

NO
ROOM
for
BULLIES

From the Classroom to Cyberspace

Teaching Respect, Stopping Abuse,
and Rewarding Kindness

editors

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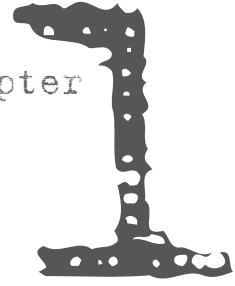
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chapter



By Michael Handwerk, Ph.D.

Defining the Problem

What does bullying mean to you?

How you define bullying probably depends on your experiences. Maybe you were the kid who always had your books knocked out of your hands. To you, bullying involves acts of physical aggression. Maybe you were on the receiving end of snickers and whispers every time you spoke up in class. If so, you may be more sensitive to verbal harassment.

Bullying, as defined by the *American Heritage Dictionary*, means “to treat in an overbearing or intimidating manner.” Barbara Coloroso, author of *The Bully, the Bullied, and the Bystander*, describes bullying as always involving three elements: an imbalance of power, an intent to harm, and threats of further aggression. Our definition of bullying is *repeated acts* of aggression or harm (kicking, pushing, excluding, spreading rumors, etc.) by individuals who have *more power* than their victims. By power, we mean advantages in strength, confidence, status, or aggressiveness. However you choose to describe this ubiquitous phenom-

enon, one thing is certain: Bullying takes many forms, and its consequences damage individuals and learning communities.

As hard as it may be to admit, most of us have behaved like bullies at one time or another, both as children and as adults. This behavior may have involved gossiping, teasing, intimidating, or socially isolating someone. Perhaps we ostracized or excluded a classmate because he or she had unusual hair, wore unfashionable clothes, talked funny, or had some other perceived flaw. Many of us would learn, of course, that acting like a bully was no defense against becoming a victim.

You, no doubt, have at least one memory from your school days when you were the target of a bully's abusive attention. If you can't recall being a victim, surely you remember playing the role of bystander. It was probably just easier to stand and laugh or sit quietly and watch as some other poor soul was picked on, all the while feeling relieved that you were not the one being humiliated.

The bullies that we remember from our youth are a lot like those of today, with one big exception. Today's bullies have new weapons of intimidation at their fingertips. The information superhighway has created avenues for abuse that were not possible when we were growing up. Bullies are now lashing out at their victims using instant messaging on the Internet and text messaging on cell phones. One simple click of a button sends a lie, rumor, or threat to endless numbers of people. We call it "bullying on steroids." It is yet another troubling example of the challenges parents and educators face in the fight to stop bullying.

As we crisscross the country conducting workshops with educators or visiting with parents, we hear a lot about blame. Teachers tell us it's the parents who are at fault. Parents tell us the schools do a lousy job of protecting their children. Children tell us most adults don't want to get involved, and when they do,

the situation only worsens. In our experience, there is some truth to what each group says. But playing the blame game will never solve the problem.

The simple truth is this: Bullying can be stopped only if all the stakeholders – from the classroom teacher to the cafeteria cook to the vice principal to the bus driver to the concerned neighbor to the child to the parent – become more vigilant, more skilled, and more proactive. No longer is it good enough to wait until someone is assaulted or a horrifying act of abuse occurs before awareness is raised, accountability is demanded, and action is promised. Reactionary responses are of little consolation or comfort to a victim. And in bullying, all the players – the bully, the bullied, and the bystander – are victims.

How can a bully be a victim? In the short term, research shows that bullies tend to engage in other problem behaviors such as drinking and smoking.¹ Their academic achievement suffers, too. In the long term, without proper intervention, bullies are at greater risk of being incarcerated as adults. In one study, nearly 60 percent of males who were labeled as chronic bullies in junior high (grades 6 through 9) had at least one criminal conviction by the age of 24. And more than 30 percent had multiple convictions!²

Those who are bullied face dangerous consequences as well. The term “bullycide” was coined to label suicides committed by people because they had been bullied. Depression, anxiety, and alienation can dog victims into adulthood, undermining their relationships and self-confidence, as illustrated by the teacher described in the introduction.

Bystanders have obstacles, too. Fear may be the biggest. Bystanders may hesitate to defend a victim, even a friend, out of fear of what the bully might do to them. They may lack the courage to intervene because stepping up may mean standing alone.

Bystanders may never have been taught how to respond. Sadly, this may partially explain why bystanders often root for the perpetrator and feed the cycle of abuse.

As parents and educators, we certainly can do more to change our children's social environments. We can promote respect, not ridicule. We can ask for involvement, not inaction. We can be partners instead of adversaries, working toward prevention rather than placing blame. That is the message we want to share with you. The perception that bullying is a problem that can't be solved is a false belief. Bullying is a problem that must be solved. Together, we can put an end to the continuous intimidation and harassment that threaten our children's physical and emotional well-being.

In order to address the problem of bullying, we must first dispel many of the myths that surround this issue. Myths are dangerous. They can blind us to the facts. They can lead us toward solutions that are ineffective or impractical. They can focus our attention away from real threats and lull us into a false sense of security. Not surprisingly, there are nearly as many misconceptions about bullying as there are bullies.

To bring a little more clarity to this issue, we've prepared a "Fact or Fiction" Quiz. The following statements are a chance for you to see how well you can separate rumor from reality. You'll find the answers on pages 14-17.

Don't worry if you don't quite manage to score 100 percent. The purpose of the exercise is simply to highlight some truths about who the main players in this drama are, how they act or react to situations, and how their actions can have profound and lasting consequences. There is much more to be said. In the next chapter, you will see profiles of two different types of bullies and types of victims. You will also see why bystanders can be either a child's biggest ally in stopping the cycle of abuse or his or her biggest nemesis.

FACT OR FICTION QUIZ

1. Bullying is a male behavior. **FACT OR FICTION?**
2. Larger classes and larger schools promote bullying. **FACT OR FICTION?**
3. Bullies are usually socially isolated. **FACT OR FICTION?**
4. Bullying is a normal, unpleasant part of growing up. **FACT OR FICTION?**
5. If told their child is a bully, parents will accept it. **FACT OR FICTION?**
6. Manipulation, gossip, and exclusion are common bullying tactics girls use. **FACT OR FICTION?**
7. Bullycide is a term used to describe a suicide caused by bullying. **FACT OR FICTION?**
8. Most acts of bullying are never reported. **FACT OR FICTION?**
9. Bystanders who observe bullying violence can be emotionally affected. **FACT OR FICTION?**
10. Bystanders are always fearful of the bully. **FACT OR FICTION?**
11. Once a bully, always a bully. **FACT OR FICTION?**



FACT OR FICTION QUIZ

- 1. Bullying is a male behavior...** **FICTION**

Bullying defies gender. However, studies show some differences in how bullying is acted out by boys and girls. For example, males are more likely to engage in overt acts, such as punching, kicking, and posturing, while females report using more covert behaviors, such as gossip, rumor, and exclusion. Of course, these behaviors are never gender exclusive.
- 2. Larger classes and larger schools promote bullying...** **FICTION**

Research suggests that there is no correlation between larger classes or schools and increased incidents of bullying. One Canadian study actually found that students in small schools bullied more. According to the researcher, the findings imply that "Victims of bullying in small schools may be 'repeated victims' because it is more difficult for offenders to select different victims."³
- 3. Bullies are usually socially isolated...** **FICTION**

Research studies show that bullies often enjoy higher social prestige among their classmates. In one large-scale study, bullies indicated a "greater ease of making friends" than did those who were victims or both bullies and victims.⁴

answers

- 4. Bullying is a normal, unpleasant part of growing up...**

FICTION

Abusive relationships are not natural, nor should they ever be accepted as normal.

- 5. If told their child is a bully, parents will accept it...**

FICTION

Admitting your child is a bully is unlikely given its stigma after high-profile cases of school violence. As parents, we are reluctant to think our children would act in such a way. This underscores the critical need to obtain objective documentation of bullying incidents, especially in schools.

- 6. Manipulation, gossip, and exclusion are common bullying tactics girls use...**

FACT

Studies show that girls are more likely than boys to engage in covert behaviors that undermine relationships (gossiping, backstabbing, excluding, etc.).

- 7. Bullycide is a term used to describe a suicide caused by bullying....**

FACT

The term "bullycide" was coined by two authors who co-wrote a book by the same name. Suicide is the third-leading cause of death for Americans between the ages of 15 and 24.⁵ While it's not known how many suicides result from bullying, experts believe it is often a contributing factor

answers

for adolescents. Risk factors for suicide include feelings of hopelessness and social isolation – two emotions that bullying victims know well.

8. Most acts of bullying are never reported... FACT

Research suggests that bullying behaviors often go unreported for several reasons. Victims feel ashamed or are reluctant to tell out of fear the problem will escalate. In our experience, that fear may be justified. Teachers and parents who react impulsively often end up compounding the problem as much as adults who choose to ignore it.

9. Bystanders who observe bullying violence can be emotionally affected... FACT

Bullying, whether it happens in a school cafeteria or at a neighborhood pool, creates tension and anxiety in children. It has a detrimental effect on the entire social climate. At school, when children do not feel safe, they can't concentrate on learning. Instead, they focus on how to avoid being harassed as they walk to class, ride the bus, or walk home.

10. Bystanders are always fearful of the bully... FICTION

Some bystanders may fear the bully. Others simply don't know what to do, and still others

answers

worry they'll do the wrong thing if they intervene. Bystanders may exacerbate the situation by watching, laughing, and generally encouraging the bully's behavior.

11. Once a bully, always a bully... **FICTION**

No child is a lost cause. With patience, guidance, and instruction, children can be taught how to develop positive relationships with others and satisfy their needs by being assertive rather than aggressive.

answers