

Preface

Going Upstream

Every individual should have the right to be spared oppression and repeated, intentional humiliation, in school as in society at large. No student should be afraid of going to school for fear of being harassed or degraded, and no parent should need to worry about such things happening to his or her child.

—Dan Olweus

Outside my office there was quite a clatter of voices, laughter, and crying. When I got to the window, there were all the telltale signs of a fight. A large group of seventh graders had gathered around several unseen people in the middle and were laughing, pointing, and encouraging someone to do more of whatever they were doing. I shouted out the window for the group to stop whatever the chaos was and raced outside the office as quickly as I could to intervene.

When I arrived at the scene of the commotion, most of the masses had scattered except for the primary participants in the activity, so caught up in what they were doing that they had not heard my call for them to stop. On the ground was the largest seventh grader of them all, covered in dust from head to toe. He was not just a little bit dusty. He looked as if he had been a child laborer in a 19th-century coal mine. Surrounding him were two of the smallest seventh graders—twins—who were still kicking dirt on him, along with the occasional kick to the back or legs. Of those remaining in the gang who had made the mistake of hanging around to see a few more toe loads of dirt go flying across the parking lot were the toadies of the twins.

The seventh grader on the ground was crying, perhaps truly as a result of the blows he had received, but probably more so from the outright humiliation of his circumstances. The seventh-grade twins, the ringleaders of the group (and, in all honesty, two of the meanest children I ever had the chance to meet in my career!), had planned the attack all morning and invited their friends to come and watch. The student they chose to victimize was in special education and, to every teacher's agreement in the school, was a gentle soul, the one most often chosen to be abused by his peers. Teachers often affectionately referred to him as a gentle giant who did not know the full capabilities of his strengths.

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I will leave our friends for now because I want to refer back to them as we move through the book as both a point of reference and as a case study for how we might be able to help all the parties involved—the victim, the bullies, and the observers. Your patience will be rewarded.

We have all heard the fable of the people by the river. Great distress was expressed day in and day out as the citizens of the village rescued people who had fallen into the mighty currents upstream. Daily, people were pulled from the river, often at great risk to the rescuers themselves. People of the village would line the banks just to watch for the next person to come floating downstream so as to be better able to save them before they got to the falls below.

One day, while the people lined the banks watching as another rescue was being performed, a man suddenly bolted from watching along the shore and ran upstream. “Wait!” the villagers cried. “Where are you going? You can’t leave! We need you here to help us pull these people from the river!”

The man turned and said, “But I am going to help. We will never solve the problem of the people in the river until we find out what it is that is making them fall into it in the first place! The answer lies upstream!”

So it is with the problem of helping our children learn effective methods of stopping the cycles of violence that plague them. Bullying and teasing behaviors, left unchecked, are some of the seeds to our violent society. The research is very clear on this fact: Children imitate what they see and what they believe adults either approve of or give no indication that a particular behavior is incorrect or problematic. Unchecked aggression in childhood becomes a life-long pattern. Aggressive children are more likely to become involved with the criminal justice system as adults. Clearly the seeds of anger and resentment sown in the fields of childhood victimization reap a harvest of sorrow for the bully and victim alike.

Of course, bullying and teasing in childhood and adolescence are not the cause of all the world’s evils. However, the fact that such behaviors often occur in our schools offers us a tremendous opportunity to break the early learning pattern where children get the impression that force and intimidation—either physical or psychological—are acceptable means of getting their way and resolving disputes. If we are serious about solving the problem, like the villager rushing upstream, we must start early in breaking both the violent thought and behavioral patterns our children have absorbed from either home or society—and sometimes both. We can continue to pull victims out of the river all day long for many years to come, or we can travel upstream and attempt to solve the problem before it occurs.

The choice is up to us, both as individuals and as a society. While there are no guarantees as to how successful an effort on any task involving human behavior will be, there is one thing that is crystal clear: To do nothing changes nothing. In the case of bullying behaviors among our children and youths, there is every reason to believe that doing nothing will only encourage the problem to expand.

Children look to us for guidance in times of crisis. Let us not let them down.
Let us go upstream to see what is causing them to fall into the river.

