

# NYU Child Study Center

## Bullies: More Than Sticks, Stones, and Name Calling

by Robin F. Goodman, Ph.D.

The search for the roots of violence has included a closer look at interactions once thought innocent. For example, the seemingly playful teasing between children may not be harmless give-and-take but may escalate into more serious aggression. Read about bullies and victims - who they are and what to do to help them.

To learn more about the research in teasing and bullying behavior we spoke with Alice Pope, Ph.D., Associate Professor of Psychology, St. John's University, who has authored numerous publications on peer relations.

### **AboutOurKids: Isn't teasing just part of growing up?**

Dr. Pope: Teasing among people may be an inevitable fact of life, and unfortunately, young children are initiated into this behavior at a young age. Children cope with teasing in a variety of ways. For example, they may walk away or stand up to the individual who is doing the teasing or confront a teaser with friends who will stand up for them. However, when the teasing turns to taunting and the child is afraid that any attempt to stop the aggressor will cause harm, the situation is more serious and possibly crosses the line into bullying.

### **Can occasional episodes of teasing really be harmful?**

Teasing may not be harmful for most kids and is part of learning about group culture and peer relationships. However, it can be damaging to those who are more vulnerable and at risk for other problems. Obviously teasing can have an extremely negative impact on children who are less well equipped physically, socially, or emotionally to ride it out. More specifically, children who have an emotional or physical handicap, those who are depressed or have low self-esteem may be less robust and less able to effectively cope with teasing behavior.

### **So what exactly do we mean by bullying? How is it different from teasing?**

Bullying is more than just one single act of aggressive teasing or fighting. Current definitions of bullying behavior stem from the original research conducted with Norwegian and Swedish students by Dan Olweus, who stated, "a student is being bullied or victimized when he or she is exposed, repeatedly and over time to negative actions on the part of one or more other students. Negative actions can include physical contact, words, making faces or dirty gestures, and intentional exclusion from a group. An additional criterion of bullying is an imbalance in strength (an asymmetric power relationship). The student who is exposed to the negative actions has difficulty defending himself or herself" (Olweus, 1995). Bullying behaviors themselves have been further classified as either direct or indirect, with direct bullying characterized by open attacks and indirect bullying characterized by social isolation, exclusion, or nonselection (Bosworth et al, 1999). Thus, the hallmark of bullying behavior is an ongoing pattern of physical or psychological aggression that is threatening, coercive, relentless, and leaves the victim feeling powerless. The bully is not necessarily bigger or stronger but rather is someone who is intimidating. Often, bullying does not occur solely in the context of a one-to-one relationship. In fact there is usually more than one bully and more than one victim. Typically the bully has an assistant and an organization of helpers, referred to by Olweus as the bully's "henchmen", who may carry out the acts. The bully may be in charge but may not be one caught.

### **How serious is the bullying problem?**

Bullying is a pervasive problem for school children in the U.S. as well as internationally. Studies of incidence range from a high of 80%, where "only 20% reported no bullying behavior" in a 30 day period (Bosworth et al 1999) to studies showing a conservative 10% of kindergarten through high school students being bullied (Hodges and Perry, 1996). Some groups of children are also at greater risk, for example, Garrity & Barris (1996) reported on a study finding "that 33% of mainstreamed, special-needs children had been targets of bullying, compared to 8% of their normal classmates" (p. 97).

### **Are there differences between boy and girl bullies and victims?**

Although bullying is more common among boys, both girls and boys can be bullies (Kumpulainen et al, 1998) or victims. However, boys are more likely to be attacked by boys whereas girls may be attacked by girls, boys, or mixed groups (Schuster, 1996). Boys and girls tend to use different types of bullying behavior. Boys engage in and perpetrate more physical forms of attack whereas girls give and get more indirect forms such as being ridiculed or victimized by rumors (Schuster, 1996, Smith & Myron-Wilson, 1998).

### **What kind of kid is likely to become a bully?**

Research aimed at identifying psychological factors predictive of bullying (Bosworth et al, 1999, Kumpulainen et al, 1998) found that bullies:

- have higher levels of anger
- lack confidence in the use of nonviolent strategies
- accept aggression as justifiable and satisfactory
- are unhappy at school
- are impulsive
- have feelings of depression
- lack a sense of belonging in school
- dislike or are dissatisfied with school
- have problems at home

### **What kind of kid is likely to become a victim?**

Victims have also been found to have certain features in common. They:

- tend to score higher on internalizing and psychosomatic behaviors (Kumpulainen, 1998), meaning that instead of aggressively acting out they are prone to anxious and depressed feelings, perhaps to the point of displaying physical symptoms.
- may contribute to bullying by virtue of their being irritating (e.g. hyperactive, Kumpulainen, 1998), different, or socially awkward or insecure.
- may be "physically weak...quick to submit to their peer's demands...reward their attackers by displaying signs of distress...and by giving up desired resources...be low in social skills...use inappropriate group entry tactics, and they lack humor and pro-social skills" (Hodges & Perry, 1996).
- may have few friends, thus have less peer protection, and more often be rejected.

In light of this, we now realize that bullies should not be the sole focus of interventions intended to reduce the incidence of bullying and victimization.

### **Do you agree with the idea that bullies and victims have similar psychological profiles?**

It's more complicated than that. Bullies and victims are not just two sides of the same coin. It's certainly possible that bullies were victimized at one time and are identifying with the powerful figures in their lives. But as bullies, they are not necessarily acting out feelings of victimization. Research suggests 3 things that motivate bullies (Olweus, 1995).

They may:

- have a need for power and dominance
- be hostile toward the environment and feel satisfied when inflicting injury and suffering
- be compelled to acquire things of value that confer prestige

### **Are kids likely to pick up bullying behavior at home?**

Although we don't know how bullying arises in all cases, some contributing childrearing factors include (Olweus, 1995):

- Authoritarian or punitive parenting. Children brought up in a harsh home environment often become angry and aggressive.

- Coercive parenting. Parents who use power assertive techniques, especially physical punishment, yelling, and name calling, often generate fear about punishment in their children. These children also tend to identify with and model such aggressive authority figures.
- Caretakers' attitudes such as indifference, lack of warmth or involvement
- Permissiveness for aggression seen as inadequate limit setting
- Temperament of the child, e.g. an active or hotheaded child

But keep in mind that just as we do not know the direct cause of bullying, we do not know why some children who grow up in a home that could be expected to foster bullying behavior do not succumb to following this path. It may also be that factors in children's social environment, particularly the classroom, permit bullying to arise and continue.

#### **Are parents doing things to encourage their children becoming victims?**

Just as particular parenting practices have been associated with the development of bullies, so too certain parenting techniques have been correlated with the development of victim behavior in children. Various researchers have identified such factors as insecure attachment to the primary caregiver as being associated with victimization (Hodges & Perry, 1996). Others have focused on gender differences, looking at how different behaviors by mothers and fathers relate to different victim behavior in girls and boys (Smith & Myron-Wilson, 1998). Victims have also been categorized in various ways depending on their being passive or aggressive/provocative (Hodges & Perry, 1996; Kumpulainen et al, 1998), with aggressive or bullying victims having a history of exposure to violence at home (Smith & Myron-Wilson, 1998). But these results are always complicated by the interaction, in specific individual cases, between parental style and child temperament.

#### **Evidence is mounting that aggressive and violent behavior may have its roots in the early years. Do you think there's a relationship between teasing and bullying at an early age and adolescent aggression?**

Bullying is not just a schoolyard problem. Childhood bullies tend to have later problems in life. These can include: school attendance and performance problems, engagement in criminal behavior (Limber, 1996). Systematic peer abuse can also have a lasting impact on victims. For instance, the peer abuse experiences can affect victims' self esteem, sexual relationships, and vulnerability to depression and even suicide (Kumpulainen et al, 1998).

#### **Don't children have to learn how to deal with bullies? Should adults intervene?**

Children should not be expected to handle bullies on their own. Kids need to be taught that bullying is unacceptable. And because bullying often happens in peer environments, this message has to be reinforced and supported on all levels - at home and in school. Hodges found that children who have friends who stand up for them against bullies are less likely to become victims. But one individual's attempts don't necessarily stop the bully completely because the bullying often occurs in a group situation. Furthermore, the bullying can affect everyone in a group - besides the obvious bully or victim. For example, children who have not been targeted are secretly relieved when someone else is bullied which in turn creates widespread avoidance of the bully and lack of involvement with the victim. Thus there is an unfortunate silent majority that is ill prepared, ineffective, and equally fearful. The bully system can create a group wide undercurrent of intimidation that is difficult to overcome single-handedly. Therefore it is imperative to enlist aid from adults.

Parents, teachers, and even pediatricians must become more adept and sensitive at identifying possible victims and bullies. The adults who are in a position to intervene on behalf of the victims must band together to take power away from the bully. An important step is identifying and stripping the bully of his or her power because bullies themselves are skillful at avoiding apprehension or punishment. Thus once a bullying situation is revealed and identified, adults must:

- act immediately
- trust the victim
- take a strong stand
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### **What should parents do?**

Parents must (Hodges & Perry, 1996, Shea, 1996):

- provide a secure attachment for their child
- monitor their own behavior and aggression
- provide appropriate models of conflict resolution
- encourage autonomy and independence in their child
- be concerned and responsive regardless of whether your child is the reported bully or victim
- offer suggestions/advice for dealing with problematic peers e.g. being in more public places
- involve the school if abuse continues

### **What can schools do?**

The most effective intervention program requires focusing on the bully, the victim, the peer culture, and the school and home environments (Garrity, et al, 1996). Since bullying often goes undetected and out of the range of vision of most adults, adult investigation and recognition of the problem are essential for initiating an effective program and stem the tide of bullying. A variety of school intervention plans focus on (National School Safety Center, 1996):

- helping both the bully and victim develop improved self esteem
- establishing a no tolerance policy for bullying
- creating and enforcing rules of respectful and responsible behavior
- educating students about the issue
- encouraging of reporting
- training of educational staff
- involving parents and the community

A successful bullying program is built around a multi-system approach - one that sends a clear and consistent message to bullies and victims alike that bullies are not in charge and that all children will be safe

### **About the Authors**

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