

Bullying: It's Not a Right of Passage!

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The classic image of school bullying—a big kid picking on a little kid on the playground—is an oversimplification of a range of cruel behaviors affecting nearly a third of America's school children.

What was once dismissed as an unpleasant but unimportant aspect of growing up is now understood to be a major predictor of long-term problems for both bully and victim, a contributor to the widely held misperception among students that their schools are among the more dangerous places in their environments, and a common thread in the rash of school shootings over the past decade.

Bullying involves three conditions:

- Negative or malicious behavior
- Behavior repeated over time
- An imbalance of strength between the involved parties

While this clearly fits the conventional perception of direct, physical bullying associated with boys, it also encompasses the indirect forms of aggression—gossiping, slander and exclusion more commonly attributed to girls.

Bullying: Myths and Reality

Contrary to a widely held belief that bullying occurs largely en route to and from school, research shows that two to three times as many students are bullied at school, with the majority of incidents occurring outside of classrooms during breaks.

Another assumption about bullying not borne out by research is the image of the bully as a person of low self-esteem who bullies to build his ego. Instead, recent studies show them to have normal or even elevated levels of self-esteem, and to be reasonably popular, though their popularity tends to wane as they reach high school.

Save for their higher-than-assumed self image, the general characteristics of bullies will come as no surprise to anyone who has encountered one:

- They have a more favorable view of violence than their peers
- They are often aggressive toward adults, including parents and teachers.
- They have a marked need to dominate other students by means of force and threats
- They are quick-tempered, impulsive and intolerant of frustration
- They tend to be callous and unfeeling toward their victims
- They find it difficult to conform to rules
- They are good at talking themselves out of trouble

Victims tend to fall into two categories—passive/submissive and provocative.

- Passive/submissive victims fit the profile of the popular conception of bullying—unassertive, careful, sensitive from an early age, and, perhaps, smaller and weaker than their peers. They also frequently manifest increased anxiety, insecurity and negative self-image due to their victimization. What may be most significant, however, is that they have few or no friends
- Provocative victims account for between 10 and 20 percent of bullying targets. They are quick-tempered, restless, clumsy, immature, disruptive and unable to concentrate. They are often disliked for their irritating behavior by both their fellow students and their teachers. They may be harassed by their entire class. Provocative victims are frequently bullies in their own right, taking out the anger and humiliation from their own oppression on those still more vulnerable.

The mechanics of bullying are simple and cruel: isolate the victim, prove his powerlessness, and thereby establish a “right” to persecute him. This process demonstrates one of the less often emphasized aspects of bullying—its group nature.

While a single individual’s discreet physical persecution of another may fall within the realm of bullying, it is probably more accurate to describe these encounters in terms of their component antisocial and criminal acts—assault, battery, extortion and theft. A bully without an audience isn’t a bully. He is a petty criminal.

Bullying is typically a public event, staged by the bully to humiliate the victim. In one study of bullying in early grades, 85 percent of bullying incidents occurred in the presence of others.

Why bullying occurs

Research suggests that the increase in bullying that occurs in the transition from elementary to middle school is associated with two social aspects of the onset of adolescence:

- Growing desire for autonomy from parents
- Increased reliance on peers as the major social support

Advocates of this view speculate that lack of clear guidelines regarding how to achieve social status in a new school leads to a reliance on the social stratification achieved through bullying.

Some interpretations of group bullying go a step further, arguing that it is a worldwide phenomenon that serves as a sort of aggressive ritual, through which social relationships are

constructed and affirmed—albeit at severe expense to the victim. They note, in support of this thesis, that clowning and laughter are more likely to accompany bullying than anger or serious fighting.

One author likens bullying to professional wrestling, which he sees as a kind of morality play, in which a stoic hero suffers at the hands of an unprincipled, brutal villain, who is ultimately and justly vanquished, amid great histrionics, by the hero. If that analogy is to be accepted, it makes bullying all the more objectionable, since the bullying victim rarely achieves a morally edifying victory over his oppressors.

A closer analogy for the advocate of the ritual character of bullying would be to view the victim as a classic scapegoat—a weak and marginalized individual who is punished for allegedly embodying some threat to the integrity or dignity of the group. This interpretation elevates bullying from merely odious to profoundly disturbing. While 80 to 90 percent of students indicate that watching bullying makes them uncomfortable, most seem to tolerate the discomfort rather well. Fifty-four percent of the time they reinforce the bullying by passively watching and 21 percent of the remainder actively participates. Only 25 percent of the time do they intervene on the victim's behalf, even though doing so ends the bullying attack within 10 seconds in a majority (57%) of instances.

A bully frequently has a built-in audience of henchmen who accompany him, assuring that his acts will be applauded and that the victim—and perhaps the bystanders as well—are safely cowed.

The High Cost of Bullying

The negative impact of being bullied is significant. Victims come to view school as an unhappy and unsafe place. Seven percent of American 8th graders stay home from school at least once a month because of bullying. The already great likelihood of social isolation is compounded by the concerns of peers that they will lose social status by associating with the victim, or risk becoming victims themselves. In the long run, chronic victims of bullying can suffer depression and low self-esteem that persists into adulthood.

Pure victims and bully victims suffer about equally under their oppressors. A recent study of 1,600 grade-school children found that victims and bully/victims were at an increased risk of coughs, colds, aches, pains, nausea and psychosomatic problems like nightmares and bed-wetting. Their parents also reported they were more likely to fake illnesses to avoid going to school. Pure bullies, by comparison, proved healthier and mentally stronger than those they harass, suggesting, in the words of the study, that bullies “have a constitution that allows them to be dominant in inappropriate ways.”

Bullying victims may derive some bitter satisfaction from learning that the long-term psychological harm they suffer from the experience will be more than matched by the negative

trajectory likely to mark the life of their tormentors. The seminal studies of bullying conducted in the 1990s found that 60 percent of boys identified as bullies in grades 6-9 had at least one criminal conviction by age 24, and 40 percent had three or more convictions.

The pain of physical violence—even the psychological scars it leaves—may be far less than that inflicted by relational or indirect aggression in the age of the Internet, e-mail, instant messaging and blogs. Gossiping, shunning and slander, the weapons of the relational aggressor, have been rendered immensely more hurtful by the ability of relational bullies to access these virtually universal forms of communication. The cruel remark formerly whispered in a hallway can now be broadcast anonymously to the entire school or community almost instantly.

Clearly, the widely held view among adults that bullying is merely an unpleasant but normal aspect of childhood, or even a “rite of passage,” is unwarranted. It is not “normal” to be the chronic victim of aggression, nor is it “normal” to persecute the weak and isolated. Both events are common enough in society, but they remain, deplorable in the first instance and reprehensible, if not criminal, in the second.

The antisocial character of bullying is even acknowledged, to a degree, by the bully himself, in his enlistment of others as active or passive participants in the behavior, and by the aforementioned fact that any intercession on the side of the victim usually ends the bullying almost immediately.

It follows that the first obligation of those observing an instance of bullying—physical or relational—is to refuse to participate. To laugh at the predicament of someone being harassed by a bully, or to take part in the slandering of a peer amounts to condoning the behavior.

Are You Part of the Problem or the Solution?

Students seem to be aware of bullying’s impropriety. Surveys of students in the late-90s found that 43 percent of students said they would try to help the victim of a bully, 33 percent felt they should help, even though they didn’t, and only 24 percent felt bullying was none of their business. However, there is some ambiguity in their feelings on the subject. A majority of those surveyed felt that victims were at least partially responsible for bringing the bullying on themselves and that bullying toughened a weak person. Some even expressed the view that bullying taught victims appropriate behavior.

It is quite illogical, of course, to believe that a behavior can be both wrong and deserved. That paradox is readily resolved by an appeal to self-interest. If you endorse the use of such tactics against someone else, you are left with no argument against their application to you. It is not a coincidence that virtually every ethical system, religious or secular, contains some variation of the Golden Rule.

If you observe someone being victimized by a bully, self-interest dictates that you intercede on behalf of the victim, if that can be done safely, or that you walk away and enlist the help of an adult in authority.

That raises the issue of whether it is right to “snitch” on a classmate, even one you know is doing wrong. The answer, stated bluntly, is that you are in school, not the mafia. It is no reflection on

your honor to try to help someone who is being hurt, physically or psychologically. Indeed, it is dishonorable not to do so. Mature people report harmful behavior to the proper authorities, if discretion prohibits them from intervening directly.

Your own safety in making such a report is a consideration, of course. Report bullying to an adult you trust to keep the source of the report confidential. You're trying to be a good citizen, not a hero.

There is a secondary benefit to be derived from reporting bullying to school authorities: adults commonly underestimate how much of it occurs. The more bullying is brought to their attention, the stronger the motivation for establishment of effective policies to reduce it.

A second way to reduce bullying is to be inclusive of classmates who could easily be left out. Physical size is less a factor in the targeting by bullies than the perception that the potential victim has few or no close friends.

Since discretion is ever the better part of valor in dealing with bullies, it is fair to ask why students who are not bullies or victims shouldn't just stay out of the matter altogether, rather than working toward elimination of bullying from schools. The general answer is that **bullying poisons the school experience for everyone** -and possibly life beyond graduation, as well.

- Bullying is a distraction from learning—the reason you are in school in the first place
- Everyone feels less safe and secure in an environment where bullying is tolerated.
- Bullying children often grow up to be bullying adults, abusing their own spouses and children.
- Bullies may branch out into other delinquent behavior—gang membership, drug abuse, vandalism, etc.
- Targeted children may carry the anxiety, depression, social insecurity and low self-esteem inflicted by the bully into adulthood.
- Bullying has been linked to a number of school shooting incidents carried out by bullying victims]

How Do You Avoid Becoming a Target?

You are the descendant of thousands of generations of ancestors who managed to survive when it really *was* a jungle out there. So your instincts for survival in the far less threatening environment of your school should be more than adequate—assuming you obey them.

- **Avoid the bullies.** Teachers and administrators may be oblivious to who is a bully, but students know perfectly well. If you are just entering a school, befriend students who have been there a while, and learn who the troublemakers are.
- **Avoid places where bullies hang out.** Why tempt fate?
- **Be hard to predict.** If you think a bully may be trying to set up a confrontation en route to or from school, thwart him by varying your route, departure time, arrival time, etc. Bullies aren't generally blessed with much patience. He may decide that you are more trouble to pin down than you're worth.

- **There is safety in numbers.** Walk to school with other people. Carpool to school, and avoid being alone in the parking lot. Try not to be alone in hallways, locker rooms, restrooms or empty classrooms
- **If you've got it, DON'T flaunt it.** Never bring expensive possessions or large amounts of money to school with you. Bullies pick on people they can take things from. If you are confronted by a bully demanding something of yours, don't fight over it. Nothing you have is worth a serious injury.
- **Don't act like a victim.** Predators learn very quickly that they will be most successful if they single out and concentrate on the most vulnerable looking members of the herd. Walk with a confident stride, with your head up and an air of self-assurance and you are far less likely to be singled out than if you skulk along the edges of the crowd, eyes downcast, as if you are trying to become invisible.

What to Do If You Become a Target

Let's start with the two things you absolutely should **NOT** do if you are singled out by a bully:

- **Confront or fight the bully.** Bullies are generally cunning cowards. They don't allow themselves to be confronted unless they have all the advantages. You are virtually certain to be beaten, humiliated or both. Bullies are usually accomplished liars, too, so even if you should win the fight, you'll probably be the one who gets into trouble.
- **Carry a weapon.** This is absolutely the **WORST** thing you can do. You are far more likely to be caught with it than you are to use it, with expulsion or arrest the probable result. Worse still, there is almost no conceivable schoolyard situation in which deadly force would be legally permissible, so just threatening to use the weapon will land you in jail. And, worst of all, you could actually use the weapon, with you or someone else ending up in the hospital, dead or in prison. If you think the bullies you encounter in school are bad, just imagine how much worse the bullies in jail would be!

Don't waste time and energy thinking of ways to defeat a bully. The potential risks outweigh any potential benefits. Concentrate instead on:

- Avoiding the bully
- Depriving him of the reaction he wants
- If necessary, bringing adults in to resolve the situation

If you find yourself confronted by a bully, the best thing to do is simply walk away, preferably without reacting, as though the bully were invisible and inaudible. That's one response he or she is probably not prepared for.

If your way is blocked, stay calm. The bully is looking for an emotional response—fear, anger, frustration, tears—to prove he is dominating the situation. If you respond calmly and unemotionally, you are denying him what he wants.

Some sources suggest humor as a response. But that approach is of limited practical value. If the humor is directed at the bully, and elicits a laugh at his expense from onlookers, he may react physically. Self-deprecatory humor on the part of the victim may come off as cringing. It would take a truly witty victim to walk the fine psychological line required to defuse a bullying situation with humor.

If you are bullied, make a written record of the event(s).

- Identify the bully and any witnesses
- Record the time date and location of the encounter
- Describe what form the bullying took and what you did in response
- Note where it happened and how often it happened
- Report the bullying to someone in authority. It's part of a teacher or counselor's job to prevent bullying
 - If you're uncomfortable reporting the events, take someone along with you.
 - If you are being physically bullied, ask that your name be kept confidential
 - You can report the bullying when the bully isn't around
 - If you can't tell them in person, write a note.
- If the bully is hurting you physically, see your doctor or school nurse. Ask them to write down your experience and injury so there is an official record.
- Know your legal rights. Consider filing a police complaint or going to the courts to force the bullying to stop.

Be careful who gets your phone number and email address. If someone starts harassing you over the phone or by email, they may be committing a crime. Report it to police.

Make friends. Bullies often single out kids who don't seem to have friends

Join clubs, social groups, sports teams, after-school programs, and church or community groups

Project confidence

- Check out your body language. Walking with your head down, avoiding eye contact, fidgeting and other behavior that suggests uncertainty might cause a bully to single you out.
 - Look self-confident. Hold your head up, look people in the eye. Walk proudly and a bully will be less likely to choose you as a victim
 - If you're confronted by a bully, talk to him
- Speak firmly and confidently, so you don't seem intimidated. Prepare something to say in advance

In an extreme situation, you might want to consider assertiveness training, which will equip you to respond to verbal harassment.

How to Help Someone Who Is Being Bullied

For starters, don't join in. Don't try to make yourself fit in by excluding others.

Be a friend to someone who is being bullied. Urge them to tell someone who can help. Offer to go with them if they are reluctant.

Don't question the person about why they are being bullied. It may make them defensive, thinking you're blaming them or that they did something wrong.

If they refuse to report the bullying, do it yourself. You can keep your name confidential.

Don't confront the bully in a way that could lead to a fight. You might get hurt.

Observe the behavior of the person being bullied, and watch for any harmful signs.

- If someone threatens suicide, take him or her seriously. Suicide is the third leading cause of death among those under 24. Tell an adult about your concerns.
- Try to notice whether the victim is attending school regularly. An estimated seven percent of 8th graders have skipped school to avoid a bully.
- Bullying can also result in self-destructive behavior like taking drugs.