# Why Vaguely Defining Bullying Can Be A Problem

April 17, 2013 2:42 AM

Bullying has become a hot topic for schools and the media following several highly publicized incidents. But some worry that in our enthusiasm to tackle this social problem, we are creating new problems. David Greene talks to Slate writer Emily Bazelon about her new book on bullying called Sticks and Stones.

STEVE INSKEEP, HOST:

There's been a major push to prevent bullying in America's schools but some are now worried in our enthusiasm to tackle this social problem, we are creating new problems. Indiana is the latest state to pass a tough anti-bullying law. It requires schools to develop prevention programs and adopt rules for disciplining bullies, among other measures.

DAVID GREENE, HOST:

We spoke to Emily Bazelon about this. Her new book on bullying is called "Sticks and Stones." Emily, thanks for joining us.

EMILY BAZELON: Thanks so much for having me.

GREENE: So if you don't like the idea of bullies in schools, anti-bullying laws would seem like a good thing. But you're expressing some real concern about these laws.

BAZELON: I'm very much in favor of laws that push schools toward prevention. What I'm concerned about is, I think, some laws are also really pushing toward criminalization or other kind of punishment. And they're doing that while defining bullying in a vague or a too broad way.

GREENE: Vague and too broad. Now tell me why exactly that could create problems.

BAZELON: Well, there's definition of bullying that psychologists have used for years in studying it, is that it's repeated physical or verbal abuse that involves a power imbalance. And when you have all those elements in place, I think you can see that bullying is something that we should be concerned about, because it actually really harms kids. But also that there's a lot of conflict that kids get into that just isn't bullying; a fight or drama, as kids often call it, that goes back and forth.

And I worry that some of the state laws are going too far in over-policing kids. And also, encouraging victims to kind of cry bullying when, in fact, the conflict is more mutual. And then finally, I'm worried about stigmatizing kids by labeling them as bullies because that is a label that creates a lot of moral outrage. So we want to be sure that we're using it correctly and sparingly.

GREENE: What is an example of maybe a state law that you feel is just not handling this in the right way?

BAZELON: I worry about New Jersey's statute for a couple of reasons. The first version of it made a lot of demands on schools, but provided no money for the schools to actually implement it. And I've also been told by kids in New Jersey that the way this law was explained to them, it just sounded like it was going to police a lot of their conduct.

So, for example, one kid told me that she was told that if she told a friend: You stink at tennis, and both she and her friend knew that she was kidding, but another kid overheard and thought I was bullying, that she could get in trouble.

GREENE: What is your guidance for school in terms of creating new disciplinary measures and procedures for stopping bullying?

BAZELON: The most important thing is that the whole school has to be involved. You can't just focus on the kids who are bullies or the kids who are victims. Because the kids who are bystanders play an important role, and so do the adults in setting the tone. So it's really important to have a calm and orderly environment in the school. When I walk into a school and I hear teachers snapping at each other or yelling at kids, I know that I'm going to see a higher level of bullying.

GREENE: If I'm a parent and I say, you know what? I want states to go as far as they possibly can, even if it means going too far, this is just such a problem, I don't want my kid to be bullied. What would you tell me, you know, in terms of why I should worry about that? Why should I want states to kind of hold back and think about this very carefully?

BAZELON: You know, I think the problem here is that we both have over-policing and under-policing at the same time. So there're plenty of schools in which parents feel exactly the way you are saying. Because they see that their kids aren't being taken well care of, and they want to make sure that their kids are protected.

On the other hand, if we start hovering over kids all the time and taking away a lot of their freedom to develop and to speak freely to each other, that's not good for their development either. Kids have to have some adversity in their lives in order to grow up.

And, you know, another problem is the punishment route takes us toward long-term suspension and expulsion. And neither of those punishments have been shown to deter bad conduct. And they also cause academic problems for kids who usually need to be in school learning.

GREENE: Emily Bazelon writes for Slate.com and is the author of a new book on bullying. It is called "Sticks and Stones." Emily, thanks so much for talking to us about this.