

WHEN VICTIMS TURN INTO BULLIES

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When is the last time you thought about what it was like to be bullied as a child? Maybe you have your own clear memories of the boy down the street who tormented you, or the girl at school who told tales about you that were untrue. Maybe it's your own child who is being tortured daily by that older kid who savors his position of power over the younger students. Maybe it was the last guy who cut you off as you were trying to get on the M5 that brings bullying to your immediate attention. Or maybe, bullying came to mind the last time you watched a Parliamentary debate. Regardless of your own particular associations, few of us get through life without suffering from the unwanted attentions of some abusive other and many of us would argue that the basis of national and international relationships is bullying.

Bullying describes direct behaviors such as teasing, taunting, threatening, hitting and stealing that are initiated by one or more students against a victim. Racially or ethnically-based verbal abuse and gender-based insults are also found in bullying situations. In addition to direct attacks, bullying may also be more indirect by causing a student to be socially isolated through intentional exclusion. The key component is that the physical or psychological intimidation occurs repeatedly over time to create an ongoing pattern of harassment and abuse (Banks, 1998; Sudermann, Jaffe and Schiek, 1996).

According to Norwegian researcher, Olweus, approximately 15% of students are either bullied regularly or are initiators of bullying behavior (Olweus, 1993). Observations of children on the playgrounds and in classrooms confirm that bullying is frequent – once every 7 minutes on the playground and once every 25 minutes in class (Craig and Pepler, 1997). This behavior is clearly not innocuous childhood behavior that will disappear without trace. The Scandinavian studies indicate that there is a strong correlation between bullying other students during the school years and experiencing legal or criminal troubles as an adult – 60% of those characterized as bullies in grades 6-9 had at least one criminal conviction by age 24 (Olweus, 1993).

There is also a correlation between domestic violence and bullying behavior. Since bullying is an issue of power and control, men who are particularly

sensitive to experiences of helplessness and loss of control outside the home often come home to exert a sense of power and control over their loved ones. And these patterns also do not begin in adulthood. Boys who are going to become batterers often begin their pattern of controlling, coercive and ultimately violent behavior as adolescents. In a study of mid-western high school students, 15.5% of females reported sexual violence, 15.5% reported physical violence and 9.9% reported both in their dating relationships. (Bergman, 1992). According to the Washington State Parent-Teachers Association who have developed a teen violence program, 28% of young people experience dating violence – about the same rate as adult domestic violence. And 70% of pregnant teenagers are abused by their partner a fact largely overlooked in the rhetoric about the sexual profligacy of teenage girls.

There are many reasons for our social failure to address the problem. In the first place, as in so many other areas of abusive power, we have had a social tendency to blame the victims rather than identify and address the problem behavior. Most children do not tell adults they are being bullied. The reasons include feelings of shame, fear of retaliation, and fear that adults cannot or will not protect them when and where the bullying takes place (Sudermann, Jaffe and Schiek, 1996). This reluctance to confront the problem continues into adulthood where few people are willing to confront bullies anywhere – at home, at work, at school, in our neighborhoods, on our playing fields, in our corporations, or in our governments. In fact, our most idealized entertainment icons are often those who are the most successful at bullying, albeit bullying “bad” guys. Regardless of the target, the behavior itself is set up as an acceptable – even sought after - social norm.

Another part of the problem is in the very results that bullying behavior brings. Victims of bullying suffer from fear, anxiety, and low self-esteem. They are often avoidant of school and other social situations and are often socially isolated. They may have parents who are described as overprotective. They tend to be physically weaker than their peers. They frequently become depressed, lose interest in activities, and may become suicidal. Bullies, on the other hand appear to have little anxiety and to possess strong self-esteem (Olweus, 1993). This may be in part, a biochemical effect. It has been noted among groups of traumatized children that some of them develop predatory aggressive behaviors that produce a calming effect on their heightened level of physiological arousal (Perry, 1995). It may be that this is a far more common phenomenon than we have previously recognized, but because the results of socially-adaptive bullying brings so much positive social regard, the real character, nature, and results of the behavior are largely ignored.

What can be done to stop bullying at its roots? For the sake of intervention and prevention, programs to address bullying in the schools need to be actively created by the school community with the full support of school administrators

and include consultation with mental health professionals. The school killings in Columbine, Colorado indicate – among other things - the potential consequences for not dealing with bullying situations. In the U.S., the National Crime Prevention Council released guidelines in 1997 pointing out that probably the most important intervention that a school can do is to take the problem seriously – to make it abundantly clear that bullying is not acceptable behavior. Playground behavior needs to be far more closely monitored than it usually is and bullying incidents must be consistently addressed. The entire school staff needs to be trained to recognize and deal with bullying. Parents must be informed about the problem and given guidance and direction as to how to manage the problem. Peers must be encouraged not to be silent bystanders but to intervene when someone else is being victimized. The school community must alter its social norms so that bullying behavior will not be tolerated – and the adults have to be consistent role models for such a change.

And what about the adults? Might it not be time for grown-ups to take some cues from our schools? Behavior that is unacceptable on the playgrounds and in the streets should not be unquestioningly accepted just because it is occurring in the Board Room or in the halls of government. But as in a school, the appropriate response must come from a concerted community effort to establish a different set of norms and these changed norms must be applied to everyone.

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