

The Buzz on Bullying

If you grew up and are functioning in American society, you can probably provide your own definition of bullying and have had some level of personal experience with it. Bullying is an all-too-common human activity that has existed since the beginning of recorded history and is present in most cultures. It is enacted by both boys and girls, as well as women and men. Research suggests that somewhere between 30 percent and 60 percent of American schoolchildren report being bullied.

Bullying hurts. Those who are bullied hate it. They fear it, dread it and try to avoid it. One recent survey found that 58 percent of school children claimed they stayed home from school on at least one day to avoid being bullied.

Bullying is about power. A colleague of ours says, "It's all about big on little, many on few, smart on less smart, older on younger." We're sure you know this fact. At some point, you've probably been the smaller one, the younger one or had your interests and feelings unfairly damaged by someone more powerful than you.

The Traditional School Bully

In the drama of the school bully, there are five roles available. You can star as the bully, co-star as the victim or you can play a smaller part as a peer bystander, school official or parent (of the bully, the victim or a bystander).

Most traditional bullying interventions start with the bully. The bully needs to be taught a lesson. And because bullying is inherently unfair, those playing the role of an adult bystander or victim's parent have a natural urge to teach the bully a lesson through some sort of punishment.

The "punish-the-bully" urge is natural and, unfortunately, ineffective. Think about it. You see a bigger boy picking on a littler boy. You intervene by grabbing the bigger boy by the back of the neck and chewing him out. Yes, your response is natural. Yes, the bigger boy deserved punishment. But ironically, when an adult intervenes in an aggressive or violent manner, the bullying cycle repeats, only this time an older, bigger adult is picking on a younger, smaller bully.

Some anti-bullying strategies focus on the victim, with the hope that the victim can learn effective skills for dealing with bullies. Such interventions try to teach some clever new interpersonal skills. Unfortunately, research and reality generally show that when faced with a big, aggressive bully, most of us can't recall our cool new skills, and we end up fighting, running, hiding and suffering bruises to our bodies or ego.

As you probably already know, although girls are sometimes physically violent, boys tend to be more physical. They punch, trip, kick and slam each other into lockers. A less-physical form of bullying is more often the bullying-of-choice for girls. This bullying, sometimes called relational aggression, includes spreading vicious rumors, using social exclusion, taunting and other psychologically painful strategies to hurt someone, damage reputations or keep others in line.

New Research on Bullying

It's not surprising that researchers have discovered we need to do more than punish bullies and support victims. The most recent and compelling research indicates we need to intervene on many levels simultaneously. In other words, bullies, victims, peer bystanders, school personnel and parents all have a role to play in preventing and reducing bullying. Parents should consider the following tips to deter and diminish bullying:

- Communicate your concerns about supervision, monitoring and consequences for bullying to your children's school.
- Help your children build a social safety network and encourage them to travel via the buddy system.
- Encourage your school to develop anti-bullying social norms for children before middle school; this includes teaching about the difference between tattling and telling.
- Help your child's school use a clear, effective limit-setting system for bullies; bullies need to know exactly what consequences they will suffer if they engage in bullying behavior.
- Teach your children anti-bullying strategies. These might include methods for getting the bully on their side, assertiveness skills, humor and conflict-management skills.
- Avoid bullying the bully or your own children. One of the ways children learn to be bullies or victims is through their own family experiences.

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For More Information

"The Bully, the Bullied and the Bystander: From Preschool to High School – How Parents and Teachers Can Help Break the Cycle of Violence" by Barbara Coloroso. HarperResource, 2004..

"Bullying at School: What We Know and What We Can Do" by Dan Olweus. Blackwell Publications, 1993.

"Odd Girl Out: The Hidden Culture of Aggression in Girls" by Rachel Simmons. Harcourt, 2002.

National Youth Violence Prevention Resource Center
www.safeyouth.org/scripts/teens/bullying.asp

Project Respect
www.dontlaugh.org