



Bullies and Victims: A Primer for Parents

BY KATHY ROBISON, EDS, NCSP, *Minneapolis Public Schools, MN*

Bullying in childhood and adolescence is a significant problem, affecting about one in five students in elementary through high school. Bullying is aggressive, hurtful, and sometimes violent behavior that always involves an imbalance of power or strength. Victims of bullying have difficulty defending themselves. In a study of 15,686 students in the United States in grades 6-10, approximately 19% reported bullying others, 17% reported being bullied, and 6% reported being both bullies and victims (Nansel et al., 2001).

BULLYING BEHAVIOR, ITS CONSEQUENCES, AND ITS CHALLENGES

There are several different types of bullying, all of which have negative consequences for both bully and victim. Bullying occurs across all ages, socioeconomic classes, races, and cultures. Most bullying occurs in the school environment, and children are more likely to be bullied in elementary school. The nature of bullying presents significant challenges to adults hoping to stop or prevent it.

Types of Bullying

Direct bullying is overt and includes physical aggression (hitting, kicking), verbal aggression (teasing, racial or sexual comments), and nonverbal aggression (threatening gestures). *Indirect* bullying can be physical (getting someone to assault someone else), verbal (spreading rumors), and nonverbal (excluding someone from a group or activity; cyberbullying). Both boys and girls bully others directly and indirectly, but boys are more likely to use physical types of bullying. Girls are more likely to spread rumors and use social exclusion or isolation, a type of bullying also known as *relational aggression*.

Consequences of Bullying

Bullies are more likely to drop out of school, engage in criminal behavior, and later have more difficulty keeping jobs. Victims are more likely to suffer from anxiety, low self-esteem, and depression.

Bullies and victims are not the only ones who are affected by bullying. Bystanders may feel afraid, powerless to stop the bullying, and guilty that they don't help or lack empathy for the victim. Adults may feel frustrated and powerless when they are unable to identify or change bullying behaviors. Parents may feel angry, helpless, and frustrated if their child is the bully or the victim.

Challenges to Stopping Bullying

Many adults mistakenly believe that bullying is an unavoidable part of childhood. Most young children who are bullied do not tell an adult at school. Older students, especially boys, are even less likely to report being bullied, so it is often difficult to know when a child is being victimized and how to intervene in a timely manner. Adults can make a difference by knowing what to look for and by taking action to help both bullies and victims. Children and youth can learn to identify, avoid, and discourage bullying behaviors.

CHARACTERISTICS OF BULLIES AND VICTIMS

Although there are individual differences among bullies and victims, there are some consistent characteristics.

Characteristics of Bullies

Children who bully tend to:

- Have a more positive attitude about violent behaviors
- Watch television programs where violence is endorsed as a way of gaining power

- Lack empathy for their victims
- Have difficulty following rules and often argue with adults
- Behave impulsively
- Have at least average self-esteem
- Have more power, physically or socially, than their victims and may even be regarded as leaders among their peers

Characteristics of Victims of Bullying

Children who are bullied usually:

- Have poorly developed social skills and difficulty with their peer relationships
- Have few friends and may be socially isolated at school
- Are unassertive or vulnerable
- Are insecure and/or have poor self-esteem

Additionally, students with disabilities, special needs, and/or physical differences, and those who speak a first language other than English, are often targets of bullying.

Characteristics of Bully-Victims:

Some children who are bullied also bully others (sometimes referred to as “proactive victims”). These children usually:

- Are anxious and insecure
- Have difficulty concentrating
- Have difficulty reading social cues
- May be hyperactive
- Behave aggressively

Warning Signs That Your Child Might Be a Bully or a Victim

As a parent, it is important to know the warning signs that your child is bullying others or being bullied.

Your child may be a bully if he or she:

- Is likely to argue and to get angry very quickly when confronted
- Takes control of situations quickly and confidently
- Angers easily and quickly shows anger toward others
- Is often very bossy toward peers
- Rarely shows empathy toward others
- Is good at convincing others to follow
- Wants to win, sometimes at any cost
- Likes rough physical play
- Often refuses to cooperate
- Is likely to deny his or her involvement with bullying

Your child may be being bullied if he or she:

- Comes home with damaged clothing, books, or other belongings, or frequently “loses” or “forgets” belongings
- Has unexplained bruises, cuts, or scratches
- Has few friends with whom he or she spends time
- Seems afraid to go to school, ride the school bus, walk to school, or take part in community activities with peers
- Loses interest in school or suddenly does poorly in school
- Seems sad, moody, teary, or depressed when he/she comes home from school
- Complains of a variety of physical ailments (headaches, stomachaches), particularly on school days
- Can’t sleep or complains of bad dreams
- Avoids using the telephone or Internet
- Seems anxious and has low self-esteem
- Talks about suicide

INTERVENTIONS FOR BULLIES AND VICTIMS

It is essential that parents intervene early when their child shows signs of bullying others or appears to be the victim of bullying, in order to prevent long-term negative consequences.

If Your Child Is Bullying Others

- Make it clear to your child that bullying is not okay.
- Hold your child accountable for his behavior.
- Set up clear rules in your household and follow through with logical consequences, such as withdrawing privileges, when those rules are not followed.
- Limit your child’s exposure to violent television programs and/or video games.
- Spend time with your child and pay attention to what she does with friends.
- Support your child’s talents and skills by encouraging positive activities, such as involvement in sports or clubs.
- Reward your child and offer frequent reinforcement for positive behavior.
- If your child has been reported as engaging in bullying behaviors, listen to your child, but check the facts. Children who bully are very good at manipulating.
- If there is evidence that your child has bullied others, take it seriously.
- Talk to your child’s teacher, counselor, or principal and create a clear, consistent message that the bullying must stop.
- If necessary, seek professional help from community mental health providers.

If Your Child Is Being Bullied

- Make sure your child knows that being bullied is not his fault.
- Encourage your child to talk about the bullying experience. Listen.

- Do not criticize your child for how she is responding to the bullying.
- Contact your child's teacher, school counselor, or principal immediately and tell them about your concerns.
- Teach your child ways to stay safe at school, such as telling an adult if he feels threatened.
- Conflict resolution strategies are not effective interventions for bullying. Ask school personnel to use other means of resolving a bullying situation involving your child.
- Encourage your child to pursue friendships at school.
- Find out if your child's school has an anti-bullying program and, if not, encourage the school to begin one.
- Encourage your child to walk with an adult or an older child if she does not feel safe at school or in the neighborhood.
- Identify safe areas (neighbor's home, library, community center) and tell your child to go to one of these areas if he feels threatened.
- Make sure your child has a phone number of an adult who can help.
- Provide your child with a safe and positive home environment.
- If necessary, seek professional help from community mental health providers to support your child.
- Find out if your state has laws regarding bullying or cyberbullying.

CYBERBULLYING

Cyberbullying involves the use of websites, e-mail, text messaging, and cell phones. Children who engage in cyberbullying use electronic forms of communication to spread false rumors, gossip, and make verbal attacks. Although it is important to respect your child's privacy, his or her safety is more important. To prevent cyberbullying:

- Keep your home computer in an area of the house where it is easily viewable.
- Talk to your children about online activities.
- Consider installing parental control software.
- Know your children's passwords and tell them not to give them out to others.
- In general, it is always wise to monitor your children's Internet activity. Let them know that you may review their online communications at any time.

REFERENCE

Nansel, T. R., Overpeck, M., Pilla, R. S., Ruan, W. J., Simons-Morton, B., & Scheidt, P. (2001). Bullying behaviors among U.S. youth: Prevalence and association with psychosocial adjustment. *Journal of the American Medical Association*, 285, 2094–2100.

RECOMMENDED RESOURCES

Print

- Coloroso, B. (2003). *The bully, the bullied and the bystander: Breaking the cycle of violence*. New York: Harper Resource.
- Haber, J. & Glatzer, J. (2007). *Bullyproof your child for life: Protect your child from teasing, taunting, and bullying for good*. New York: Penguin.
- Kaufman, G., Raphael, L., & Espeland, P. (1999). *Stick up for yourself: Every kid's guide to personal power & positive self-esteem*. Minneapolis, MN: Free Spirit Publishing.
- Romain, T. (1997). *Bullies are a pain in the brain*. Minneapolis, MN: Free Spirit Publishing.
- Simmons, R. (2003). *Odd girl out: The hidden culture of aggression in girls*. New York: Harcourt.
- Voors, W. (2000). *The parents' book about bullying: Changing the course of your child's life*. Minneapolis, MN: Hazelden. (Available in Spanish: *El libro que odos los padres deben conocer*, 2005.)

Online

- Cyberbullying.org: <http://www.cyberbullying.org>
- Girls Health: <http://www.4girls.gov>
- Kid Power: <http://www.kidpower.org/>
See "Articles."
- National Association of School Psychologists: <http://www.nasponline.org>
See "Resources."
- National Mental Health Information Center: <http://mentalhealth.samhsa.gov>
- Schwab Learning: <http://www.SchwabLearning.org>
See "Behavior."
- Stop Bullying Now: <http://stopbullyingnow.hrsa.gov>
- Teaching Tolerance (Southern Poverty Law Center): <http://www.teachingtolerance.org>

Websites That Attract Cyberbullying

Parents are urged to carefully monitor children's access to the following (and similar) sites, which have been identified as sites where cyberbullying occurs:

- Facebook: <http://www.facebook.com>
- Friendster: <http://www.friendster.com>
- MySpace: <http://www.myspace.com>
- YouTube: <http://www.youtube.com>

Kathy Robison, EdS, NCSP, is a school psychologist in the Minneapolis Public Schools, serving K-8 students.

© 2010 National Association of School Psychologists, 4340 East West Highway, Suite 402, Bethesda, MD 20814—(301) 657-0270