

The Good, The Bad and The Bully

Assault. Robbery. Extortion. These acts are crimes when the victims are adults. But when children are the victims and perpetrators of these "crimes" they often are dismissed as everyday schoolyard experiences; just cases of bullying.

Bullying has evolved into something that today should not be taken lightly. One in seven students in grades one through nine is either a bully or the victim of a bully, according to statistics gathered in Scandinavia, but the problem appears to be widespread in the United States as well. A 1995 survey of California sixth through twelfth graders, conducted by Michael Furlong, Ph.D., an associate professor who specializes in the training of school psychologists at the University of California, Santa Barbara's Graduate School of Education, found that although getting good grades was the number one worry of students, violence in the schools ranked as the third greatest worry at 10.7 percent, just behind the 11.7 percent who found being accepted by peers to be their top concern. A national survey found that 4.4 percent of students nationwide stayed home one day in the previous month because of personal safety reasons. This fear and a lack of good grades have translated, in some schools, as among the major reasons for dropping out.

Parents and other concerned adults also have found "lack of discipline" and "fighting/violence/gangs" as the top concerns about America's public schools, according to a 1995 Phi Delta Kappa - Gallup Poll. It is essential that school psychologists and educators be aware of what is known about the occurrence of violence in schools and the prevention and interaction strategies that have been implemented.

In spite of the serious nature of the bullying problem -- and there is plenty of research to attest to its long-term negative impacts -- there are disturbing paradoxes surrounding the problem.

Bullying is technically defined as chronic physical and verbal intimidation and attacks by one individual or a group of individuals on a specific target, according to Dr. Furlong. This is not just random aggressive behavior. Bullies single out weaker kids for repeated attacks. It is the repetition that leads to long-term problems for the victim.

Yet, many school administrators, teachers and parents tend to dismiss bullying as a rite of passage, a case of "kids being kids." They frequently are not aware of most student victimization. American schools, for the most part, have not found constructive ways of dealing with bullies. However, a handful of victims are fighting back in ways ranging from filing multi-million-dollar lawsuits against school districts, to taking the lives of fellow students who have been harassing them.

Being a bully is not necessarily something the bully -- or the victim -- will simply outgrow. More than likely, that bully will taunt and bully his way through life. According to some studies, he has a one in four chance of having a criminal record by his 30th birthday, as compared to other boys' odds of one in 20. His poor school performance is now reflected in his poor job performance, or inability to hold onto a job. And he could be raising a bully of his own. In fact, bully prevention could save money for the public and businesses by creating better workers.

The bully is not the kid who occasionally pushes or shoves a classmate. On the other hand, bullies are not so seriously antisocial as to be diagnosed as a "seriously disturbed child". Instead, bullies are a subset of aggressive kids who seem to derive satisfaction from harming others, physically or psychologically. Such aggression is a way of life for them, and they don't pick a fair fight.

The roots of violent behavior are complex, but experts cite a consistent range of

influences that put children at risk. "Violence has many causes; genetic, physiological, economic factors; social class, poverty; observing violence at home or on television. All of these contribute. It's never just one thing," Leonard Eron, Ph.D., recently told *Parents Magazine*. Eron is a researcher in developmental psychology at the Institute for Social Research at the University of Michigan.

Bullies are usually boys, although girl bullies do exist. Rather than attacking their victims physically, girl bullies are apt to harass them verbally or simply exclude them from the group. More than likely, they will bully other girls. Although they may not face the same bleak future as their male counterparts, they, as adults, tend to have psychological problems and punish their children severely, thus contributing to a new generation of bullies.

Researchers have found that male bullies tend to suffer from the combination of parental influence, aspects of a child's home environment and a hot-headed temperament. They tend to pick on younger, weaker students, many of whom rank higher intellectually.

In his groundbreaking long-term study, published in 1993, Dan Olweus, Ph.D., a Norwegian psychology professor regarded by many as the premier researcher on bully and victim problems, found that by age 23, victims of bullies' actions were more depressed and had lower self-esteem than peers who were not bullied. The study also showed that by age 23, about 60 percent of the boys identified as bullies in middle school had at least one criminal conviction and 35-40 percent of them had three or more convictions.

Dr. Eron's 22-year study yielded similar results. He found that eight-year-old bullies are five times more likely than their less aggressive classmates to have a criminal record by their 30th birthday. He also found strong evidence of spousal abuse, poor academic achievement, and a tendency to physically discipline their children -- to the point in which they are raising a new generation of bullies.

Trouble begins when parents pay little attention to their children or reject them altogether, according to Dr. Olweus, who has been studying bullies for more than 30 years. Too much freedom in childhood mixed with too little loving care can erupt into an aggressive personality. He also has found that physical violence used as punishment by an adult results in more violence by the child.

Television also is considered a culprit. Preschoolers often watch nearly four hours of television every day, and the American Psychological Association estimates that the average child witnesses 8,000 murders and over 100,000 other violent acts by age 12. The messages associated with the violence can be misleading. For example, cartoon violence is trivialized; no one ever suffers permanent harm.

Recent studies by Dr. Olweus have found that there are three myths about bullying. One view holds that bully/victim problems are a consequence of large classes, with the larger the class the higher number of bullies. But Dr. Olweus found that the size of the class or the school appears to be negligible when it comes to the frequency or level of bullying.

A second myth holds that bullies are reacting to their own failure or frustrations with school. Yet studies do not show this to be true. And the third myth is that victims are usually students who are fat, have red hair, use glasses or speak in an unusual manner. But data recently gathered did not show this to be the case, even though many students believe it to be true.

Instead, the data suggest that personality characteristics, in combination with physical strength or weakness in the case of boys, play major roles in the development of both bullies and their victims.

Typical victims are more anxious and insecure than students in general and are often cautious, sensitive and quiet. When attacked, they often react by crying, especially in the lower grades, and by withdrawing. They suffer from low self-esteem, look upon themselves as failures

and feel unattractive, stupid and ashamed. As a rule, they do not have a single best friend in their class. Physically weak, these children have a negative view toward violence and the use of violent means. Their lack of ability to concentrate and anxious behavior patterns may cause irritation and tension around them. Some of these students are hyperactive and their behavior provokes other students.

Dr. Olweus' follow-up study of 23-year-olds, half of them victims and half who were not, showed that former victims were much more likely to be depressed and have poorer self-esteem. The findings clearly suggested that the earlier, persistent victimization had left its scars.

Bullies, on the other hand, are not only aggressive toward peers, but toward adults as well. They have a more positive attitude toward violence than students in general. They are impulsive, have a strong need to dominate others and express little empathy for victims. Boy bullies tend to be physically stronger than their peers.

While many psychologists and psychiatrists believe bullies, like their victims, are actually anxious and insecure, there is nothing in the research to support this view, according to Dr. Olweus. Instead, bullies demonstrated little anxiety and insecurity or were average in these areas. And they did not suffer from poor self-esteem.

Because children expect schools to be safe and nurturing places, the effects of violence at school, including bullying, can be damaging to a child's sense of security and interpersonal trust. Unlike adults, children have little recourse to try to stop a bully from harassing them. They may find themselves shunned by other children and too ashamed to admit their fears to adults. Some victims feel compelled to fight off bullies, while others avoid unsafe turf at school and in their communities. Others have more dramatic responses, such as becoming run-aways or attempting suicide. Still others have taken the legal route; filing lawsuits against school districts and administrators, charging they were denied the right to attend safe campuses.

Prompted by reports of lawsuits and student suicides resulting from merciless bullying incidents, a dozen internationally renowned authorities from the fields of psychology, education, law enforcement and public relations gathered at Harvard University in 1987 to develop strategies to respond to the increasingly serious problem of schoolyard bullying. The National School Safety Center (NSSC) sponsored the unprecedented "Schoolyard Bully Practicum" which initiated a broad-based public awareness campaign.

The experts at the NSSC Practicum agreed that for the nation's bully problem to be successfully addressed, educators, parents and the public must acknowledge the following issues:

- School bullying is a significant problem.
- Fear and suffering are becoming part of the everyday lives of bullying victims.
- Young bullies whose behavior goes unchecked are more likely than other children to grow up and suffer from personal, professional and legal problems.
- The attitude that bullying is no more than normal youthful aggressive behavior must be discarded.
- The United States should promote national intervention and prevention programs similar to those operating successfully in Scandinavia and Japan.

Practicum participants also outlined their primary prevention and intervention strategies, which could be pursued by school psychologists:

- Accurately assess the scope of the problem.
- Communicate clear behavior standards and then consistently enforcing them.
- Monitor playground activity closely with a supervising adult visible at all times.
- Teach proper conflict resolution and watching for victim symptoms, such as withdrawal, decline in study habits or grades, unexplained anxiety, and cuts, bruises or torn clothing.

- Create a norm in the school that discourages bullying. Most youths are bystanders. They observe the bullying and don't feel empowered to do anything about it. All students, teachers, administrators and staff members need to develop the norm that says chronic intimidation will not occur on their campuses.

The needs assessment allows for locally-based prevention and intervention programs to be created, and provides an opportunity for local school administrators and teachers to buy into plans to make school safety a priority. Safety plan actions could include establishing a parent center that encourages proactive parent participation, ensuring active student input and participation in the planning process, enhancing extracurricular student programs, integrating school safety plans into the school curricula, supporting staff development, making behavior guidelines for students clear, establishing a crisis response plan, paying special attention to the needs of school violence victims, and creating partnerships among youth service professionals to coordinate violence prevention efforts.

In the report "School Violence: A Multicomponent Reduction Strategy," UCSB's Dr. Furlong states that everyone on the schoolyard must be managed within a framework of a school safety plan. In addition, he says, it is necessary to examine how the school context itself may contribute to the occurrence of violence. Dr. Furlong suggests programs that focus on the impact of zero tolerance for violent behavior, as well as studies on the root causes, are needed.

Early identification and intervention of aggressive children is necessary. Then specific interventions that focus on study skills development, social skills development, increasing awareness of health risks associated with aggressive behaviors and the teaching of coping strategies to prevent future substance abuse may be established. Social skills training and positive reinforcement should be combined and implemented on a case-by-case basis to produce beneficial behavioral changes. Classroom management strategies, instructional techniques, and playground management considerations to modify students' behavior may also be used.

After just two and one-half years of operation, a program established by Dr. Olweus slashed bully-victim problems in Norway by as much as 50 percent. The program also reduced other antisocial behavior, including theft, vandalism, fighting and truancy, improved students' attitude toward schoolwork and resulted in fewer new victims.

Like the suggested programs noted above, the Norway program was based on an acknowledgment by school officials that bullying and victimization is a problem and that adults must become part of the answer. Dr. Olweus' program begins with an anonymous student survey to establish how widespread the problem is in the school. Results from the student survey are presented to all school staff to apprise them of the situation and of the steps that will be taken. The resulting program should involve all teachers, lunch workers, janitorial staff and administrative staff. Among the action items to take is to increase the supervision of non-classroom areas, elicit student help in the development of firm rules against bullying, a listing of disciplinary actions that are to be taken against bullies, and teacher and peer support of victims. At the individual level, adults are to have serious, one-on-one discussions with the aggressors, the victims and the parents of these children.

This program was recently adapted for rural middle schools in South Carolina, where a survey of 6,500 middle school students revealed that one in four children reported that they had been bullied at least "several times" in a three-month period. And, about one in five children admitted to bullying other children within a three-month period.

The South Carolina program immediately increased sensitivity toward bullying problems among children, teachers, cafeteria workers, bus drivers, parents and neighbors. As recommended by Dr. Olweus, strict rules and consistent sanctions against bullies were established. But the South Carolina program went further by forming friendship groups for

children who were regularly bullied by their peers, holding regular class meetings to discuss bullying among students, and the development of a video and teachers' guide which provides ideas for discussions, artwork, role-playing and writing activities.

Other programs focus on prevention. A 1996 University of Michigan study by sociologist Ron Astor, concluded that high schools that resort to metal detectors, video cameras and security guards to combat school violence might be better served by asking teachers to supervise known trouble spots. Astor surveyed five Midwestern high schools and found that incidents often occurred in locations where few adults were visible. By far, the most effective violence intervention described by students, teachers and administrators who participated in the survey was the physical presence of teachers willing to intervene, coupled with clear, consistent administrative policies on school violence.

Recent legislation may also result in a reduction of schoolyard bullying. During the last three years, several states have passed laws lowering the age in which young people may be tried in court as adults. In addition, several states now fine parents for the criminal behavior of their children. Whether these new laws will result in schoolyard assaults being treated as actual crimes remains to be seen. However, it signals that parents should be closely involved with schools in working out appropriate restitution strategies. The support of the court may also become more important when resolving schoolyard conflicts. The presiding juvenile court judge can be particularly helpful in ensuring that bullies and their parents receive the training, skills and the support they need to create a more positive environment in the life of the child.

Many incidents of bullying go unreported because of victims' fear of retaliation or intimidation. Combating this problem takes the support of the entire school supervision team, including administrators, psychologists, counselors, teachers and other staff members and community volunteers who are willing to work with the bullies and their victims. The success of these programs, and the success of our children in schools, rests with adults who are ultimately willing to attack the schoolyard bullying problem head on; and to involve, rather than absolve themselves of responsibility for the welfare and safety of school children.

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