



BULLYING

Both Sides of the Fence

by William Voors, L.C.S.W.

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Dealing With Bullying

Ask adults whether bullying is a problem, and you're bound to get a variety of answers. On one side of the fence, we hear rationalizations for bullying such as, "It happened to me when I was growing up, and I turned out OK"; "It's just part of growing up"; "It's just kids having fun" and "It's no big deal." On the other side, we hear the harsh reality of how bullying can truly affect children and adolescents. "I hate going to school because of what goes on there," "I think about suicide all the time because of the way I get treated," or, in the words of Eric Harris — one of the Columbine shooters, "This is what you get for the way you treated us."

The fact is that 160,000 children in this country miss school every day to avoid being harassed, teased, gossiped about, "dissed" or physically assaulted. The bullying that is often dismissed as a part of growing up often leads to more serious violence. Maine Attorney General Andrew Ketterer's Civil Rights Division found that the most severe and brutal hate crimes in that state were almost always committed by someone who had participated in years of bullying.

Bullying is one of the leading social problems facing young people today. Fortunately, we are emerging from the dark ages where bullying is tolerated. Instead, we are seeing it for what it is — a form of abuse that can wreck a childhood, rob one of his or her full potential and lead to a lifetime of low self-esteem, depression, anxiety and fear of social relationships.

When is it Bullying?

All children get into conflict and need to learn how to handle it. But not all conflict can be considered bullying. Normal conflict crosses the line and becomes bullying when several criteria are met:

- 1. It's a repeated and consistent negative behavior.** Most children go through periodic experiences of cruel taunts, gossip or even physical abuse. Though unacceptable, one occurrence is not bullying. Bullying means a predictable pattern of abuse has developed between children. It happens again and again.
- 2. There are contrasting feelings between the target and the bully.** While the child who bullies may feel excited, empowered and might enjoy the experience, the target child feels fear, humiliation and shame.

- 3. There is an imbalance of power.** The child who bullies is more powerful than the other child and uses that power to get what he or she wants. Sometimes the power is not physical — the child who bullies can also use words to hurt or popularity to exclude others.

Bullying Can Come in a Variety of Forms

Physical bullying is easy to recognize and may include shoving, hitting, kicking, spitting, pulling hair and biting in the early elementary grades. As children reach middle school, physical bullying becomes more violent, as well as more sexually oriented. Boys tend to engage in physical bullying somewhat more than girls do.

Verbal bullying is by far the most common form throughout the school years. Hurtful names or cruel jokes about idiosyncrasies, appearance, clothes, ethnicity, race, gender, sexual orientation, religion or disabilities are all forms of verbal bullying.

Relational bullying begins as children enter the middle school years and continues through high school. It includes shunning, ostracizing, gossiping and spreading malicious rumors. Relational bullying thrives in a climate that fosters the formation of cliques.

What's the Harm in Bullying?

The short and long term effects of bullying for both targets and the children who bully are alarming. Children and adolescents who bully are more likely to become violent adults, more likely to abuse their own children and more likely to commit serious crimes. The shaming that results from being chronically bullied can last well into adulthood. Many adults with depression and anxiety problems, especially social anxiety disorder, can trace their problems back to a history of being bullied. Both children who bully and targets of bullying are more likely to develop substance abuse problems as adolescents. Here are some additional problems that can result:

Problems Common to Targets of Bullying

- Low self-confidence
- Clinical depression
- Suicidal thoughts and suicide attempts
- Abnormal fears and worries
- Sleep disorders
- Tics and nervous habits
- Frequent crying

- Bedwetting
- Poor appetite, gastrointestinal and skin problems
- Profound rage
- Academic problems

Problems Common to Children Who Bully

- Blaming others for problems they created themselves
- Impulsivity
- Seeing hostile intent where there is none
- Lack of empathy or a normal sense of caring for others
- Lack of self-awareness
- Sense of superiority
- Greater likelihood of criminal activity in adolescence and adulthood
- Greater likelihood of substance abuse

What Can We Do to Stop Bullying?

The first thing we can do is to recognize that it happens and confront it when we see it — including the recognition and confrontation of our own tendencies to deny, minimize or normalize it. We need to dispel the myths that enable and allow bullying to flourish. *Here are a few that we need to confront:*

- 1. Being bullied toughens a person up.** If this were true, chronic targets of bullying would be the most well-adjusted, happiest, most popular kids in school. Yet young people who are frequently targeted by their peers are more likely to have problems with depression, social anxiety and substance abuse. This myth is simply a justification for abuse.
- 2. It's just a kid's problem.** Let's face it, much of the antisocial behavior we see among children and young people was learned by observing parents, teachers, coaches and other role models who demonstrate intolerant or abusive behavior. When adults look the other way or are intolerant or abusive themselves, they only enable the problem.
- 3. It's just playing around.** We need to teach our children that if the other person isn't laughing, it's not funny. Playing around means both people are having fun, and the teasing is clearly done in the spirit of friendship. Playful teasing is one thing, bullying is another.

In June, 2002, the American Medical Association adopted an anti-bullying measure urging doctors to help change attitudes that tolerate bullying and push for federal research into prevention programs. "There should be zero tolerance for bullying behavior," said AMA board member Dr. Ronald Davis.

What to Do if Your Child is a Target of Bullying
Being bullied is never a child's fault, but here are a few things your child can do to make it less likely that he or she will become a target of bullying:

- 1. Stay with friends:** One of the best preventive measures against bullying is to develop good friendship skills. Not only does this improve a child's overall self-concept, but he or she is less likely to be bothered by bullying children when with other kids — especially if there aren't adults around.

2. Act confident: Teach your child to stand tall, hold his or her head up while walking and to look people in the eye when talking.

3. Stay safe: Children should not be alone in potentially dangerous places such as locker rooms, rest rooms or empty classrooms.

4. Ask for help: Teach your child to talk with you or ask a trusted adult at school for help if he or she doesn't know how to handle a situation.

What to Do if Your Child Bullies Others

The family is the best place for children to learn the values and beliefs that help to shape healthy, prosocial behavior. There are a number of things parents can do to help their child if he or she has a problem with bullying behavior:

1. Let your child know that bullying is never OK: Make it clear to your child that under no circumstances is mistreating another person, either physically or verbally, ever acceptable.

2. Be a positive role model for your child: Parents are the most important teachers any child will ever have. Children learn by example from adults. Be sure to teach your child how to treat others with respect by how you act and speak. Teach your child to be accepting of other people regardless of ethnic background, race, religion, sexual orientation, etc.

3. Spend more time with your child: Make spending good, quality time with your child a high priority. Get to know who your child is, what his or her interests are and have fun with your child.

4. Help your child understand how other people feel: Kids who bully have a hard time being empathic, or understanding how others feel. Talk about feelings and ask questions like "How did you feel when that happened...?" or "How do you think the other person might have felt after that happened...?"

5. Cooperate with the school: Though the first reaction may be shock, anger or denial that your child would ever bully another child, remember that your child's school is trying to help your child. By cooperating, you will help your child to become a happy, well-adjusted person.

The world we live in can be a dangerous place, and the best place to start in making it safer is with our children. It's essential that we actively teach our children compassion, assertiveness, empathy and self-respect by modeling it ourselves. Bullying has been with us for a long time, and it's going to take the continuing efforts of parents, schools and communities to end this pervasive form of abuse.▼

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