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What Is Bullying?

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Bullying! Even the word conjures up uncomfortable feelings in adults today who were victims of classroom or playground teasing, taunting, or physical aggression. What may have been considered benign name-calling in the past continues to manifest itself in painful ways for those students who are victimized. This is not a typical rite of passage. Rather, it is a serious issue deserving the intervention of adults. And while prevalence figures vary greatly, 20 to 30 percent of students are involved in bullying, either as a bully or a victim (Rose, Monda-Amaya, & Espelage, 2011).

Stop Bullying Now (n.d., stopbullying.gov), the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services National Bullying Prevention Program, defines *bullying* as aggressive behavior that is intentional and involves an imbalance of power or strength. It is generally repeated over time. The tactics bullies employ can be physical, verbal, intimidation, or exclusion. This type of bullying has been referred to as *tradition bullying*. Unfortunately, some students use technology to bully others, which is referred to as *cyberbullying*. Social media, the Internet, and simple cell phones (the most frequent tool used) can become devices whereby bullies can prey on their victims.

Bullies want power and are able to select their victims with uncanny precision. They prey on children and adolescents who are unpopular or vulnerable (Olweus, 1993; Carter & Spencer, 2006). The consequences of bullying can be devastating to students and their families. The fear, anxiety, and social isolation suffered by victims of

bullying can result in loss of productivity in school and unknown psychological distress. Unfortunately, it can even be fatal. In one of the early cases that was highly publicized, a seventh-grade boy fatally shot himself because he was tired of being called “fatty” and “a walking dictionary.” He shot one of his classmates to death right before he killed himself. Reportedly, his classmates said, “He was just someone to pick on.” One does not have to search long for other examples. Hardly a week goes by when there is not a report in the media of a youngster who felt he or she had no other alternative other than suicide.

For these students, school is no longer a safe haven. They are fearful on the playground and going to and from classes. Even mild forms of verbal abuse have resulted in absences from school, lower grades, and overall anxiety. On top of the short- and long-term psychological damage is the damage caused by the failure of significant adults to intervene when they witness bullying behavior. Research and anecdotal information indicates that adults view the problem differently from students (Olweus & Limber, 1999).

There is general consensus as to the components of bullying. It is repetitive, there is an imbalance of power in the relationship between the bully and the victim, and there is unequal affect. Victims typically give in rapidly to the demands of the bully. This is the case of both traditional bullying and cyberbullying, where students bully through the use of technology and social media.

Who Are the Bullies?

What type of child would willingly inflict harm on others? The research findings are not entirely clear. Many researchers feel that bullies engage in this behavior because it makes them feel important. They may be insecure people who need to make themselves feel good by making others feel bad. Bullies achieve less academically, socially, economically, and occupationally. They are essentially school and job failures. Although not everybody agrees with these findings, they clearly represent the consensus of opinion on the characteristics of bullies (Wilson, 2004).

What does seem to be unanimous is the opinion that bullies are not born that way. They learn that being physically aggressive is a way to get what they want, a way to control people. Where do they learn this? Most experts point to parents and other role models. Bullies see their parents using physical force to get their way, so they emulate them. Many parents, for a host of reasons, do not use effective parenting techniques. When parents resort to being verbally and

physically aggressive with their children, they risk teaching their children that bullying is an effective way to get what you want—especially if you are bigger and stronger. The research on modeling is very clear (Bandura & Walter, 1963; Bandura, 2002). Children learn that those who are bigger and stronger can exert physical force on others. Therefore, the more the child is verbally and physically reprimanded by his or her parents, the more likely he'll find someone more vulnerable on whom to take out his or her aggression. Moreover, most bullies remain bullies throughout their lives. It becomes a vicious cycle—bullies have children that they bully, and their children become highly aggressive and bully others. Some experts suggest that bullies also learn their behavior from inappropriate role models on television or in the movies. There is considerable debate over the effects of violence on television and in the movies on children's behavior. However, for children who are in homes where the parents are aggressive, this can only serve to reinforce this bullying type of behavior pattern (Drake, Pryce, & Telljohann, 2003). There are suggestions in the research that there are temperamental differences in children that make them prone to be bullies (Olweus, 2003). However, this is far outweighed by the other factors mentioned.

Bullies do not outgrow this behavior—it appears to be a characteristic that continues throughout adulthood. And, as they progress through the adult years, they are more likely to be involved with the criminal justice system, having more arrests and more convictions and tending to be more abusive to their spouses. The seriousness of the problem demands policy changes in schools (Young, Ne'eman, & Gelser, 2011).

Who Are the Victims?

Many of us have been in situations where we felt we were bullied. Infrequent, episodic experiences with a bully do not constitute victimization. However, that feeling that we experience may help us to identify with those children who must deal with bullies on a daily basis.

There are two types of victims: passive and provocative (Olweus, 1993). The passive victim is physically weak and doesn't fight back, whereas the provocative victim is more restless and irritable and frequently teases and picks on others. Many children with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) fall into this latter category. This type of victim appears to have poor impulse control, acts out, and then becomes a victim.

Consider Emily. She was an easy target. Diagnosed with ADHD, she was impulsive and hyperactive. She would frequently say exactly what was on her mind without any filtering. She did not mean to hurt people's feelings; she just could not help herself. Her parents did all the right things; she received counseling, received special education services in a resource room, and was on medication. Yet, it was readily apparent that her classmates did not accept her. They would tease her and taunt her and knew exactly how to get her upset. Frequently, due to her impulsivity, she would initiate the negative reaction. For example, she would tell another student, "Your hair looks terrible." The student would often respond, "Well, I think your sneakers are ugly," and Emily would cry. Her teachers would tell her that, if she did not start it, it would not end up this way—if she would only learn to "think before you talk." Many of her teachers felt Emily was a bully, saying hurtful things to her classmates. This is understandable. However, she is a classic provocative victim. And while these victims represent a small percentage of victims overall, they are most often students with disabilities.

You know these students. They engage in behaviors that annoy others (children and adults), tend to be irritable and restless, and maintain the conflict even when it is clear they've lost. That is one simple way to distinguish between bullies and provocative victims; they rarely come out on top. As noted earlier, there is an imbalance of power in the bully-victim relationship, and while this may not be readily apparent with provocative victims, it is here. I observed a student on the playground during recess who was critical of other students' abilities. During a kickball game, he told one classmate that "you can't kick," and the student replied, "I can't kick? You never get on base. Ever!" Joey cried and found a paraprofessional who was on the playground to complain to about the student who was "picking on" him. The paraprofessional knew Joey well. He did this every day. She dismissed his complaint and said, "If you just keep quiet, everything will be OK." That was the problem. Joey was impulsive and lacked social skills. He could not keep quiet. This made it nearly impossible to get along with others. However, he never intended to hurt anyone, never won a conflict, and did not understand the consequences of his behavior. Joey, diagnosed with ADHD, was a student with a learning disability and was a provocative victim who needed help. Unlike passive victims, it is hard for others to feel sorry for provocative victims. They feel that they bring it on themselves.

Victims tend to be weaker than bullies. They are also anxious and insecure children who tend to have poor social skills. These behaviors tend to set them apart from other youngsters in their classes,

playgroups, or camps. Additionally, most victims have a difficult time making friends and sustaining friendships.

Not surprisingly, many victims are not motivated and lack an interest in school. And schools are where the majority of bullying incidents occur. Imagine what it would be like if you were constantly worrying about what someone might do to you. What if you were never quite sure when you turned a corner in the school or entered the lunchroom or went onto the playground if someone would be waiting to pick on you? All of your energy would be focused on the bullying, and therefore, school would not be an enjoyable place.

Victims also have disruptive academic performances due to constant bullying. They may develop school phobia and, therefore, have frequent absences. Many victims avoid the lunchroom because they are preyed upon by bullies who will force them to give them their lunch money or their food. Even at the time of day when most children can relax and get a break from academics, victims are troubled.

Michael, a third grader, is an example of this problem. He was bullied every day during lunchtime by the same child. This child would gather Michael's classmates around him on the playground and tease him about his physical appearance or clothing or being a "baby." Michael was not an aggressive child and had difficulty defending himself.

Victims are nonaggressive. They avoid confrontation at all costs and may cry when attacked. The bully identifies the victim, and the victim readily gives in to the demands of the bully, thereby making bullying very rewarding. These passive children are not able to deal with conflict in a productive way.

Victims' parents tend to be overprotective, and therefore, the children don't have many opportunities to practice conflict resolution. The low self-esteem, fear, and anxiety are reinforced so frequently that the pattern is difficult to break. Over time, victims begin to believe that they deserve this mistreatment. They lack the skills necessary to combat the problem and can become hopeless and even suicidal. The longer-term psychological effects of being bullied can be devastating (Will & Neufield, 2002; Carter & Spencer, 2006).

Schools and Bullying

Schools must do something about bullying. Most bullying occurs to students in transit to and from school and in the unstructured, unsupervised areas in and around schools. However, some victims cannot escape when they leave school through cruel e-mails and texts or the use

of social media. Children report that they are called names when they wait for the school bus; some are jostled and have lunch taken away from them on the way to school; and others report that their lockers are broken into, lunch money stolen, and belongings destroyed. Students report that they eat alone because no one will sit with them. And when they go to recess, they stay in an isolated section of the schoolyard. These isolated sections of playgrounds, schoolyards, and hallways in schools become fertile ground for physical abuse of victims by bullies.

Many victims have a variety of physical and psychological ailments, such as fainting, vomiting, paralysis, hyperventilation, visual problems, headaches, stomachaches, and hysteria. They have frequent absences from school as a result of these ailments or out of sheer fear. These are directly related to the presence of bullies in their school. The view that this is typical child's play is changing somewhat but not fast enough. One of the most startling findings from the research on bullying is that victims of bullies feel that their schools didn't do anything about it. Most students feel that they do not have any person to go to if they are victimized (Atlas & Pepler, 1998; Lumsden, 2002; Crothers & Kolbert, 2004).

One middle school adolescent reported that a bully cut in front of him every day in the lunch line. When he told his teacher, the teacher told him to work it out. The same child was a victim of physical aggression in the classroom. Whenever his math teacher would write an example on the board, a bully would slap this child on the head. When the teacher turned around, the bully stopped. The victim told the teacher what had happened, and the teacher replied, "What can I do if I don't see it?" Not surprisingly, when the child's parents told him to tell the adult in charge that he's being picked on, he simply said, "Why? They don't do anything."

What Causes Bullying?

A group of children on a school bus called a child names every day. If they didn't comment on his clothes, they made fun of his physical appearance, his school performance, or his family. This had gone on for months with no intervention from the school. One day, the father of one of the "bullies" was waiting at the bus stop when the driver told him that his son was taunting a "special

education child" every day. His father promptly asked his son if he did it; his son replied "yes," and his father proceeded to slap him in the face at least three times.



A group of Little Leaguers are playing a game on a pleasant sunny day in any particular neighborhood. A seven-year-old slides into second base and knocks the second-base player down, who gets hurt. Everybody is concerned, and fortunately, the child is not seriously hurt. On the way home, a mom looks at her son and says, "Great slide, Robert. Way to be aggressive out there!"



The principal called home today to tell Matthew's parents that he was involved in a fight. He appeared to start it and hit the kid so hard that his nose bled. After dinner, Mom, Dad, and Matthew discussed the incident, and all agreed he would try to avoid those confrontations in the future. As they were getting up from the table, the father, with a wink and a nod, said, "Guess you got a good shot in there."



You are in line at a grocery store. A toddler keeps grabbing the candy by the register, and the parent says, "Don't touch that." He continues. Finally, she slaps his hand, and the toddler cries. The parent gets more annoyed and tells him to stop crying. He continues. She takes him out of the food cart, holds him in her arms, and spanks the child, who continues to cry.



Two children are playing with a toy. A third child comes over and takes the toy away. Parents enter the scene. One parent tells her child, "Don't let him do that. Go over there, and take it away from him." The child doesn't respond. Now the parent gets even more annoyed. "You have to stick up for yourself. Go over there, and get your toy back." The child doesn't move but cries, and the parent looks defeated.

These examples are just a few in which it is clear that a message is being sent to a child: Might equals right. Aggression is valued. If you are bigger and stronger than someone, you can use physical force.

There is a difference in stating that “bullies are made, not born” rather than “it’s the parent’s fault.” In the former statement, there is no attempt to blame parents. What is necessary is that parents of bullies recognize the powerful impact of their behavior on their children. When they act in an aggressive manner, their children will follow. When they reward aggression, their children will display this behavior. When they use verbal abuse and physical aggression toward their children, their children will find someone smaller and weaker than they to do the same. This is not a predisposed condition; rather, these are learned behaviors. There may be some small evidence that temperamental differences can also influence bullying, but the overwhelming findings from the research are that parents play the major role. Some children might also be influenced by the type of movies, television, games, and books they are exposed to. However, this is also related to family characteristics—bullies tend not to have too much structure in their lives, and their parents are not as involved as parents of children who are not bullies (Hanish & Guerra, 2000).

The first step is to recognize that this generational link has to be broken. This is not as easy as it appears because “standing up for oneself,” “being aggressive,” or “being in charge” are viewed as valuable attributes. Society also appears to be somewhat ambivalent regarding these traits. The overly aggressive person, whether it be in sports, politics, or business, is often held in high regard. Society needs to change this perception.

What About the Rest of the Students?

The majority of students do not engage in bullying directly, yet they play a critical role in maintaining the bully–victim relationship. Referred to as bystanders, witnesses, or observers, these are the students that must be taught to get involved. Assuming the 20 percent figure most often cited as the percentage of students involved as bullies or victims is correct, that leaves 80 percent of the school-age population. These students may be fearful that, if they say or do something, they will be the next victims (Coloroso, 2002). Or perhaps they told their parents or a teacher and were told to “mind their business” or “if it doesn’t have anything to do with you, stay out of it.” Or it may simply be a student who wants to help but doesn’t know what to do.

Oftentimes, adults tell of their regret at not doing anything about a classmate being bullied. One teacher spoke eloquently about the guilt she has because she merely watched as, every day, the bullies in her classroom berated their classmate for being "fat." She didn't laugh or join in; she just sat there and did nothing. And to this day, she feels badly about her own behavior, and she has become a secondary victim. These students, the bystanders, need to learn how they play critical roles in reducing bullying in their classes and in their schools. Without such training, it will be impossible to reduce bullying.

Gender Differences

Boys tend to be the subject of more physical acts of aggression than of social isolation and alienation. However, the fact that the bullying tactics employed against boys are more observable may account for some of the disparity in the reporting of incidents. Girls are more often subject to victimization in ways that exclude them from their peer group, attempt to isolate them, and spread rumors about them.

The bullying tactics employed by girls tend to be more difficult to observe. Rather than physical aggression, the research shows that girls tend to engage in intimidation and social alienation, such as not inviting a specific child to a party and getting other children to do the same, encouraging others to stay away from a specific child, or never including her on a team. More severe forms include writing malicious notes, spreading rumors about someone's reputation, and instigating fights between the victims and others.

These types of bullying tactics may not be as apparent as the physical ones, but they are just as harmful. Some might argue that they are even more harmful because they are not as observable and, therefore, are likely to go on for longer periods of time.

As in the case with boys, where teachers and parents will discuss bullying with the phrase "Boys will be boys," it is not unusual to hear "Girls can be so vicious." Both statements are sexist and miss the point. The patterns of bullying may be different, but the effect remains the same. It's not a matter of which tactics are more "vicious" (whatever that means!) than others. It is rather simple. Children should feel safe at home and at school. Anything that interferes with that needs to be addressed. Labeling the tactics and interpreting the nature of the tactics prevent swift intervention.

Perhaps the most important aspect of looking at patterns is to recognize that bullying is widespread, and there are many ways in which a bully can victimize a child. There needs to be movement

away from the classic bully to becoming aware of more subtle ways, including cyberbullying, in which children are victimized regardless of their gender. Espelage and Swearer (2004) recommend moving away from merely looking at statistical differences between boys and girls and focusing on the social and ecological context in which bullying occurs. This focus on individual characteristics appears to be more productive.

Prevalence

Prevalence figures vary a great deal. Part of the problem is the way in which information is obtained. Most often, it is self-reporting surveys, and that data can be skewed. Additionally, the definition of bullying is not clear, and acts of violence are lumped into one category. The National Association of School Psychologists consistently reports that one in seven children is involved in bullying. Olweus (1993) reported 15 percent, while others reported higher. Clearly, bullying is not going away. Moreover, in the following chapter, the prevalence figures regarding students with disabilities will be presented, and they are alarming.

Summary

This chapter discussed the nature of bullying in schools. Characteristics of bullies and their victims were described as well as issues related to causation, gender differences, and prevalence. Chapter 2 will focus on bullying and students with disabilities.

TEST YOURSELF

1. What are the characteristics of bullies?
2. What are the characteristics of victims?
3. What are the characteristics of bystanders?
4. What is the parent's role in bullying?
5. What causes bullying?
6. How prevalent is bullying?