

Bullying in the School Setting

Imagine waking up every morning afraid of what is going to happen to you if you leave your home. For millions of school-aged children this is a reality they have to live with on a daily basis. This issue of the [Mental Health Matters](#) will address a very real problem of bullying in the school setting.

Defining the Problem

Bullying includes a wide variety of behaviors, but all involve a person or a group repeatedly trying to harm someone who is weaker or more vulnerable. It can involve direct or indirect attacks. Examples of direct attacks are hitting, threatening or intimidating, maliciously teasing and taunting, name-calling, making sexual remarks and stealing or damaging belongings.

Examples of the more subtle, indirect attacks are spreading rumors or encouraging others to reject or exclude someone.

Bullies can be either male or female, and each has a predictable type of behavior. Females have a tendency to bully in emotional ways, whereas males often bully in both emotional and physical ways. Bullying has reached epidemic proportions in American schools and communities.

- Sixty-six percent of youth are teased at least once a month.
- Nearly one-third of youth are bullied at least once a month.
- Six out of 10 American teens witness bullying at least once a day.
- For children in grades 6-10, nearly one in six - or 3.2 million - are victims of bullying each year and 3.7 million are bullies. Bullying is directly linked to prejudice and ignorance. The two main reasons people are bullied are because of appearance and social status. Bullies pick on people they think don't fit in. Reasons may be because of how they look, how they act, their race, their religion or because they think their victim may be gay or lesbian.
- Over the course of a year, nearly one-fourth of students across grades reported that they had been harassed or bullied on school property because of their race, ethnicity, gender, religion, sexual orientation or disability.

- Nearly one-third of middle-schoolers have been the object of sexual jokes, comments or gestures.
- Another 15 percent have been bullied or harassed because of their religion or race.
- For every gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender student who reported being harassed, four straight students said they were harassed for being perceived as gay or lesbian.

One of the most painful aspects of bullying is that it is relentless. Most people can take one episode of teasing, name calling or being shunned. However, when it continues on and on, bullying can put a person in a state of constant fear.

Students who are bullied may find their schoolwork and health suffering. Studies show that people who are abused by their peers are at risk for mental health problems such as self-esteem issues, stress disorder, depression and anxiety. These are the individuals who frequently consider suicide.

Bullying has serious physical and mental health consequences:

- An estimated 160,000 children miss school every day out of fear of attack or intimidation by other students.
- One out of every 10 students who drops out of school does so because of repeated bullying.
- Victims of bullying are more likely to suffer physical problems such as common colds and coughs, sore throats, poor appetite and night waking.
- Those who are bullied are five times more likely to be depressed and far more likely to be suicidal. The effects of bullying can be long-lasting. By age 23, children who were bullied in middle school were more depressed and had lower self-esteem than their peers who had not been bullied.

Many bullies share common characteristics. These people like to dominate others and are generally focused on themselves. They often have poor social skills and poor social judgment. Sometimes they have no feelings of empathy or caring toward other people. Although most bullies think they are entitled to dominate, some are actually insecure and do so to make themselves feel more interesting or powerful. Some bullies may act the way they do, because

they themselves have been bullied. Some bullies have personality disorders that don't allow them to understand normal social emotions like guilt, empathy, compassion or remorse.

Teen bullying is often a warning sign of impending trouble and a risk for serious violence. Teens, particularly boys, who bully are more likely to engage in other antisocial and delinquent behavior such as vandalism, shoplifting, truancy or drug use. This behavior usually carries into adulthood. They are four times more likely to be convicted of crimes by age 24, with 60 percent of bullies having at least one criminal conviction. Harassment and bullying have been linked to 75 percent of school shooting incidents. Among boys who said they had bullied others at least once a week in school, more than half had carried a weapon in the past month, 43 percent had carried a weapon in school, 39 percent were involved in frequent fighting and 46 percent reported having been injured in a fight.

Suggestions for Change

For younger students, the best way to solve a bullying problem is to tell a trusted adult. For teens, the tell-an-adult approach depends on the bullying situation. One situation in which it is vital to report bullying is if it threatens to lead to physical danger and harm. Numerous high school students have died when stalking, threats and attacks went unreported and the silence gave the bully license to become more and more violent. Sometimes the victim of repeated bullying cannot control their need for revenge and violence erupts.

Here are some suggestions to offer victims to combat psychological and verbal bullying:

- Ignore the bully and walk away. This is definitely not a coward's response, and is usually harder than losing one's temper. Bullies thrive on reactions and being ignored tells the bully that they are of little consequence. Victims should project a body language of strength by walking tall and holding their head high.
- Hold the anger. Most people are angered by the bully, which is exactly the response they are trying to get. Bullies want to know they have control over other's emotions. If in a situation where it is impossible to walk away with poise, use humor. This is often disarming.

- Don't get physical. Not only does a physical reaction show anger, it may result in a violent response resulting in injury or social sanctions. Aggressive responses tend to perpetuate the cycle.
- Practice confidence. Role play ways to respond to the bully verbally or behaviorally. Practice being in control of the situation and having positive self-esteem. Rather than trying to control other's actions, concentrate upon self-control and projecting a strong image.
- Talk about it. Confide in a friend, guidance counselor, teacher or coach. Talking is not only a good outlet for the fears and frustrations, but will engage a support system to help with self-esteem issues.

Bullying is everyone's problem. If bullying isn't stopped when it first develops, it carries into adulthood with much more serious consequences.

Written by: Marissa Lanning, C.T.R.S.

Reference:

Lanning, M. (October 2007). Bullying in the school setting. *Mental Health Matters*. 4(12). Gratiot Medical Center: An Affiliate of MidMichigan Health.