

Introduction

The Basics of Bully Prevention

Adam dreaded physical education. Smaller and less developed than the other boys, he lacked athletic skill, which earned him a daily barrage of shoves, jeers and threats from Kevin, the class hulk. On the big, open playing field, Adam could neither hide his awkwardness nor "disappear" as he had learned to do almost everywhere else on the school grounds. Talking back to Kevin only fueled his tormentor's contempt and, since the coach either didn't notice or didn't care, Adam coped by skipping school as often as possible or getting excused from gym for phony injuries.

Donald and Rudy were rivals in their neighborhood — no one was ever sure why. Maybe it was because their respective families were always arguing about parking spaces, noise levels and yard maintenance. Whatever the reason, the boys didn't like each other and frequently ended up in fights, even at school. Both were big for the 5th grade and both had a group of staunch supporters, so their skirmishes usually drew crowds. Even kids who weren't involved seemed compelled to watch, and there was much calculating and betting about who would win each bout.

Which of these stories involves bullying? Only Adam's. While regrettable, the ongoing fights between Donald and Rudy are examples of poorly managed conflict, not bullying.

What Is Bullying?

Bullying is a pattern of repeated, intentionally cruel behavior. It differs from normal peer conflict in a number of ways.

- **Power.** Bullies are almost always more powerful than their victims — bigger, stronger, older, or just tougher. Adam was small for his age, Kevin husky. Donald and Rudy were equally matched — similar in both age and size.
- **Support.** Bullies choose victims in part for their relative isolation. Alone and exposed, Adam was an easy target, whereas Donald and Rudy both had staunch support groups.
- **Vulnerability.** Bullies look for potential victims among the weak. A child who is sensitive and seemingly without defense is seen as easy prey.

How To Handle A Bully

- Intensity and duration. Bullying is rarely a one-time occurrence. Adam was subject to Kevin's barrage of bullying every time he showed up for P.E.
- Intent to harm. Bullies are sadistic. They gain release and satisfaction from hurting their victims. They enjoy watching the pain they cause.

Bullying can be anything from teasing to physical aggression. It can be physical, emotional, psychological or sexual. It can be as overt as a punch in the ribs or as seemingly innocuous as a verbal put-down. The important thing is not the specific action, but the intent with which the action is delivered and the effect on the victim. The goal of a bully is to do damage. The victim's pain, anger and humiliation are proof that damage has been done.

Bullying is certainly not new, though concern over bullying, and the proliferation of bully-prevention programs, are relatively recent phenomena. Alarming increases in school violence have prompted many educators to regard bully behavior in the elementary grades as a prelude to more serious problems in middle school and beyond. Bullying is a form of harassment, a range of behaviors to which our society has become increasingly sensitized in recent years.

Why Do Kids Bully?

Like most behavior patterns, bullying is learned. Genetics may predispose a child to be big and strong, but only experience teaches him to be aggressive and hostile.

At home, a bully may receive physical punishment for real or perceived misbehavior. A child who is spanked, slapped or beaten into submission learns to use these same methods to control others.

Children who witness repeated acts of intolerance, force and bullying among family members are likely to adopt the prejudices and coercive behaviors that appear to work for those closest to them. When they come to school, they assume that the same rules apply.

For reasons already mentioned (parental abuse, poor modeling), bullies may come to school heavily burdened with feelings of frustration, anger and self-loathing. If aggression is the norm at home, some will find a way to strike out at school, usually picking convenient, passive targets.

Finally, for all their show of power, many people believe that bullies are weak where it counts most — inside. Common sense tells us that a child who likes and respects herself can be expected to treat others with caring and consideration. If she bullies, it is because she has low self-esteem and needs to pick on vulnerable peers in order to feel better about herself. This is no doubt true in many cases, however, a number of experts argue that just the opposite can be true — that, deserved or not, some bullies actually have pretty high self-esteem.

How Widespread Is Bullying?

Bullying occurs everywhere — in homes, neighborhoods, schools, workplaces, shopping malls, the military, and government. Children who are bullied by their parents may try to dominate weaker peers at school. Years later, they may be using bully tactics to gain advantages and win promotions at work.

A lot of otherwise reasonable people become bullies behind the wheel of a car. Witness the hotshot who rips a right turn just as you step off the curb into the crosswalk, or the driver who'd sooner run a car off the road than allow anyone to merge ahead of him in traffic.

By some estimates, 75 percent of children will be bullied at some point in their school career. Incidents of bullying appear first in preschool, gradually increase throughout the elementary grades, peak in middle school and decline in high school.

In the elementary grades, bullying may be confined to teasing, name-calling and other put-downs. As they grow older, confirmed bullies are apt to resort to increasingly physical and violent behavior.

The warning signs for bullying are well known. If you know what to look for, you can identify most bullies early in their careers, and early in the school year at every grade level.

The Consequences of Bullying

A single incidence of bullying, during recess for example, impacts everyone in the immediate environment and trickles down from there. The victim, if she returns to class at all, probably does so in a state of extreme anxiety, anger or humiliation. She may lash out at other children or distract them with her obvious suffering. Bystanders return to class with feelings ranging from excitement to guilt. Everyone has difficulty concentrating and the learning environment is poisoned.

In addition to demoralizing the school community and contributing to a negative learning environment, bullying has specific, predictable effects on victims, bystanders and bullies.

- **Effects on the Victim.** Children will go to great lengths to avoid being bullied. If they don't know positive, constructive ways of protecting themselves they will use negative, destructive ways. Cutting classes and feigning illness in order to stay home are common solutions. Unless countered by parents or other adults, such tactics can lead to chronic truancy and, later, dropping out of school entirely.

Victims of repeated bullying often become socially isolated. Marked by the stigma of constant humiliation, they have difficulty making friends. Other kids avoid them. Lonely and ostracized, they fail to learn peer-accepted social skills and may use eccentric, "weird" behaviors to attract friends, further undermining their efforts to fit in and be liked.

Anxiety and dread are the victim's constant companions. When fear and suffering become habitual, a "victim mentality" may be locked in for life. Only a few years separate the bullied child from the adult misfit who blames himself and everyone else for an endless succession of problems that somehow defy resolution.

Bullied children often become deeply depressed. They have difficulty learning, and their grades suffer. A few will eventually choose suicide. Others — those who are raging inside — may retaliate in ways that are shocking and unexpected even to themselves.

- **Effects on the Bully.** If a bully is masking feelings of worthlessness and low self-esteem, every bullying act is likely to deepen his self-contempt. This may prompt him to bully even more relentlessly to strengthen his cover. Most of his classmates will start to avoid him, either out of fear or because they simply don't like his antisocial behavior. Bullies are significantly more likely than non-bullies to be convicted of a crime by the time they reach early adulthood. Children who become bullies often remain bullies for life. They batter their wives, abuse their children, and produce another generation of bullies. They develop few lasting friendships, have problems at work, and frequently end up in prison.

The bullies you see around you at school are not merely facing poor grades and disciplinary problems, they are facing a lifetime of trouble.

- Effects on the Bystander. Bullies love an audience, and most have no trouble attracting one. It's normal human behavior to want to gauge the strength of a potential foe, which may account in part for the tendency of children to watch bully encounters. On some level, observers are probably wondering what they would do if the bully turned on them. Some may actually be engaged in a kind of mental rehearsal.

In addition to rapt fascination, bystanders often feel uncertain how to act, helpless to intervene, and (later) guilty for not having come to the aid of the victim. A vocal minority of bystanders may become excited by the entertainment value of the bullying event and use cheers and taunts to incite further harassment or violence.

Another way many bystanders are affected is by having their freedom of association curtailed. A bully who has prestige and power can make social outcasts of the children she bullies. Bystanders may hesitate to associate with the victim for fear of losing status or becoming the bully's next prey.

Finally, any of these effects if experienced often enough can interfere with learning. Uneasy, frightened, guilt-ridden children seldom make good students.

Boys and Girls Bully Differently

Most adults, when they think of a schoolyard bully, picture an aggressive, belligerent male — hulky and maybe even a bit cloddish. That stereotype still plays out reliably in movies and cartoons and, to some extent, in real life. Boys who bully are usually bigger than their peers, enjoy using their power, are boastful, blaming, antisocial and relatively low in *emotional* intelligence.

No comparable stereotype exists for the female bully, yet girls do bully — often. The methods used by female bullies are far more subtle, which is probably why female bullies don't readily conform to a particular image.

While male bullies prefer direct, physical, one-to-one encounters, female bullies favor social exclusion, manipulation, rumor mills, and bullying in groups. Their behavior, though not often physically threatening, is marked by a special kind of cruelty.

Identifying Bullies — and Bully Candidates

Most kids occasionally participate in some form of bullying. They may not physically harm or intimidate another child, but they engage in teasing, heckling, put-downs, social exclusion, or some other form of psychological/emotional bullying.

Despite these occasional cruel acts, most children are not dedicated bullies. Those who are — or who have the potential to be — can often be identified by the traits and behaviors they exhibit. The typical bully:

- Lacks empathy, compassion and concern for the feelings of others.
- Is larger and/or stronger than peers.
- Manipulates and uses others to achieve ends.
- Is bossy and controlling; likes to dominate others.
- Lacks social skills; may be antisocial.
- Uses teasing as a way of getting to know others.
- Enjoys feeling powerful, competent and in control.
- Craves attention; shows off and acts tough to get it.
- Lacks empathy for victims.
- Gets pleasure or satisfaction from seeing others suffer.
- Enjoys and frequently provokes conflict.
- Lacks guilt; shows no remorse.
- Blames the victim. Insists that the victim provoked the attack and deserves the consequences.
- Blames others for own problems; refuses to accept responsibility.
- Is defensive and guarded; believes in "getting them before they get me."
- Is easily offended by innocent actions and/or remarks.
- Lacks friends, or has a few close friends (followers/lieutenants).

Identifying Victims — and Victim Candidates

The majority of children are victims of a bully at one time or another just by being in the wrong place at the wrong time. Only a few, however, become the object of repeated attacks.

According to student surveys, kids who don't "fit in" are the bully's number one targets. Not fitting in usually means that a child is different in some way. Whether awkward, oddly (or poorly) dressed, extremely tall, short, skinny or fat, victims have difficulty assimilating within the peer culture.

Out of fear or shame, many victims keep incidents of bullying secret. Visions of clumsy interventions on the part of teachers or parents may be enough to silence them. Why make the situation worse by telling an adult? Victims may also fear retribution (from the bully) or further ostracism (from peers). Vigilance is needed to identify victims. Take note if any child is:

- Frequently disheveled (torn clothing, cuts, scrapes, bruises)
- Missing money, belongings, lunch.
- Socially isolated.
- Perceived by peers to be different (features, body type, clothes, actions, speech).
- Socially inept; doesn't know the "social ropes."
- Emotional (cries, clings)
- Extremely shy, timid, sensitive.
- Nervous, anxious, fearful.
- Withdrawn, sullen, depressed.
- Physically smaller or weaker than peers.
- Frequently absent from school.
- Frequently ill or voices numerous physical complaints
- Has a physical/medical disability
- Lacking healthy self-esteem or self-image
- Failing or performing poorly in school
- Not interested in school.

What You Can Do?

As a concerned adult, parent, or professional educator, you are probably already doing much to prevent and deal with bullying in your own setting. The fact that you are reading this book indicates that you want to do more.

- **Start with Policy.** It is crucial to develop clear and effective school policy for preventing bullying and effectively dealing with it when it occurs. Once a course of action has been formulated and agreed upon, everyone needs to be informed about exactly what the policy is.

Tips for policy development include:

- Build on existing discipline guidelines.
- Apply the policy consistently.
- Enlist everyone's commitment.
- Establish procedures for investigating reported incidences of bullying.

- Adequately supervise key areas of the school.
 - Communicate zero tolerance for bully behavior.
 - Immediately step in and help any child who is bullied.
- **Raise Awareness.** All members of the school community — teachers, counselors, administrators, students, parents and support personnel — need to learn what bullying is, how it affects the community, and what they can do to prevent or stop it. Tips for raising awareness include:
 - Work with students and adults to determine the extent of bullying in your setting.
 - To obtain current data, conduct a survey. Share the results with everyone.
 - Hold classroom discussions.
 - Adopt one or more curricular programs aimed at preventing/reducing bullying.
 - Teach parents how they can help.
- **Enlist Everyone in the Effort.** Make it clear that prevention of, and zero tolerance for, bullying is everyone's business. Make it a school-wide, yearlong effort. Tips include:
 - Mobilize all students, including those who are neither victims nor bullies. Teach them how to react when they witness acts of bullying.
 - Make it safe for kids to report bullying. Protect anonymity.
 - Develop peer mediation programs to help students deal more effectively with conflict.
 - Encourage kids to talk about bullying in general, as well as to report specific instances of bullying.
 - Never trivialize the problem or make excuses for a kid who bullies.
- **Create a Positive School/Classroom Climate.** The biggest part of prevention is creating an environment where bullying cannot easily flourish. Tips include:
 - Help kids develop positive social skills, including conflict management skills.
 - Develop programs that provide recognition, admiration and respect for positive, pro-social behaviors.
 - Avoid giving attention to the negative behaviors of bullies.
 - Reward and celebrate helpfulness, friendliness, kindness, honesty, responsibility, positive leadership, and other desirable character traits.
 - Be open and honest in your own communications. Set an example by talking openly about your own experiences, feelings, values and concerns.

Helping Victims Cope More Effectively

All children can benefit from learning strategies and skills for dealing with bullies. If you have an opportunity to identify and work with individual victims, so much the better. Many of the same techniques can be reinforced through one-to-one interaction. Even role-play — a powerful way for children to practice and internalize new behaviors — can often be accomplished very effectively in individual counseling or teaching sessions.

Victims need to develop a thoroughgoing awareness of what precipitates a typical bully encounter; what they do (or don't do) to contribute to the situation; their feelings before, during and after an encounter; and what's in it for the bully.

Once a foundation of awareness is developed, help victims learn techniques and skills for deflecting and neutralizing bully attacks. Victims can learn ways to avoid being an easy target. They can test new ways of standing, walking, talking and relating to others. Reading about or discussing behavior change is just the beginning, however. Some form of behavioral rehearsal is essential. Skits, role plays or simply repeating aloud new ways of responding are helpful.

Involve the parents of victims as early as possible in the process so that they can reinforce your efforts. Offer specific suggestions, such as practicing bully-resistance techniques at home or enrolling the child in a self-defense course.

Finally, do whatever you can to help victims find reasons to feel good about themselves and confident of their ability to deal with bullies in a peaceful manner. Remember, however, that true self-esteem is always earned. Simply telling a child that he is unique and special isn't enough. Children learn to feel good about themselves by recognizing and appreciating their own accomplishments, and by having those accomplishments recognized by others. Accomplishments can take many forms — good deeds, desirable habits, academic success and creative endeavors to name a few. Every child has them. The key is to know the child (and help the child know himself) well enough to identify them.

All of the activities in this book have been designed to help victims cope more effectively with bullies, avoiding encounters whenever possible and managing them better when avoidance isn't an option.

Promoting Social-Emotional Development

One of the principle aims of any comprehensive bully-prevention program should be to strengthen the resistance of all students to bully behaviors. This is best accomplished through systematic efforts to promote healthy social-emotional development in every child.

You can extend the learning of your students by including activities from resources devoted to teaching such skills. Two additional books by the authors are ideal for that purpose: *Getting Along* (Innerchoice Publishing, 1993) and *Lessons in Tolerance and Diversity* (Innerchoice Publishing, 2001). These books help children learn to evaluate choices, think about consequences, make sound decisions, develop effective communication skills, establish ground rules for their own behavior, and peacefully manage conflict. For additional information, please see page 73, for a listing of other books written by the authors.

How to Use the Activities

There are fifteen lessons in this book. They are arranged sequentially and should be implemented in the order they appear. The first few activities are devoted to helping children develop a greater awareness of the ingredients and dynamics of bullying — the feelings and reactions it generates in victims and bystanders and the possible motivations of bullies.

Next, students are given an opportunity to examine their individual rights, to understand how bullying violates those rights, and to recognize the importance of protecting and preserving them.

- Activities deal with the importance of reporting bullying incidents. Students identify sources of help and learn how to ask for help. They also plan specific strategies for avoiding bully encounters.

Through additional activities, students examine how self-talk affects their vulnerability to bully attacks, and practice using positive self-talk and affirmations to strengthen their resolve in dealing with bullies. They learn relaxation strategies for easing anger and tension, and review specific anger-management strategies.

Two simple formulas are presented to help students respond quickly and effectively in the heat of a bully encounter. The students are given repeated opportunities to practice these response patterns.

Finally, students identify behaviors that strengthen and erode friendships, and discuss ways of improving their friendship skills.

- Experience Sheets. Each of the activities in this book includes one or more handouts to duplicate and distribute to your students. These "Experience Sheets" direct the students through a variety of exercises — questions to answer, stories to write, pictures to draw, issues to think about. Instructions for incorporating the Experience Sheets are included in the activity outlines. The majority of the sheets are designed to be completed by all participating students in the course of the activity. A few are intended for use in one-to-one sessions with individual victims.
- In leading the activities, we urge you to make whatever adjustments are necessary to ensure that each experience is relevant to the ages, abilities, specific needs and cultural mix of your students. For example, some students may require extra help understanding the printed directions on the Experience Sheets. If dyad activities or role plays are new to your students, you may need to model these processes one or more times before asking the students to do them on their own. Or, without using names, you may wish to describe and discuss actual bully encounters that have occurred at your school.

Trust your knowledge and experience to maximize the effectiveness of these materials. Use the book as an springboard, relying first and foremost on your intuition and sound judgment.

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