

Bullying: The Time to Do Something Has Past

When two or more people get together, a “pecking order” is established. This will serve several purposes, including allowing members to know who has status and it helps avoid future conflict. To achieve status, body language is often all that is necessary. However, sometimes physical strength, force or fighting might be necessary. In the animal world, this process might determine who survives and who does not. So everyone is pushed around or intimidated at some time in their lives. However, bullying as it is defined today goes far beyond the isolated cases or someone being pushed around. It involves the approximate 7% of individuals who are at the lower end of the “pecking order” who are being continuously tortured by others.

If bullying is a problem endemic to our species, why has it gone unnoticed for so long? There are a number of reasons for this. Bullying is predominantly a covert problem. It was only noticed during the overt outbreaks when victims retaliated against their oppressors or perceived oppressors. In addition, adults were often unfamiliar with the tactics of bullies. Bully behavior was often looked upon as “kids being kids.” Furthermore, bullies were masters of their art and operated when adult supervision was lacking. This low level violent activity didn’t appear on educator’s “radar screen.” Little did most of us realize the terrible price this behavior incurred on the educational community in the form of student fear, school absenteeism / school phobia, poor student academic performance and suicide. In fact, it wasn’t until the recent blitz of school shootings did we begin to realize the impact of this behavior.

Dan Olweus, Professor of Psychology at the University of Bergen in Norway, is considered by many to be the “father” of bully research. In 1982, three Norwegian boys between the ages of 10 and 14 years old committed suicide. As a result, the Norwegian Ministry of Education launched a drive to understand the problem. A huge study was begun by Olweus to collect data on this problem that was to encompass hundreds of schools and hundreds of thousands of students. Professor Olweus was to publish a book, Bullying at School, which was to become a must read for anyone concerned with the topic. In 1987, Harvard University gathered experts from around the world for the “Schoolyard Bully Practicum” sponsored by the National School Safety Center to examine the problem.

Why the urgency in controlling and hopefully eliminating bullying behavior in school? First, school is the home of the bully. This is where he or she operates most effectively. Bullying behavior is very disruptive to the functioning of a school. Apparently, depending upon which study you read, 15% of the student population is involved in this behavior. Somewhere around 7% of the student population are bullies. In addition, it has been suggested that over 150,000 students stay home from school because of bullies. The victims self esteem and ability to function in school deteriorates. In extreme cases, suicide and murderous rampages might result.

Where do bullies come from? Apparently, there are a number of genetic and environmental risk factors that contribute to this behavior. Child rearing practices seem to play an important part in the development of this behavior. Too little maternal love accompanied by permissive behavior are two noticeable factors. This combined with “power-assertive” child rearing methods i.e. physical punishment and violent emotional outbursts set the groundwork for bully behavior. Hot-headed or impulsive behavior on the child’s part further contributes to the problem.

Who is the Bully?

What behavior characterizes the bully? Typical behavior includes strong need for power and to dominate others. They are impulsive and show a more positive attitude toward violence. Children who are “hot-headed” have a greater risk of being a bully than those with a more even temperament. Contrary to popular opinion, Professor Olweus found bullies had a positive view of themselves and did not suffer from poor self-esteem. In addition, bullies showed little empathy for their victims. Furthermore, male bullies were physically strong. Let’s not forget, there are girl bullies too. We often realize that victims need our help but what about the bullies? It appears, without help, bullies have a 25% greater chance of future criminal behavior than the average child. In addition, little bullies grow up to become big bullies and play a major role in domestic violence and child abuse. In many cases, it is a bully raising another bully. In order to break the cycle of violence, it is imperative that young bullies get help.

Who is the Victim?

Who becomes the target of the bully? The student singled out by the bully is characterized by low self-esteem with a negative view of themselves. If boys, they are likely to be physically weaker with a negative view toward violence. Through body language these victims stand out and are selected. Victims fall into two categories. First is the **submissive** or **passive victim**. The other is the **provocative victim**. This student is characterized by concentration problems; they exhibit hyper-active behavior that annoys others and create tension around them. The provocative victim behavior often allows bullies to acquire help from other students in their persecution of the victim. I have found these victims to actually provoke other students to bother them. Victims are often fearful of coming forward with their problem and will suffer in silence. In many cases, victims view parental intervention as the worst possible scenario.

How does bullying express itself?

Bullying can be accomplished directly or indirectly, singly or in groups. The techniques vary somewhat between boys and girls. In groups, the bully tends to be a “role model” and the followers can be either active or passive. In males, working alone or in small groups, bullying tends to be more direct and physical. This could include pushing, shoving and punching. Verbal assaults are common. The extortion of money or possessions is likely as well. Girl bullies often work in groups, tend to be less physical, and are more subtle and sneakier. Social exclusion, manipulation of friendships, and

harassment are common tactics. Notes and rumors are the common tools used. However, the damage girls can do equals that of their male counterpart.

Tips on Preventing and Dealing With the Bully Problem

What can be done to confront this problem? According to Professor Olweus, bully busting is a community problem. First, the school must recognize the problem exists and the school community must buy-in to finding solutions. Victims generally are not physically or emotionally strong enough to confront bullies without help.

Meetings must be organized. A school conference day would be an effective way to introduce the problem to the entire staff as it relates to student behavior, parents, classroom management, danger spots, and steps needed to combat the problem. A good video might be used to motivate everyone about trying to solve the problem. A general PTA meeting should be planned to acquaint parents with the problem and explain what steps the school will take and how the parents can help. Everyone should be made aware that bullying will not be tolerated, even minor cases. Also, parents should be encouraged to report any cases of bullying that they become aware of. A district "hot-line" or online reporting system might be put in place. Having a situation where anonymous reporting of events and situations often show positive results. A committee comprised of concerned educators can meet and evaluate the school climate and discuss problems and propose solutions. Administrators must support their teachers.

Good supervision is a deterrent against emerging bully problems and more important when a problem exists. "**Teacher Presence**" and "**Teacher Density**" is a must. There should be no place in the school environment where adult supervision is lacking. A simple saying works well here, "When the teachers away, the bullies will play." Think about areas in school where adult supervision is spread thin or non-existent. Some areas might include the playground, hallways, locker rooms, bathrooms and cafeteria. Bullies are resourceful and opportunistic characters. Some students will not go to the bathroom from the time they enter school in the morning until the time they get home in the afternoon for fear of being bullied or harassed.

Class activities in the form of discussion or role playing might be helpful in preventing bully behavior. Since the majority of students are not involved in this behavior, it might be helpful in using peer pressure to discourage bullies. Having a clear set of class rules posted and discussing them at the beginning of the year would be helpful.

Class Rules

- We shall not bully other students.
- We shall try to help students who are bullied.
- We shall make a point to include students who become easily left out.

Cooperative learning has been the “catchword” for the past few years. A high risk situation can be created when students don’t pick their own partners or teachers are not aware of who they partner together. When grouping, victims should not be grouped with or near bullies. Bullies should be grouped with several confident students not inclined to follow his lead. Do not allow bullies and their accomplices, followers or passive bullies to work together. Lastly, once a bully or a bully problem is identified, there must be immediate action taken.

About the author: Professor Arthur Cohen, B.A., M.A., has created and presently teaches two graduate courses on school violence prevention for Alfred University. He is the Director of Training for Target Consultant’s Center for School and Personal Safety Research. Professor Cohen has enjoyed 33 years in the classroom as a science teacher and now retired.