships with students. School personnel must understand, however, that doing so may be one of the most important actions they can take to disrupt the utility of aggressive activities and open proactive aggressors to the consideration of pro-social alternatives to aggression for satisfying their personal needs.

Recommendation #6: Focus on Feelings Rather than Facts

As described previously, proactive aggressors may develop considerable skill at avoiding the consequences of their actions. Through verbal proficiency and manipulative strategies developed over time, they are often able to minimize the costs of their behavior simply by outdebating or winning the sympathy of authorities who observe and attempt to confront them (Sutton, 2001). In addition, they may have often become comfortable and convincing in the presentation of false information that supports their innocence of wrongdoing and raises question regarding the legitimacy of any possible consequences. In short, it is in point-for-point defense of their behavior that proactive aggressors are likely to have the most experience, control, and success.

Thus, in helping proactive aggressors accept rather than escape responsibility for their behavior, school counselors are advised to avoid factual debates and, instead, to focus whenever possible on the feelings generated by their hurtful behaviors, an area where they are likely to be less in control and more vulnerable to suggestion (Rigby, Smith, & Pepler, 2004). By focusing on the feelings surrounding suspected aggression, the school counselor can eliminate the proactive aggressor's grounds

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for rational or logical denial of responsibility, because there is no standard for reference from which the rightness or wrongness of feelings can be reasonably argued. For example, a suspected bully might be told, “I can’t prove that you are bullying the others this way, but I can tell from their fear that it is happening. Until you show some concern for how badly the others are feeling and are willing to look at what part you might have in it, I am going to have to assume that you are the bully and hold you accountable.” Proactive aggressors need to learn that there may be consequences when others *feel* victimized by their actions, regardless of whether their appetitive intentions can be proven beyond dispute. This may be the only way that they will begin to consider the feelings of others before they choose aggressive courses of action in the future.

Recommendation #7: Don’t Stop at Consequences; Teach Pro-Social Behaviors

Coercive control of others satisfies an intrinsic psychological need for proactive aggressors. Consequently, the addition of consequences, even substantial ones, may be insufficient to curtail their controlling behavior if they can see no other way to satisfy that need. Proactive aggressors often have well-developed skills in a restricted range of social interactions that promote their self-serving objectives. However, they tend to lack an understanding of social rules and to have a narrow (or nonexistent) repertoire of alternative social skills that would allow them to satisfy their personal needs without infringing on the rights and needs of others (Sutton, 2001). To be effective, interventions aimed at extinguishing proactive aggressors’ self-serving behaviors must always include instruction in alternative skills that will enable them to effectively meet their needs in more pro-social ways (Aber, Brown, & Jones, 2003; Cole et al., 2006).

By teaching and modeling such skills as active listening (to others’ views), accepting failure, impulse control, collaborative problem solving, and conveying respect, as well as promoting their emphasis in the classroom, school counselors can directly help proactive aggressors expand their limited inventory of socially acceptable responses to others. Coupling instruction with efforts to ensure that pro-social responses are explicitly acknowledged and rewarded school-wide will increase the chances of potential aggressors choosing them over aggression in response to real-life situations (Walker, Colvin, & Ramsey, 1995). When aggression occurs, school counselors must advocate for the provision of counseling as well as disciplinary intervention. It is in the teachable moments soon after an incident that proactive aggressors, whose tactics have been exposed and who face significant consequences, may

be most open to consideration of less costly ways of behaving.

SUMMARY

The preceding tips for school counselors do not comprise a complete response to the real problem of bullying behaviors in the schools. A comprehensive response also must include coordinated and collaborative efforts involving schools, families, and communities to promote developmental change in children who lack concern for others (i.e., a conscience) in their actions. In the meantime, school counselor understanding of the unique needs and skills of proactive aggressors is necessary to effect immediate containment of their bullying behavior, a critical component of the comprehensive goal.

School counselors who fail to recognize and respond to the distinguishing motivations of proactive aggressors can limit intervention effectiveness and even empower the aggressors in the eyes of their victims. At the same time, school counselors must always remain aware of the dangers of stereotyping through the assignment of clinical labels. Pure reactive or proactive aggressors, if they exist at all, are likely to be the exception rather than the rule. Aggressive students are more likely to fall somewhere on a perceptual and behavioral continuum, the label representing their most characteristic type of aggressive activity. School counselors today are encouraged to use the knowledge of proactive aggression to maximize effectiveness and efficiency and avoid previous pitfalls in their work to help bullies. At the same time, they must always remain mindful of individual client differences and be ready to revise assessments and courses of intervention as individual student needs require. ■

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