

## BULLYING IN CHILDHOOD AND ADOLESCENCE

### Note from the authors:

As you read this article, we invite you to notice your own internal responses. It is the rare individual that does not have long dormant memories and emotional states reactivated when the topic of Bullying is discussed. How we adapted to the presence of Bullying in our schools and neighborhoods is usually suppressed and unexamined. Whether a parent, teacher, or school administrator there are unrecognized, unconscious parts of our personality that witnessed abuse, endured abuse and maybe even inflicted abuse, These internal reactions alter the ways that we regard bullying behavior. They can lead to rationalizations that excuse the behavior, mental strategies that blame the targets of Bullying, feelings of helplessness as well as intense rage, which can undermine attempts to find wholistic solutions. As I'll explain below, everyone involved in the bullying process needs to grow, needs to be healed. This is true not just for the target, but for those who bully, and bystanders as well.

### TERMS

Nearly every child has the potential to become a bully or a victim, given the right, or rather, wrong circumstances. The roles are not static. In fact, it is sometimes the case that children who are the targets of peer abuse can, in turn, be abusive to others. The potent draw of the dominant social position and the experience of power over another, especially when one has been powerless, are part of what makes it more appropriate to talk about bullying as a behavior and a role. Otherwise we tend to think of the bully as only at the extreme end of the continuum. There are many kinds of bullies and many kinds of targets.

#### Bullying student and Target

As we write about Bullying, we will use terms Bully and Target, rather than victim. The Target is the recipient of abuse. This shows the direction of the hostility and exclusion. Victim is a role, with the self-experience as powerless and passive. We want to change the nature of the target's responses to allow him or her to avoid or shed identification as a victim.

I'll be using bully and target to refer to the *role* of the individuals. Please understand that these terms do not necessarily denote permanence in identification. However, it is true that if unchallenged and unchanged, these roles can become lifelong identities.

## **DEFINITION**

First, a quick definition of bullying behavior:

The hostile incidents happen repeatedly. All children make mistakes, but those prone to bullying repeat their attacks even after the targeted child protests

The bullying child is aware that s/he is causing pain

The targeted child has made clear that s/he resents the behavior

The behavior is of a degrading or offensive nature, regardless of how the behavior is couched or portrayed.

There is a real or perceived imbalance in strength, social status, or numbers between the target of the bullying behavior and the child or children who bully.

## **STATISTICS**

### **Kaiser Foundation, Nickelodeon TV and Children Now (2001):**

75% of High School students report Bullying as a regular occurrence at school

86% of children 12-15 say they get teased or bullied (obscures some information)

>50% of students 8-11 say that Bullying at school is a "big problem"

### **Zeigler and Rosenstein-Manner (1991)**

Children grades 4-8

35% of students were directly involved in bullying incidents as targets

Bullying peaks in the 11-12 year-old group Middle School.

38% of special education students were bullied, compared with 18% of other students

24% reported that race-related bullying occurred 'now and then' or 'often'

23% of student who were bullied reported that teachers intervened often or almost always, whereas

71% of teachers reported that teachers intervened often or almost always

**American Association of University Women** used this definition of sexual harassment: "unwanted and unwelcome sexual behavior that interferes with your life"

59 % of 8<sup>th</sup> through 10<sup>th</sup> graders reported that they had been sexually harassed often or occasionally.

27% reported such harassment was frequent.

Thus, 86% of students were subjected to sexual harassment.

### **Fight Crime: Invest in Kids 2006.**

1,000 US youth

One third of all teens (ages 12-17)  
One sixth of all children (ages 6-11)  
Had mean, threatening or embarrassing things said about them online.

10% of teens  
4% of children  
Were threatened online with physical harm.

50% of children  
30% of teens  
Told their parents

45% of children  
30% of teens  
Reported that Cyberbullying occurred at school.

**Crimes Against Children Research Center 2006 Youth Internet Safety Survey.**  
Ages 10 – 17

9% had been harassed online  
58% of targets were girls  
44% of the harassers were off-line friends or acquaintances.

**CyberBullying.us: 2009**

- 33 percent of youth have been victimized by cyber bullying.
- Among this percentage, being ignored and disrespected were the most common forms of cyber bullying.
- The primary cyber bullying location where victimizing occurs is in chat rooms (56 percent).
- Following chat rooms, 49 percent are victimized via instant message and 28 percent via e-mail.
  - 34 percent of youth who are bullied feel frustrated, 30 percent angry and 22 percent feel sad.
- 41 percent of victims do not tell anyone in their off-screen lives about their abuse, but 36 percent did tell an online friend.
- The situation only improved for 19 percent of victims when they did tell someone about the bullying.
- 17 percent admitted to bullying another individual online.  
Often offenders interviewed most considered it fun or instructive; such as a way to strengthen their victims.
- More than half of study participants feel that cyber bullying is as bad, or worse, as bullying in real life.

## **FORMS OF BULLYING**

There are three forms of bullying. Each is potent alone. Combined they pack a devastating wallop. The three forms are: Verbal, Physical, (including intimidation), and Relational. Cyberbullying combines primarily Verbal and Relational forms of abuse.

Each form of bullying shares a common root. Bullying is the abuse of power and the expression of contempt for the target. This power derives from a variety of sources. These include social status, economic status, physical strength and athletic ability, verbal facility, group numbers, and intelligence. I'll have more on this when we cover the social context that supports bullying. The experience of bullying another brings to the bully an internally rewarding experience, an *intoxicating power experience*. This is amplified by the distress of the target and the support of the bystanders. *Thus, it is not just the reaction of the target that rewards the bullying behavior.* This is an extremely important point that many well-meaning adults do not understand.

Boys and girls use verbal bullying about equally. Boys are more likely to use physical bullying; Girls more likely to use relational bullying.

This gender difference is both an outgrowth of differences in physical power as well as social convention. Boys tend to play in large, loosely defined groups held together by common interests. Physical prowess is more valued than is intellectual ability. Pushing, shoving, jabbing are means for the exercising power to harm along with words that convey physical weakness, such as "nerd" "wimp" and words meant to feminize the target such as "sissy" and its more vulgar versions. The use of feminizing words in bullying also demonstrates the implicit belief that girls are at the bottom of the ladder of social power.

Girls tend to socialize in small, more intimate groups with clearly defined boundaries. This allows for power to be exercised with greater subtlety simply by excluding the target from the social circle.

### **Verbal Bullying**

70% of reported bullying is of a verbal nature  
It is quick and not so likely to draw the attention of adults.

- name calling
- taunting
- cruel "nicknames"
- teasing about clothing, possessions or appearance
- negative comments about the person's race, ethnic background, religion or idiosyncrasies
- cruel jokes

Adults tend not to grasp the impact of verbal bullying. For example, a first grader calling someone a "dumb head" may seem innocent enough to an adult who is not witnessing the distress of the target. This brings us to one important point, which is that from an adult perspective much of bullying seems "childish." Of course it's childish! These are children, but that doesn't make it painless.

It's important for us as adults to translate what we hear as childish into the universal experience of peers attacking a peer. This is especially useful when dealing with other adults who consider bullying to be "kid stuff." *An attack by our peers using the language of our peers is still an attack.*

The old adage of "Sticks and Stones may break my bones but names can never hurt me" may have once been a good defense, but it does not hold much truth. The fact is that words do hurt. Insults repeated by our peers leave lasting injury. Years later, one can see the lasting effect of childhood taunting in the sudden anger experienced by adults when a comment hits on an old "sore spot". Many times we adults are not even aware of the connection between the earlier events and later reactions; at best we just know that we are sensitive to kidding about certain things.

That's because our peers help to define us. They are the mirrors of our identity. Sometimes they are distorted mirrors, like fun-house mirrors, but the reflection they give us of ourselves becomes internalized as one view we hold of ourselves. Children are actively constructing their sense of identity each day. Children who are given repetitive negative messages about themselves by their primary reference group will come to hold these beliefs about themselves at some level.

Whether they completely buy into it, or are left with persistent doubts, targets of bullying need to deal with the hurt somehow. If the charge is that one is fat or ugly or spastic or stupid, then some kind of compensation necessarily will be erected. Avoiding sports, dressing to avoid attention, becoming promiscuous to prove one's attractiveness, clowning to distract attention from academic performance, these are just some of the ways we as humans attempt to compensate for distorted views of ourselves that come from verbal bullying.

Verbal bullying is also easier to get away with than physical bullying. It is quick. Verbal bullying takes little energy, or physical strength. It attracts little adult attention. It can sometimes be portrayed as just "teasing" or "having fun" with someone. But the essential difference between verbal bullying and fun teasing is that the target isn't in on the joke. When the intent of the words is to hurt the other, it's more appropriate to consider this verbal abuse. When the intent is to hurt, then this is a means to have power over another.

One helpful way to teach children to distinguish between teasing and bullying has to do with the face of the one doing the teasing. Because some children can be very sensitive to playful teasing, I've offered this test. Look at the face of the teaser. Are they smiling in a way that looks friendly? If they are, are they smiling at you or at the kids who are around you? If they're not smiling in a friendly way at you, then it's more likely that they are trying to gain the approval of those around, and not caring about your feelings. Secondly, will they stop if you object?

Barbara Coloroso has some helpful markers to distinguish Teasing from Taunting (Coloroso, 2003)

### ***Teasing***

1. Allows the teaser and person teased to swap roles with ease.
2. Isn't intended to hurt the other person.
3. Maintains the basic dignity of everyone involved.
4. Pokes fun in a lighthearted, clever, and benign way.
5. Is meant to get both parties to laugh.
6. Is only a small part of the activities shared by kids who have something in common.
7. Is innocent in motive.
8. Is discontinued when person teased becomes upset or objects to the teasing.

### ***Taunting***

1. Is based on an imbalance of power and is one-sided: the bully taunts, the bullied kid is taunted.
2. Is intended to harm.
3. Involves humiliating, cruel, demeaning, or bigoted comments thinly disguised as jokes.
4. Includes laughter directed at the target, not *with* the target.
5. Is meant to diminish the sense of self-worth of the target.
6. Induces fear of further taunting or can be a prelude to physical bullying.
7. Is sinister in motive.
8. Continues especially when targeted kid becomes distressed or objects to the taunt.

Friendly teasing communicates a sense of belonging and safety. It is a way of saying we are together here. No one has to maintain an image of perfection; we can relax and not take ourselves too seriously. Friendly teasing is an important part of healthy relationships. But it requires security in one's self, and trust in others.

This brings us to an important aspect of all bullying, but especially the form that involves humor. Whether through the use of clever word play or through making the target look foolish, bullying often derives power from laughter. As we are invited to laugh with the bully we de-humanize the target. Cruel humor numbs us and takes away our empathy. It is a desensitizing force that allows us to enjoy, *at least for the moment*, the suffering of another. For the participants and the instigator, the laughter reinforces the perception that nothing is wrong or that the abuse is deserved. For the target, the laughter of others communicates that he or she is completely alone. Confidence in the compassion of others is undermined and the cycle of abuse-abuser is continued.

Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. said: "In the end we will remember not the words of our enemies, but the silence of our friends." Based on those I've interviewed, I'd say that Targets remember both.

Verbal Bullying is part of the dehumanizing process that allows for greater abuse. The target becomes dangerous to keep as a companion, lest the abuse transfer. If unchallenged, other forms of abuse are likely to follow.

## **Physical Bullying**

In early elementary grades Physical bullying takes the form of kicking, pushing, shoving, hitting, spitting, pulling hair, biting, and locking a child in an enclosed space.

In later elementary, middle and high school years physical bullying can become more violent and more sexually oriented as young people deal with sexual and aggressive urges and insecurities about their development and sexual urges. Punching, especially quick jabs to shoulder, swirlies (pushing the target's head into a toilet and flushing), wedgies, and pantsing (yanking down the target's pants) become more common forms of physical bullying. Girls can be subject to unwanted sexual touching.

While some adults will attempt to minimize the importance of other forms of bullying, most adults tend to agree that physical bullying is unacceptable.

- spitting
- pushing
- shoving
- kicking
- hitting or slapping
- pulling hair
- locking in or out of a space
- twisting limbs in painful ways
- throwing objects at
- physical acts that are humiliating such as "wedgies",
- urinating on,
- "swirlies" putting the targets head in the toilet and flushing
- "pantsing"
- unwanted sexual touching
- physical violence against family and friends, pets
- threatening with a weapon
- inflicting any other bodily harm

## **Intimidation**

Intimidation is a very clear form of bullying in which the power element is stripped of its more socially acceptable veneer. Intimidation is a form of physical bullying. It is sometimes indirect, as in stealing or vandalizing and often depends on the threat of physical violence. Males use these forms of bullying more often, though girls are not immune to using such measures. .

- playing dirty tricks
- hiding, defacing or damaging possessions (books, hats, clothing, lunches)
- threatening to reveal personal information
- extortion
- stealing
- verbal threats of aggression against property or possessions
- threats of violence or inflicting bodily harm to the victim, the victims family, friends or pets
- dirty looks or threatening gestures

- forcing the target to harm himself

## **Relational Bullying**

Ostracizing others has a history as old as humankind. The term ostracizing comes from the ancient Greek word, Ostraca, a shard of pottery used to document formal votes on who should be banished from the community. Ostracizing those who demonstrate anti-social behavior is an effective means for maintaining social order. Shunning among young people is most often arbitrary and cruel. *Moreover, relational bullying does not prevent antisocial behavior; it is antisocial behavior.*

Relational bullying often combines shunning, an act of omission, with disseminating rumors, an act of commission. Both powerful and nearly invisible, relational bullying is present at every age, but most pronounced during middle school years.

Why do young people have such a great need for group identifications? As young people shift the center of their identities away from their families and more toward their peer group, subgroups or cliques are often formed as a way to express a central aspect of this new identity. In the younger grades these subgroups are relatively fluid, with much overlap and room for inclusion multiple groups. One can be a soccer kid, a "Magic" or "Yugioh" card collector, and a member of band or chorus with little pressure to make any of these exclusive.

Beginning in middle school years and through early years of high school, allegiance to one's group becomes more enforced. Because group identity is an external prop for an internal need, disruptions to group-belonging challenge basic structure of personality. Thus relational bullying produces exclusions that strike at the core of a young person's identity.

Many young people need to have the group identity untarnished by personal variability. Anyone whose personal qualities could harm the reputation of the group becomes a threat to the group and must either conform or leave.

Those who are more secure tend to need this external identification less, but none of us is immune to its power. Notice in yourselves the increase in group-identity as an American after the attacks of 9/11. Being attacked by another group encourages greater identification with one's own group. Thus, a Goth who is harassed by a Jock will feel a greater allegiance to his fellow Goth's and greater distrust and hostility to other Jocks.

When we feel insecure or powerless, our need for identification with a group or entity outside ourselves grows. Group identification offers a stable source of good feelings about ourselves. Shunning and bullying are the expression of "Not Me!" Relational bullying says "I will disdain and punish you because your qualities are not what I value and I want all to know that I am not like you." When we are more secure in our own sense of identity, then we are better able to accept differences in other's behavior, attitudes and customs.

Shunning is our way of saying who belongs and who doesn't. Children may shun another for any number of reasons, but the impact on the target is just the same. A feeling of unworthiness, dislike of whatever attribute is targeted, self-doubt and wish for retribution are all common consequences of relational bullying.

Shunning tends to appear earlier in girls than in boys, and also tends to persist in girls as a preferred means of bullying. Perhaps because it can be subtle and deniable, perhaps because girls tend to be more attuned to the nuances of interpersonal relationships, researchers have



found a gender difference in the use of shunning. That's not to say that males don't use relational bullying, and more girls are using physical forms of bullying.

**Relational Bullying**, which includes acts such as:

- gossiping about or embarrassing another
- spreading rumors about
- setting up to look foolish or to take the blame
- publicly humiliating
- excluding from recess activities
- social rejection, threatening social rejection from the group
- manipulating social order to achieve rejection
- exclusion from the group
- ethnic slurs, racism and homophobia
- threats of withdrawal of "friendship" unless the victim complies
- excluding from events, both formal and impromptu
- excluding from sitting together, cafeteria, classroom, other groupings threats of withdrawal of "friendship" unless the victim complies
- acting as if the person is not there – not responding to their words, avoiding eye contact "silent treatment"

CyberBullying:

In 2006, 13 year old Megan Meier of Dardenne Prairie, Missouri began receiving flirtatious messages from a boy on her MySpace page. As many of you have since learned, that teenage boy was the creation of a neighbor, 49 year-old Lori Drew, who created a false identity for the teenage boy on MySpace. Drew believed that Megan had spread rumors about her own daughter. Drew and an employee of her small business won the trust of the 13 year old girl and then began sending venomous messages. According to court documents, in October, 2006, the 'boy' dumped Megan, telling her, "You are a bad person and everybody hates you. Have a [expletive] rest of your life. The world would be a better place without you." Later that day, Megan hanged herself in a closet. She died the next day.

In South Korea, Choi Jin Sil was one of the country's hottest movie actresses, acclaimed as the "people's star" and the mother of two small children. In 2008, a series of rumors raced through internet chat rooms falsely accusing her of being a merciless loan shark, and responsible for the suicide of a popular actor who had run up \$2 million dollars in debt before asphyxiating himself in his car. Choi, who was reported to be depressed following a 2004 divorce which was regular tabloid fodder, attempted to defend herself but was devastated by the barrage of hatred. She wrote in her diary, "I am lonely and I am ostracized. I cannot even breathe." In October of last year she hanged herself in the shower of her Seoul home.

These News Headlines serve to stir public awareness of cyber bullying but it is the mundane, often unspoken stories that are the real news. Verbal bullying and relational bullying, the most difficult form to confront, have found a fertile environment in electronic media. Online social networking spaces like MySpace, My Space, chat rooms, gaming websites with the ability to communicate with other players, and countless blogs, Instant Messaging, and email as well as cell phone texts and photos, now make it extremely easy to spread rumors and coordinate efforts to damage reputations and ostracize peers.

### **Types of Cyberbullying (Willard)**

Flaming: Intense angry exchanges using text messages, Instant Messages and other formats. May or may not be bullying.

Harassment: Repeatedly sending offensive messages.

Denigration: "Dissing" someone online by spreading rumors or posting false information. This can include creation of sexually explicit image with the targets face through the use of digital imaging software.

Outing and trickery: Disseminating intimate private information or talking someone into disclosing private information, which is then disseminated.

Impersonation: Pretending to be someone else and posting material to damage that person's reputation.

Exclusion: Intentionally excluding someone from an online group.

Cyberstalking: Creating fear by repeatedly sending offensive messages and engaging in other harmful online activities.

### **STATISTICS**

More than 40% of teens say they have been targeted by a cyber bully <sup>7</sup>

More than 80% of teens also believe that cyber bullying is "just a joke" <sup>7</sup> Similar to responses given about bullying in real space.

Several factors may make teens unconcerned about the consequences of online behavior.

They think they are invisible or can take steps to become invisible, so they think they can't be punished.

There is no tangible feedback about the harm they cause, so it seems like a game to them.

Harmful online social norms support Cyberbullying. "On the Internet, I have a free speech right to post whatever I want, regardless of the harm I cause."

Protecting children from cyber bullying is extremely difficult as destructive messages may never directly reach the victim. However, there are steps that parents can take to reduce the likelihood that their child might be involved.

- ◆ Always save the original text message, email or IM that contains a threat or rumor.
- ◆ Tell children the importance of not sharing passwords, even with trusted friends. This is a special temptation for girls in elementary and middle schools where sharing passwords is a mark of true friendship. If someone is your BFF, why wouldn't you trust her with your password? Make passwords impossible to guess. Do not use pet's names, initials, birthdates or nicknames.
- ◆ Keep a list of children's passwords. Occasional parental access to their online accounts should be made explicit as the prerequisite for participation.
- ◆ Keep personal information restricted on websites such as MySpace. Do not reveal any personal information in exchanges over the internet.
- ◆ Set up a parental account on the social site where your child or young teen has a site and insist that you be 'friended' so that parents can review activity on the site.
- ◆ Many IM providers offer software to block unwanted messages
- ◆ Third party software is available to scan incoming messages for hostile content (questionable value).
- ◆ Once the exchange becomes hostile or strange, cut off all contact. Do not succumb to the temptation to get revenge. This is often just what the sender wishes. Especially those who use another's account in order to stir conflict between friends.
- ◆ Report e-bullying right away, even or especially if it makes you embarrassed or uncomfortable. It is never the recipient's fault to be the target of bullying. (This is different from saying that the target is innocent of all provocation) Only 10% of teens who experienced cyber bullying said that they reported this to an adult.
- ◆ Keep computer in high traffic area for children and young teens.
- ◆ If the communication is going through school computers or servers, it is especially important that the school administration be made aware.
- ◆ Abusive, especially threatening contacts can also be reported to the local or state police.
- ◆ Report online attacks to internet service providers. Each has its own policy for dealing with abuse.
- ◆ AT&T Wireless, T-Mobile and Verizon offer the ability to have parents turn off text messaging, or block specific numbers, time and days, or phone-based purchases.

There are multiple issues involved here, including the rights of school personnel to punish behavior that affects the school environment but takes place away from school property and outside of school hours. Because internet messages exist in multiple locations simultaneously, it

can be argued that cyber bullying does cross into school grounds. Moreover, many schools now take the position that student behavior that occurs in transit between home and school is covered by school disciplinary policy, especially when it damages a safe learning environment.

## **POWER and CONTEMPT**

Power in youth derives from a variety of sources as we mentioned earlier. These include social status and its correlates such as dress and economic status, physical strength and athletic ability, verbal facility, group numbers, and intelligence.

The tendency to abuse power may be inherited from our primate ancestors. Ethologist Frans de Waal, from Emory University, has found that the high-ranking members of primate groups tend to harass the low-ranking members (the scape-goats) when the group is under strain, or when the hierarchy is being questioned. Identifying the victim unifies the group, according to de Waal.

This suggests some important questions. Is there something about our school system, as it currently exists, that produces the social strain which triggers the abuse of power? In what ways has abuse of power become institutionalized such that it affects the decisions and behavior of those in power within a school system?

The New York Times in April 2001 cited one example of institutionalized abuse of power. Ed Koch, a senior at Mountain Lakes High School, here in NJ complained about the unfairness of the school's new zero tolerance policy. All through his years as an underclassman, the seniors had dominated the school through physical and emotional intimidation. Once the new anti-bullying policy was established, he felt that the freshmen students were "getting out of hand" They were not deferential to the seniors, like he was forced to be. "Now, kids get away with whatever they want" Koch complained. Another student added, "Senior year is supposed to be *your* time. Now we're on the same level as anyone else."

Jason Katz, a school and military consultant describes the school issue as a larger cultural issue, "The bully is a kind of hero in our society. Our culture defines masculinity as connected to power, control and dominance. The concept of power we admire is power over someone else."

The way that authorities recognize the contributions of different groups transmits a sense of power to some while communicating a lack of importance to others. This is a student quoted by Gabarino and De Lara in "And words can hurt forever" "The athletes here are pretty nice, well, most of them. I do think they have a privileged status, though. For example, last year when the hockey team won the state championship, we had a special program in the auditorium and the mayor came over. When I was on a tech team that won the National championship, we had to go to the Board of Education and beg for money to go. When we won, there wasn't any special school or city recognition."

When a group is given special privilege within a system, it tends to make discipline of that group inconsistent. Athletes are certainly one group whose status within a school frequently leads to teachers and administrators turning a blind eye to abusive behavior.

In my daughter's high school, the coach of the girl's volleyball team is known to regularly launch into verbal abuse against his players, collectively and individually. The principal, a generally responsible man, has offered only curt rejections to those parents who complain. The school glory brought by successive state championships alters the expectations for behavior. [Update: the coach was fired this year.]

Inconsistent discipline undermines a young person's understanding that "I am responsible for my behavior." Instead, those who bully believe that consequences are only imposed if someone "makes a big deal" out of their behavior. Most of the time they can expect that their privileged status will protect them and that the *difference*, the *otherness* of the target will be sufficient to justify their behavior.

We told members of our Social Success Group that we were doing a presentation to professionals about Bullying, and asked them if there was anything they wanted us to convey. The most enthusiastic response was this: "You should let them know that it's not just kids that bully other kids. Sure, that happens a lot. But adults bully kids too. In my school, a teacher had sex with one of the kids. That's really abuse. Even if the kid wanted to.

And the way that teachers talk down to some kids in the class, you know that they hate them. And then everyone knows that you can harass that kid and nothing's gonna happen to you, at least not in that class."

Teachers can signal to students which of their peers will go unprotected. The use of ridicule, shame and sarcasm to discipline a student sends a message to the students who witness the event. "I deem it acceptable to treat this student in a condescending manner." It will not be long before others in the class join in and mimic the behavior.

## **SIGNS AND SYMPTOMS**

Here are some things to watch for:

- ◆ Children may become withdrawn and depressed or abnormally aggressive.
- ◆ They may cry at night, or have nightmares, frequent waking, or excessive need for sleep.
- ◆ Children may lose appetite, feel sick to the stomach or have headaches.
- ◆ They may start stammering, be quieter than usual or appear to be depressed.
- ◆ They may lose interest in activities that had been enjoyed.
- ◆ There may be a marked shift in appearance.
- ◆ A child's marks in school may go down, may not want to go to school, begin skipping school, may not want to go on the school bus, change their normal route when walking to or from school, or be worried about walking to or from school.
- ◆ Children may avoid extracurricular activities.
- ◆ Their books or clothing may be destroyed, or they may have scratches or bruises, which they can't fully explain.
- ◆ Some children become surly towards family members, and may bully siblings or weaker children. They may avoid family members and friends.
- ◆ They may ask for money or steal money, or valuable items may go missing in attempts to pay off or bribe the bullies
- ◆ They may start getting anonymous text messages, or hide on-line activity, including erasure of online history.
- ◆ Received cell phone calls or texts suddenly increase or are received at odd hours

## **BULLYING MYTHS**

Our culture is permeated with myths that allow bullying to persist. Partly, this is due to the long-term effects of the bullying that we experience, as instigator, victim or witness throughout our lives. Individually and collectively we assign meaning and rationale for the abuse that we experience. Our social structures, e.g. stories, myths, assist in the process by transmitting common misunderstandings about bullying which keep the process alive, and distract from addressing the lasting internal conflict that comes from exposure to abuse.

The # 1 common myth is one that every child answers without hesitation when we ask what advice he's received regarding how to manage bullying. ***Just ignore it.*** "Ignore it" is advice that's been passed from parents to children endlessly. This advice is based upon what happens between peers when they tease one another. It also can be useful in some of the early, testing phases of bullying.

However, for ongoing abuse, it fails on two levels. Will not stop the abuse because the reward structure of bullying does NOT depend on the apparent pain of the victim. A good audience is just as rewarding. So too is the internal experience of superiority. As every child I've asked will attest, "It doesn't work"

The second level that this advice fails on is that children, upon trying the advice, quickly conclude that since ignoring doesn't work, then the problem must be personal to them. The blame for the abuse becomes internalized with all the emotional, social, physical and academic damage that can follow from this. Bullying evokes a sense of difference and isolation. Ineffective solutions compound this effect and shut-down future communication about the abuse.

Myth 2 Stand up to a bully once and he'll back down and leave you alone. For those kids fortunate enough to have the physical strength, social support, and confidence to do so, this can be very effective. However, this advice ignores that bullies choose their targets base on a disparity in strength, power. Most targets do not have the resources to stand up to their tormentor. The power difference needs to be re-balanced by adult intervention

Myth #3 Bullies must themselves be bullied, perhaps by older siblings, or by parents. Or they must have a significant lack of self esteem or other weakness from which they compensate by bullying another. Sometimes this is true, but not necessarily. Poor limit setting by authorities such as parents and school personnel are just as common a root cause. An inflated sense of self, grandiosity and entitlement are a potent a source for aggressive behavior.

But so too is ignorance, poor impulse control, need to belong to a social group. Bullies, or better said, bullying behavior comes in many flavors and therefore has many remedies. Efforts to rebuild self-esteem in chronic bullies have proven wholly ineffective.

Myth #4 If the target of abuse changes to be more like the abuser, the abuse will cease. If only the recipient of bullying was a better athlete, more attractive then everything would be better. These assume that the content of the bullying is the reason for the bullying. The reason for bullying is the experience of power over another. It is true that having a supportive peer group does provide some protection against being targeted by those who would bully.

Myth #5 Victim kids are too sensitive and are taking simple teasing as bullying.

Yes and No. Children on the autism spectrum can be very literal in their interpretations of social events. Youth with ADHD often already feel different from peers and have difficulty modulating their emotions. However, those with fewer emotional and social supports, i.e. fewer friends, are often the targets of bullying

Myth #6 The parents of children who bully will never listen or get involved.

False...Many parents are unaware of their children's behavior and will respond appropriately when informed.

Myth #7 Geographic cures never work.

Moving to another school or community is sometimes the only cure for situations where an ineffective administration does not rebalance power and provide consequences for those who would abuse their peers.

Myth #8 Bullying toughens kids up

This harkens back to the idea that bullying is a social means to correct antisocial behavior. Bullying IS antisocial behavior. Instead, bullying tends to make targets more reactive as incidents hit upon the same internal "sore spot".

Myth #9 Bullying is a phase. Kids will grow out of it.

Without consistent limits, children who bully will persist. Their abilities to have intimate relationships and to manage social situations will suffer. The life-long outlook for bullies is not good. If bullies don't learn how to change their behavior, the pattern of bullying behavior often becomes a habit as the bully gets older.

Bullies have average social popularity up to approximately age 14 or 15. In fact, some children even look up to bullies in some ways because they are powerful and do what they want to get their way with their peers. However, by late adolescence, the bully's popularity begins to wane. By senior high school, if a bully is still attending school, his or her peers group includes other bullies, or more seriously, he or she has developed or is developing gang alliances. By late high school, schoolyard bullying is a rare occurrence, but what takes its place is more serious.

By age 24, up to sixty percent of people who are identified as childhood bullies have at least one criminal conviction. A study spanning 35 years by psychologist E. Eron at the University of Michigan found that children who were named by their school mates, **at age eight**, as the worst bullies of the school were often bullies throughout their lives. In this longitudinal study of bullies, many of these children, as adults, required more support than their age mates from government agencies. For example, these children later had more court convictions, more alcoholism, more antisocial personality disorders and used more of the mental health services than the other children. Bullies identified by age 8 are six times more likely to be convicted of a crime by the age of 24 and 5 times more likely than non-bullies to end up with serious criminal records by the age of thirty.



Myth #10 Only boys bully.  
Fortunately this myth has been shattered in recent years

Myth #11 Only weaklings, nerds and outcasts are bullied.  
It is true that those with fewer social supports are more likely to be targeted, but anyone can be chosen as the target of bullying behavior.

Myth #12 Only victims are affected by bullying  
See Myth #9.

Intervening successfully in a bullying situation requires a careful assessment of the dynamics of the situation. Here parents are often too close to the situation to be objective in their assessments. Moreover, school administrators are often more receptive when dealing with professionals who do not carry strong emotional responses into the discussion.

### **Guiding Principles**

Since bullying is about POWER, we listen to reports of bullying with a few questions in mind: For example, **“Where is the power?”** Knowing this helps to generate potential responses and also helps to distinguish between bullying and peer-to-peer teasing.

We also wonder **“What kind of power is being abused here?”** Is this physical intimidation, the abuse of social status, group size, intellectual status? Knowing this can help suggest what kinds of intervention would be most effective.

For example, if the abuser is employing the power of social standing, an authority who can identify ways that the abusers social status could be damaged will be more likely to be successful. As one school administrator put it, “When I’m dealing with someone who is completely intractable, I find leverage in the things that will make them hurt.” When it was clear that three girls were abusing their social status in targeting a fourth student, this administrator made it clear that attendance at the high school’s major social events would be in jeopardy if the abuse continued.

This leads to the second guiding principle:

**The goal of intervention is to empower the targeted child.** It is extremely tempting for many parents and others who get involved to become angry with the target of the bullying. Parents get over-identified with their child and feel disappointed that their child is not more popular or better able to manage conflicts. Sometimes their personal history leads them to identify as a victim. This identification triggers rage and they are inclined to blast away at parents, children and school personnel. Lost in the rampage is the child who very often has a much better appreciation for the political and interpersonal connections of the situation.

### **When formulating an intervention, we usually first look for ways to put the child into a leadership position.**

In a recent exchange, the mother of an 11 year old boy, feeling guilty that she’d not done more already to stop her son from being abused, asserted her intention to publicly confront the bullying child the next time she witnessed him abusing her son. This was entirely understandable, and could possibly even be effective, but only temporarily. It was also exactly what her son feared she would do. He would have experienced this as completely humiliating with long lasting repercussions. Instead, he wanted to learn how to handle the situation himself. It took some convincing to help mother understand that her protective instincts would need to be rechanneled in order for her son to grow.

So we begin a careful assessment of the situations where bullying occurs. Who initiates it? Who participates? Who supports it? Who observes? How long has it persisted? Are there other situations in which the child is also abused? Are there stereotypical forms for the abuse? What adult resources are available? What kinds of power differences exist between those who bully and the target of the abuse? What social strengths does the target have? What kinds of social support exist for the target? Is it possible to begin with a child-based intervention or is the abuse at a level that requires adult intervention? If adult intervention is required, where what

should be the first line of approach? What would be some potential secondary strategies? It is very important to have several strategies in mind because it is likely that many will need to be employed before we are successful.

The good news is that most bullying situations can be rectified using a thorough, persistent, supportive approach. Many schools are now very sensitized to the emotional and legal consequences of the old hand-off policy. We have recently had many school personnel take effective, proactive role in establishing a safe environment for all their students. Collaboration between the targeted child, parents and a trained mental health professional can help a young person gain mastery in a situation that once seemed impossible and endless.

For more help, send us an [email] or contact us at 973-734-0780, ext 8.  
[Hyperlink here](#)

## RESOURCES

**Best Friends, Worst Enemies**, Michael Thompson, Catherine O'Neill Grace, & Lawrence J Cohen, Ballentine Books, 2001

**7 Ways to block a cyberbully.** DVD Learning Zone Express, 2008

**Stop Bullying Now Video Tool Kit** DVD US Dept of Health and Human Services

**And works can hurt forever.** James Garbarino and Ellen deLara, Free Press 2002

**Bullies, Targets and Witnesses.** SuEllen Fried and Paula Fried M. Evans and Co. 2003

**The Bully, the Bullied, and the Bystander.** Barbara Coloroso, Harper Resource 2003

**Your Child: Bully or Victim? Understanding and ending school Yard Tyranny.** Peter Sheras, Ph.D. Fireside 2002.

**Childhood Bullying and Teasing,** by Dorothea M Ross, Ph.D. (American Counseling Association, 1996 1-800-422-2648)

**Bullying, Changing the Course of Your Child's Life,** by William Voors (Hazelden, 2000)

**Bullying At School,** by Dan Olweus (Blackwell, 1993)

**Cyberbullying and Cyber Threats,** Nancy Willard, Research Press 2007

**Cyber safe kids, cyber savvy teens,** Nancy Willard, Jossey-Bass 2007

**Totally Wired What teens and tweens are really doing online.** Anastasia Goodstein Jossey-Bass 2007

### For Teens:

**The Real Deal** Bullying. Joanne Mattern, Heinemann Library, 2009

**The Beckoners.** Carrie Mac, Orca Books, 2004

### For Children:

**Nancy Drew: Secret Identity.** Carolyn Keene, Aladdin Paperbacks, 2008

**An American Girl Chrissa Stands Strong** DVD American Girl, HBO .2009

**Bully on the Bus,** by Carl Bosch (Parenting Press, 1988)

**The Amazing Frecktacle,** by Ross Venokur (Delacorte Press, 1999)

**I am not a short adult,** Marilyn Burns (Little, Brown, 1977)

**Reluctantly Alice,** By Phyllis Naylor (Atheneum, 1991)

**Wendy and the Bullies**, by Nancy K. Robinson (Scholastic, 1991)

**Joshua T. Bates Takes Charge**, by Susan Shreve (Knopf, 1993)

**The Shorty Society**, by Sheri Cooper Sinykin (Puffin, 1994)

**Stick Up For Yourself**, by Kaufman, Raphael, & Espeland (Free Spirit, 1999)

