

CPI *Unrestrained* Transcription

Episode 8: Dr. Deborah Temkin

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Host: Terry Vittone

Terry: Hello. This is Terry Vittone, your host on *Unrestrained*, the podcast series from CPI. Today my guest is Dr. Deborah Temkin. Good morning, Deborah.

Deborah: Hello, thanks for having me.

Terry: You're welcome. Dr. Temkin is a child development and prevention research scientist, specializing in bullying prevention, school climate and connecting education policy to healthy youth development.

She was the research and policy coordinator for bullying prevention initiatives at the US Department of Education from 2010 to 2012, where she was charged with coordinating the Obama administration's bullying prevention efforts, including launching StopBullying.gov.

She was a finalist for the 2012 Call to Service medal, for the Samuel J. Heyman Service to America medals for her work at the department. Dr. Temkin continued her work in bullying prevention by creating and launching a new initiative, Project Seatbelt, at the Robert F. Kennedy Center for Justice and Human Rights in 2013.

Dr. Temkin is now a senior research scientist in education research at Child Trends, a non-partisan, non-profit research organization in Bethesda, Maryland.

All right. And my first question for you, Deborah, in your recent Huffington Post blog, "Four Years In: Reflecting on Progress Toward Preventing Bullying" you write:

"In the last four years, we have changed the conversation, brought the issue of bullying to the forefront. But we need to stop just talking about bullying and engaging in superficial action. Four years in, we must shift our goal from conversation to action."

What are our best strategies to accomplish that change?

Deborah: Sure. One of the major obstacles we're facing when it comes to preventing bullying is shifting our mindset from simply telling kids not to bully, to actually addressing the context that encourages the behavior.

If we look back to the 1990's, we were in much the same place we are now with bullying as they were with substance use prevention for adolescents. Back then, the mantra was, "Just say no." And that was taught in schools throughout the country.

But unfortunately, research actually showed that that approach did little to prevent substance abuse and actually increased use in some cases. What does work, we know now, is teaching adolescents life skills and helping them address the reasons why they were choosing to experiment or do drugs.

We need to do the same with bullying. We need to, for instance, help change the school climate whereby bullying is not rewarded through popularity and status, as we know it is right now.

There is no one size fits all solution, unfortunately, for this. Most schools need to explore their own context and identify the needs that they have in order to help improve the environment for all students.

Terry: So you see a parallel between the, "Just say no" initiative and what would be the parallel in bullying?

Deborah: The mantra right now is really, "Stop bullying." Which really, to me, sounds just like, "Just say no to bullying." We are not really giving guidance to students on what they should be doing or what skills they need to learn in order to stop bullying. We're just telling them to stop. Which seems very unrealistic.

Terry: I see. In another recent blog post, "Playful Banter and Bullying: Whose Perception Matters?" you write: "We need to stop arguing over the definition of bullying and trying to objectively identify it." Could you talk about that?

Deborah: Sure. Unfortunately, there's no one single definition of bullying. What I mean by that is if you ask any two people whether they think certain behaviors are bullying, you're likely to get two different answers.

If we look at the definitions and research and policy, we have 49 state laws now on bullying that all have different definitions. And this is really a

problem when the definition of bullying varies so widely. It makes for an intellectual debate among bullying prevention researchers and advocates. But when it comes to actually addressing the needs of the children involved in bullying—both those who are accused and those who feel bullied—the definition really matters.

Right now our approach is to address bullying by punishing the person who's being bullied. And I think most would agree that we don't want to punish someone for something we can't objectively say is wrong, that we can't objectively say is bullying. But unfortunately, when we put that objective label on something that feels so subjective to the person who feels bullied, we actually deny the experience of that child. We have to really shift our mindset to supporting the youth involved, as opposed to simply punishing it away.

Terry: That dovetails into my next question. You've written that "The belief that we can punish away bullying is very misguided." And you said just a moment ago about the recent legislation, or 49 different definitions of bullying across the states. Could you talk about that and also your reaction to this legislation in more detail that criminalizes bullying?

Deborah: Sure. The 49 states that have bullying prevention laws, for the most part, are not criminal laws. Most of those laws have to do with having schools implement a standard policy that they will address bullying, that there are procedures to report it, etc. And of course, they give the definition. But most of those don't put a criminal penalty. Lately however, there has been a trend throughout the country of tying criminal punishment to bullying. Or even, in some cases, tying tickets or fines for the parents of the accused bullies to help prevent bullying somehow.

And as you said, I think this is really misguided. There are several issues relying on punishment. As I mentioned, punishment against one student will do very little to repair the harm done to the targeted student. Criminalization also sets an even higher bar for what constitutes bullying and it's that much more likely that a case will be dismissed without any support provided to the youth who felt bullied.

Beyond that, there are also many who are concerned about the potential of such laws to violate such things like the freedom of speech, which was actually the major issue that got a recent law overturned in Albany. One that was criminalizing bullying in a case there.

Terry: Could you speak a little more about the... Go back to definitions for a second, . . . what are the most widely divergent definitions out there that

states have? You said there are demarcations between how the states define bullying and those probably are important.

Deborah: Sure. In research, we tend to say that bullying is aggressive behavior that's repeated over time in the context of a power imbalance. But turning that into a policy is very difficult because, again, a lot of those components are pretty subjective. How repeated does it need to be to be repeated? What is a power imbalance? And these are questions that researchers are still struggling with as well. So what we see in the language of the law tends to be along the lines of behavior that is objectionably wrong or behavior that is severe, pervasive, and persistent.

The language within those laws varies quite dramatically. Sometimes you'll see behavior such as what we call relational aggression, or the "mean girl" behavior covered. And a lot of times they'll restrict it to only physical bullying, or only verbal bullying. And this really affects which behaviors are covered for kids in those particular states.

Terry: I see. Well it raises, at least in my mind—this is probably a very rookie question but—how the person who might be charged with something under this legislation, how do they get due process with something that's not properly defined?

Deborah: Right. And I think there are two issues. One is, of course, the child who is being accused of bullying, but also the child who feels bullied. And more often than not we're seeing these cases dismissed. If you look at the recent statistics about schools that report cases of bullying, you see that even the largest school districts in particular states are reporting very few, zero, 10 cases of bullying in a single year.

And if you compare that to the statistics from nationally represented samples that say 20% of youths between the ages of 12 to 18 feel that they've been bullied in the past year; there's a huge discrepancy. More likely than not, these cases are being judged not objectively bullying. And so there's a huge disconnect to what schools are reporting versus what children feel is happening to them.

Terry: I see. What could maybe take the place of legislation to start to have a lever against this sort of behavior in schools?

Deborah: Well, I think there are legislative solutions to an extent. I think one of the things policymakers should think about is adding something to their laws that even if a case is not deemed to be bullying, they need to provide support to the child who feels bullied.

I think this is common sense. If a child feels hurt we want to do something to help them. But I think more often than not, we're so focused on trying to determine whether bullying has happened that we often lose sight of those children.

Terry: I see.

Deborah: I think, in addition to that, we really need to encourage schools to start thinking beyond just academics, to thinking about helping kids learn the social and emotional skills they need to be successful in their lives. And to help improve the school climate that surrounds them. We know both of those, social emotional learning and school climate, are highly linked to academic achievement. So it only makes sense for schools to focus on that.

Terry: I see. Now, could you make your case, Dr. Temkin, for why you reserve the term bullying for school age youth and why you believe we need a different term for that sort of behavior among adults?

Deborah: Sure. I want to start by saying I know that aggressive behavior occurs among all people, regardless of if you're a minor or an adult. I don't deny that bullying or things that look like bullying does happen among adults and happen in the workplace. But because adults are fully developed, the intention and the effect of those behaviors are very different for adults than it is for children who are still minors.

Until about the age of 25 the prefrontal cortex, which is the part of the brain that's right in the front, that is not fully developed. And so that's the part of the brain that controls things like impulse, aggression. And it's also part of the brain that can be severely affected by ongoing trauma, such as bullying.

And so while the brain is still developing, you are at a stage where kids are not necessarily in control of their own behaviors as much as they'd like them. They are more malleable. So we can help train them and teach them to do better behaviors. And then we're also at a phase for those kids where they are much more likely to be affected by the bullying behavior.

Terry: I see. So probably the severity of the repercussion in that brain that is still developing is your demarcation for why you're saying we should reserve the term. Is that accurate?

Deborah: I think there are a couple other reasons as well. I think the other key piece is that youth in school are also in a very different context than adults at work. While it's somewhat hard for an adult to change jobs, obviously there is difficulty with that, they do have the freedom to do so if they would like. It's very different for a student who is required to go to school who has very little ability to change the school they're in.

Jaana Juvonen, who is a researcher at UCLA, coined the term "the involuntary social group" for the in-school environment. Which really reflects the fact that students aren't able to pick the group of peers that they're around.

That's really hard when those are the kids who end up bullying you. That context effect, as well as the developmental effects, are why I think bullying is a very different behavior when kids are in school versus when they are adults.

Terry: I see. That's pretty persuasive, I have to say. Could you talk about what you're most excited about at Child Trends and your hopes for bullying prevention advocacy in the five-year frame?

Deborah: Sure. I'm really thrilled to be returning to my research background. I got my PhD just a few years back, but have been so involved in the advocacy realm. I sort of let my research go a little bit by the wayside. And so I'm really excited to get back into that, especially at such a renowned organization such as Child Trends. I really look forward to filling the gaps in bullying research, as well as working to identify best practices.

There is a huge research gap in us knowing we need better prevention for bullying but really not knowing what works. The vast majority of bullying prevention programs that are out there have either not been evaluated or have not shown effectiveness or efficacy in the United States. And that's a real problem when there are so many schools clamoring for programs to implement in their schools.

Terry: Are there . . . oh, excuse me.

Deborah: Go ahead.

Terry: Are there any bright lights?

Deborah: There are some. Work toward social emotional learning is demonstrating some results towards bullying, but not enough. And I think one of the key issues is there is really not a one size fits all solution. It's about identifying

how schools can figure out which programs are going to work for them and making sure we have a wide array of programs for them to select from.

Terry: I see. So Deborah, may I ask you, who in your career would you say has been your biggest inspiration?

Deborah: I would have to say my former boss, Kevin Jennings, who was the former Assistant Deputy Secretary for the Office of Safe and Drug-Free Schools when I was at the Department of Education. He's really the one who inspired me to actually hit the ground running, become a bullying prevention advocate as much as I have been and really lifted me up.

I was 25 at the time I started working for him. You know, "Here's a 25-year-old, she can do this, she can lead this effort" and really put his trust in me. And so I will always be grateful for that.

Terry: That's a great vote of confidence, indeed.

We've had these issues about bullying, what is it, and we've I think settled, or the dialogue as I am familiar with it has settled into it involves repeated aggression and a power balance. Those two components are always in play.

Do you have a definition of bullying that you have honed in on that you feel is accurate as a starting point?

Deborah: Unfortunately, there is not a really good definition. When I was at the Department of Education I helped coordinate a uniform definition panel with the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. That definition came out about a year ago now. And it was the same definition. That panel really struggled to get away from the definition that we have now. I think the important thing for us to think about is whether or not the definition actually matters. Whether it's more of the actual behaviors that go into the behavior or whether it's the experience of being bullied.

I tend to think of it as the latter. If a child feels like they're being bullied then they're probably being bullied. And those effects that we know are linked to being bullied, such as decreased academic achievement or increased depression and anxiety, probably are going to occur.

We want to make sure that we are addressing both the subjective experience of bullying as well as the objective bullying that kids who are perpetrating are engaging in. Those kids are at risk too. I want to really

stress that. Those kids we know are more likely to enter the criminal justice system, enter the school to prison pipeline. And so we want to address their needs as well. So I really think we need to separate the bullying perpetration from bullying victimization as two separate behaviors.

Terry: I see. And so that would then, if the debate focuses beyond a strict definition of bullying and starts to incorporate these subjective elements, that kind of pushes way back against legislation then. Doesn't it?

Deborah: Exactly. We need an objective definition to punish someone. There's no doubt about that. But I think that's where we really need to get away from punishment as our only recourse for bullying.

Terry: I see. That's fascinating, and a paradigm shift, it sounds like, in the thinking that might be needed at this point for effective school bullying prevention.

Deborah: Definitely.

Terry: All right. Do you have any last thoughts? Do you have a take-away for our listeners that you might want to talk about?

Deborah: I think I want to stress that for parents who perhaps are getting pushback from their schools, where their schools are saying, "No, this is not bullying. We can't punish someone," truly go back and think, "Well, what do I need for my child to succeed?"

A lot of times parents tend to focus on, "My child's being wronged. We need to punish the person who's wronging them." And of course, this is really where that debate on definition comes in. I think parents need to step back from saying, "Okay, the other child is not my concern. My concern is my child. What do they need?" And often times there can be a solution that will help their child that goes beyond the punishment of the child whom they feel has been bullying.

Terry: What would go beyond?

Deborah: For instance, helping their child perhaps get mental health support or helping their child have more activities or get involved in different things or meet a new group of friends. These are all things that can be done without concern of the punishment of the other child.

Terry: I see. Well, thank you. My guest today has been Dr. Deborah Temkin. She's a senior research scientist in education research at Child Trends, a non-partisan, non-profit research organization in Bethesda, Maryland. Do you have anything you would like to make our listeners aware of? A site or a resource that you might point them toward?

Deborah: Sure. I encourage people to check out both www.StopBullying.gov as well as www.ProjectSeatbelt.org. That's seatbelt like the thing you put in a car.

Terry: All right. This is Terry Vittone, the host of Unrestrained; our podcast is concluded for today. I thank my guest, Dr. Deborah Temkin. Thank you, Deborah.

Deborah: Thank you for having me.

Terry: All right.