

3-1-2024

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Recommended Citation

Page, A. (2024). Advocating for adolescents with eating disorders due to bullying. *South Carolina Association for Middle Level Education Journal*, 3, 143-145.

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Published online: March 2024
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Adolescents with Eating Disorders Due to Bullying

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Abstract: Bullying is a strong predictor of eating disorders. Adolescent girls are more susceptible to developing eating disorders due to social media, developmental changes, and societal pressure for unattainable perfection. Adolescent advocates have an important role in addressing this issue and providing support for students.

Keywords: anorexia nervosa, bulimia, binge eating, bullying, social media, anxiety

Introduction

When adolescents experience bullying in critical personal and mental growth periods, they can tend to develop eating disorders or disordered eating habits. Eating disorders tend to fall under diagnosable categories such as anorexia nervosa, which is the act of restricting ones eating until they do not eat for days at a time resulting in massive weight loss. Binge eating disorder, which is when a person does not eat much at all day, then eats a mass amount of food resulting is becoming sick, or worse. Bulimia nervosa is when a person eats meals regularly but forces themselves to become sick immediately after. Disordered eating tends to not be diagnosable but is teetering on the edge. This is where a person will eat sporadically and not much when they do. Disordered eating is a prevalent issue that is not talked about enough. It can result from bullying and sexual harassment, which has grown significantly due to the rise of social media and streamline texting services. Due to the pervasiveness of social media, middle school aged adolescents are now able to see celebrities and influencers who are the conventional state of pretty and compare themselves to them, resulting in body dysmorphia. Streamline texting services also allows for an easier way for kids to cyberbully their peers. It is important for teachers to notice when students are suffering due to peer-victimization, and best prepare themselves on how to handle these types of situations. Personally, I believe it important because growing up I was a victim of bullying and sexual harassment in middle school developing in an eating disorder. I suffered from binge eating for many years of my life due to this and the rapid rise of social media in my youth. In perfect clarity, I still struggle today to eat correctly, though many of my symptoms of binge eating disorder have passed.

How Prevalent are Eating Disorders?

Though this topic is important, the rising prevalence of eating disorders has rapidly grown. In one study administered by the National Institute of Mental Health in 2004 showed that

“62.6% of people with binge eating disorder had any impairment and 18.5% of people had severe impairment” (National Institute of Mental Health, 2004, n.p). Binge eating disorders can cause many impairments such as a burned stomach lining, rotted teeth, and a future inability to process food correctly. Furthermore, some eating disorders effect a person much longer than just through adolescence. The same statistic showed that” lifetime prevalence of anorexia nervosa was three times higher among females (0.9%) than males (0.3%). The lifetime prevalence of anorexia nervosa in adults was 0.6% (National Institute of Mental Health, 2004, n.p.). Eating disorders can last long into adulthood, causing severe health issues, and in the worse cases death.

Because of the nature of eating disorders resulting from bullying and sexual harassment, women are more susceptible to develop these habits due to the societal pressure to be ‘perfect’. Women also tend to take these habits from their adolescence into their adulthood because the standard for beauty is everchanging. Men as well have societal pressure to look a certain way as well, this type of standard can also start around middle school because of their changing bodies at a different rate. Men who do not develop as fast as their peers can often be bullied for such, as well as women.

Predictors of Eating Disorders

Bullying is a strong predictor of eating disorders, but it is not the only predictor. Factors such as parental overprotectiveness, sociocultural pressure, personality, and bodily dissatisfaction can also be predictors (Abebe, Torgensen, Lien, Hafstad, & Von Soest, 2014, p.114). Bullying can cause sociocultural pressure, body dissatisfaction, and personality changes. It is important to understand that because of peer victimization along with parental and self-influences, adolescents are more inclined to try and control some aspect of their life when they do feel so out of control, such as their eating habits.

Anxiety can also play a role in the development of disordered eating. Anxiety tends to be very prevalent within middle school aged adolescents as they think the whole world is watching them, this can also be a justified thought if their body size and personal image is under attack. In one study they found “There is evidence that childhood bullying effectively predicts eating disorder symptoms...This study of middle school students’ peer victimization, anxiety, and eating disorder symptoms found that greater peer victimization was associated with a higher degree of eating disorder symptomatology overall” (Cook-Cottone, Serwack, Guyker, Sodano, Nickerson, Keddie-Olka, & Anderson, 2014, p. 363). Anxiety in an adolescent can heighten their sense of being out of control within themselves, their peer groups, and their lives. Bullying can also elevate their levels of anxiety to an unsafe level. Previously mentioned, girls tend to experience more disordered eating than their male counterparts. Women tend to be bullied more about their bodies and the way they present

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themselves. This can also lead to comparison of themselves to others and be detrimental to their mindset. It is common for girls to be emotionally dissatisfied in themselves, leading to bodily dissatisfaction. Verbal bullying can further increase these feelings and the need to carry out disordered eating habits. One study says, “Bullying, emotional symptoms, restrained eating, and body dissatisfaction were all correlated. Emotional symptoms were found to significantly mediate the relationships between verbal bullying with body dissatisfaction in girls but not in boys”(Farrow,& Fox, 2011, p.409).

Furthermore, adolescent girls are more susceptible to the objectification theory which a study states are, “Objectification theory argues that individuals who self-objectify focus their attention on an ideal physical appearance, which they are unable to attain, and which may be linked to negative outcomes such as disordered eating”(Petersen& Hyde, 2013, p.184). Through sexual harassment, objectification theory can come into play. When girls go through the process of being mocked, catcalled, harassed, groped, and more they tend to think of themselves more and more as objects for people to look at. The more this happens, the more they tend to try and achieve society’s ideal body type, which most times is unachievable. This can lead to disordered eating and one or all of the types of eating disorders. Sexual harassment in middle schools is not uncommon, though it may seem that way. Though it progresses through the grade levels, and ages, it still happens quite frequently in schools. This is a time where students are not only becoming aware of their bodies, but also others, opening up the gateway for sexual harassment accompanied by bullying.

What Challenges Do These Adolescents Face?

Though this may already be challenging enough, adolescents who struggle with disordered eating face many more obstacles. They can begin to see themselves as an object and not a person. This can result in them dressing, acting, and looking different to appease others in order to feel worth in themselves. As a way to achieve this, adolescents may restrict their eating, develop disordered eating habits or develop eating disorders in general. These challenges can also lead to adolescents developing low self-esteem, low-body confidence, and struggle with their self-image. These habits are not only personally damaging, but they can be physically damaging in the extreme. Sexual minorities can also face unique challenges as they are under a more specified lens of their peers. Sexual minority students, such as the LGBTQIA+, tend to be scrutinized more heavily because they feel differently than their peers. In these cases, it is important to create safe spaces within the school for not only the, but for everyone feeling this way because of peer victimization. Safe spaces can allow for students to talk to a trusted adult about what they are going through and how they feel about themselves. One study shows, “efforts to support feelings of school safety among SGM students are likely to have positive implications for eating and weight-related behaviors and emphasize the need for interventions to promote climates of safety and inclusion within the school setting”(Lessard, Wang & Watson, 2021,

p.788). These types of disorders can also lead to academic struggles. Having an unbalanced diet or poor nutrition can lead to issues such as dizziness, lightheadedness, trouble focusing, trouble sleeping, drowsiness, nausea, stress, headaches, and fatigue. These symptoms can lead adolescents to not be able to participate or focus on schoolwork as much as they might need to. The lack of participation in academics can also be caused from low self-confidence in themselves.

How Can Teachers Help?

Educators can best equip themselves for these types of situations by educating themselves on the signs of disordered eating or eating disorders. Adolescents tend to exhibit certain behaviors in class due to bullying or eating disorders such as severe low self-confidence, unable to participate or pay attention, a drastic shift in mood or personality, and a drastic change in self-presentation. After noticing these signs teachers are better equipped to become a safe space for these students, by allowing their class to have an open-door policy, not taking a judgmental tone, understanding that adolescents going through this do not need prying eyes, instead accepting ones. It is also important for teachers to talk about correct nutrition, to explain how correct and healthy nutrition fuels the body, further explain how adolescent’s bodies are changing, needing proper nutrition to develop properly. Teachers have also been surveyed about policies being put in place for schools to provide classes on nutrition which include the effects of eating disorders. In this survey they found, “A large majority (75%-94%) supported 8 of the 11 policies, especially actions requiring school-based health curriculum to include content on eating disorder prevention (94%) and addressing weight-bullying through antibullying policies (92%), staff training (89%), and school curriculum (89%)” (Puhl, Newmark-Sztainer, Bryn Austin, Suh & Wakefield, 2016, p.507).

The Role of the Adolescent Advocate

Adolescent advocates also have an important role as well, in advocating for students with eating disorders and experiencing bullying in school they can push for these policies and classes to be put in place. Advocating can include building trust with students who are suffering and having an open and honest space for them. Through pushing for these policies and safe spaces, students will be able to better express themselves, gain confidence and information necessary for them thrive in their adolescents. This can also lead to more participation in school as they grow more confident and gain better nutrition. Advocating can also look like having resources for students to reach out to if necessary. Some of these resources are the National Eating Disorder helpline, where they can call and speak to someone about their problems, receiving trained and professional help to better navigate their disordered eating. In more extreme cases, the eating recovery center can also be contacted. This organization provides programs and outpatient services to better accommodate and educate adolescents of the effects of disordered eating while giving them the tools to correct their eating habits.

Every young adolescent “faces significant life choices and needs support in making wise and healthy decisions” (AMLE, 2010).

Connections to AMLE's This We Believe

This topic connects to AMLE's position statement, *This We Believe*. I agree that every young adolescent "faces significant life choices and needs support in making wise and healthy decisions" (AMLE, 2010). I also agree that the successful middle school is "welcoming, inclusive, and affirming for all" and that "every student's academic and personal development is guided by an adult advocate" (Bishop & Harrison, 2021, p. 9). Adolescents at this time are coming into themselves and facing choices they have never had to make before. Adolescents are having to choose who they are, how they dress, who they hang-out with, etc., these choices can be new and intimidation for many students. Once these choices are placed on top of bullying and sexual harassment, many adolescents struggle to make healthy decisions for themselves. This relates to body-image and self-esteem as they may resort to restricted eating habits as a way to cope or control how they look to better fit in. By being able to guide the adolescent to make good and healthy choices for themselves we are able to help steer clear of disordered eating. Informing students of these choices and the influences that cause them will not eradicate bullying and body dysmorphia, however it will aid students to better feel empathy for their peers and equip them with information on how to deal with bullying and unhealthy eating habits.

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About the Author

Avery Page is an undergraduate student at the University of South Carolina Aiken. She is currently majoring in Fine Art with a minor in Education in hopes of becoming an art teacher. She has plans to continue her education further along in her career.



Recommended Citation (APA 7th ed.)

Page, A. (2024). Advocating for adolescents with eating disorders due to bullying. *South Carolina Association for Middle Level Education Journal, 3*, 143-145.

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Published online: March 2024

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