



Problems with Bullying and What to do About It

By Rich Bayer, Ph.D.

It happens every day. A big kid comes up to a little kid and hits him, or calls him names, or demands that he fork over his lunch money. Often the big kid has a “buddy” or two backing him up, watching, laughing, encouraging him.

We’re all familiar with this scene.

It’s called bullying. When it occurs, somebody gets hurt—emotionally, physically, or both.

Of course, there’s the emotional pain suffered by the victim. In my clinical practice, I’ve treated many who were victims of childhood bullies. I’ve also treated a few who were bullies. The bullies tend to have their own problems as adults, usually because they continue their habit of bullying.

What’s the prevalence of bullying? In a sample of 15,000 students in U.S. schools in grades six to ten, 30% reported moderate to frequent involvement in bullying. The highest incidence occurred in middle school.

Other studies have shown that:

- Every day in the U.S. about 160,000 students miss school due to fear of bullying.
- 14% of those who experience severe bullying suffer lifelong psychiatric problems.
- 22% of students who experience bullying have academic problems.
- Children who are bullies are six times more likely to have a criminal conviction by age 24.

A Definition

“Bullying,” is defined by the US Center of Mental Health Services as, “repeated acts of physical, emotional, or social behavior that are intentional, controlling, and hurtful.”

Studies show that these acts usually occur in and around school buildings—in the schoolyards, corridors, or bathrooms—during school breaks. The acts themselves include hitting, pushing, and kicking, as well as indirect behaviors such as threatening, name-calling, or exclusion. Bullying always involves a power imbalance between the bully and the victim.

What are the long-term effects? Throughout their lives, victims generally feel more insecure, anxious, or depressed than their cohorts, and have higher rates of absenteeism at school or work. Childhood bullies tend to become bullying adults. They’re more likely to become child, or spouse, abusers, and more likely to exhibit criminal behavior including involvement in vandalism and drug abuse.

Identifying and Helping the Victim

To determine if your child is a victim of bullying, look for these signs:

- Is socially withdrawn
- Has few friends
- Feels picked on, isolated, or rejected
- Often complains of illness to avoid going to school
- His or her possessions are often damaged or “lost”
- Wants to take some kind of weapon to school for protection
- Talks about running away
- Talks about hurting themselves or others

To help children who are victims, first assure them that it’s not their fault. Often victims feel they are somehow to blame for the bullying, but that’s not true.

Let the child know that he or she will not face the bully alone. Get the school involved. Have the victim tell an adult every time he or she is bullied. In school, it’s best to report to a teacher or administrator. At home, report to a parent.

Prepare a plan with the child. It may go something like this: “When the bullying starts, tell the bully not to do that, that it hurts you, then walk (don’t run) away and tell an adult.”

There are some important things that parents should not do. Don’t tell the victim, “You need to work this out with the bully,” or “You need to beat the bully up.” Already the child is lower in power and cannot do this. The key is to get adults to intervene.

Also don’t try to mediate between the victim and the bully. This could further victimize the child.

More importantly, bolster the positive side of those who are victims. Strengthen their self-confidence by stimulating the development of talents or other positive traits. Help them to join groups of students of same age who have similar interests (music, sports, or hobbies). Physical development training is especially helpful. Encourage your child to make a friend and perhaps invite the friend over. This reduces social isolation that makes victimization easier. Encourage your child to make friends outside of the immediate family.

Identifying and Helping the Bully

Look for these sign to determine if your child is a bully:

- Attempts to dominate others
- Is a poor loser
- Is a poor winner—upon winning, will boast or become arrogant
- Has poor anger control
- Is a discipline problem
- Derives satisfaction from others’ discomfort
- Lacks empathy

To help a bully, first tell him or her that bullying is not okay. Let the bully know that there will be penalties for bullying.

Help him or her to understand the impact of bullying on the victim. Describe what it's like from the victim's point of view.

Teach the bully how to deal with frustration and anger in ways that don't involve hurting other people. Often psychological counseling can help bullies learn ways to change their behavior.

Bullying is one of those behaviors that affect other people. It not only affects the victim adversely but also, if left unchecked, becomes a life pattern that has serious consequences for the bully as well.

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