

## **Bullying Touches Nearly Every American School Child: What to Know & What to Do**

Think your child is free of bullying? While 10% of children experience some direct form of bullying, victimization or social rejection by their peers during their school years, estimates indicate upwards of **three quarters of school aged children have been involved in peer victimization either as victimizers, victims or bystanders**. And if you were waiting to talk to your child about bullying when he or she is a little older, you should know the potential for peer victimization begins when children are first introduced to a social setting around preschool or kindergarten age. In one sample of kindergarten students, 22.6% of children reported moderate to high levels of peer victimization.

Bullying is defined by the United States Department of Health and Human Services as "aggressive behavior that is intentional and that involves an imbalance of power or strength." It often goes unreported yet the consequences of victimization are both immediate and long term. The bullied child may experience emotional distress, loneliness, rejection, desire to avoid school, a fall in school performance, anxiety, depression, substance abuse and/or low self-esteem. Internalization of bullying can linger even after bullying ends and can carry into adult life, creating subsequent social anxiety, adjustment difficulties, and a diminished self image that can make it hard for them to succeed in the adult social world and the job market.

### **I. Types of Aggression & Bullies**

Bullying is a kind of behavior that is typically repetitive and chronic, and can take several forms, some more subtle than others, yet equally devastating. ***Overt or direct aggression*** is observed mostly in boys. This involves verbal or physical aggression that can include name-calling, hitting, kicking, threatening and even sexual harassment. The rates of overt aggression are shown to decrease with age, in both boys and girls, usually because as children grown older, physical aggression becomes less and less socially acceptable and the punitive measures grow harsher.

Another more subtle form of bullying is known as ***social or relational aggression*** which is more often found in girls and older children or adolescents. This form of peer victimization involves deliberate and hurtful exploitation of peer friendships and relationships. This could include slandering, spreading rumors or gossip, manipulating classroom friendships. In certain cases, relational aggression can actually exist within friendship groups or dyads (duos) where one "friend" holds a considerable amount of power of the other and uses the weaker to his/her advantage. While girls are found to exhibit relational aggression more, it is also girls who find this form of aggression much more upsetting.

Bullies have certain characteristics and traits that are universal and recognizing these traits is the first step for parents, teachers and students alike to prevent bullying. Bullies are often the "leader of the pack" and like to be in control. When playing games, they will want to make the rules and pick the teams, exerting power to prove their superiority. They can also be very charismatic and quick on their feet, often turning on the charm around adults while later resuming in their bullying when no authority figures are around. Bullies extract their control from exclusion and exclusivity. Such children may make a big scene of giving out party invitations to guests in front of those who are not invited, openly excluding them. Bullies also are often impulsive, emotionally immature and don't like to accept responsibility for their actions. They are often described as "poor winners" and "sore losers". Their short fuse and lack of control often leads to confrontation, which in the effort to reassert

dominance, they bully.

## II. Types of Victims

The majority of bullying victims are **passive victims**. They are submissive, unassertive and present themselves as a weak target for bullies who want to assert dominance and control interpersonal relationships. These victims often display internalizing behavior problems such as depression, anxiety or loneliness and do not have many if any friends. **Provocative victims** make up the minority of bullying victims but are often more noticeable. These victims are also often loners with little to no friends, but they are isolated due to their irritating and provocative behaviors. These children often make themselves a target for bullying by offending those around them through teasing or they simply lack the social skills to join a peer group and make friends.

Victims also might have a lower ability to judge nonverbal cues such as a furrowed brow or clenched fist and thus may be unaware they have aggravated their peer. Sometimes, bullied children display a lot of aggression which becomes the isolating factor in their life. Children report that they are less likely to make and stay friends with a child who displays open aggression. This aggression sometimes stems from what psychologists call hostile attribution bias. Children who have **hostile attribution bias** perceive neutral or potentially harmless stimuli as overtly negative and retaliate to these stimuli in an aggressive manner. For example, if a child spills water on a hostile attribution bias child's painting, it may have been an accident but the biased child will immediately assume it was intentional and react with aggression.

## IV. The Signs

The key common element in most bullied children is their loneliness and lack of strong friendships. Such rejected children are less likely to have friends standing as bystanders to bullying and therefore are less likely to have someone intervene on their behalf. Oftentimes these children do not have the correct social skills to be able to make friends easily and interject themselves into the social stratum. Studies have shown that having even one friend provides a significant buffer against peer victimization. Unfortunately, children who lack the social skills to make friends find themselves in a vicious cycle; because they are rejected they don't have friends to practice healthy social interactions with and therefore are more likely to be victimized. Those who are victimized are therefore even less likely to form friendships and have even less opportunity to make friends and buffer themselves from victimization.

There are many tell-tale signs that your child may be a victim of bullying at school. Vigilance is often the best method to notice bullying right away for swift intervention. Your child may be a victim of bullying if he/she:

- Comes home with torn, damaged or missing belongings
- Has unexplained injuries
- Has few friends with whom they spend time
- Seems afraid of going to school, riding the bus or participating in school activities
- Has lost interest in school or they suddenly start doing poorly
- Appears sad, moody, teary, depressed when they come home
- Complains frequently of headaches, stomachaches and other physical ailments to avoid school
- Experiences loss of appetite or appears nervous, anxious and seems to have lower self esteem

## **V. Cyber-Bullying: A new frontier of peer victimization**

Technology, notably the internet, has revolutionized the way we communicate, but it has also opened up new doors for our children to be bullied. Cyber-bullying is the latest form of peer victimization to have arisen, and it carries with it potentially dire consequences, as can be seen from the tragic 2006 suicide of Megan Meier after she had been a victim of cyber bullying. In the era where text messages have replaced much of adolescent face to face conversation, playground poundings have similarly moved online to chat rooms, social networking sites and instant messaging channels. Nearly half of all teenagers report they have been the victim of cyber attacks and 18% of students in grades 6th-8th reported having been cyber-bullied within the last couple months. The phenomenon has also increased dramatically over the last few years. Twice as many 10-17 year olds reported being victimized online in 2005 as opposed to a 2000 study.

What really constitutes cyber-bullying? Sometimes referred to as "online social cruelty" or "electronic bullying," cyber bullying can involve all of the following:

- \* *Sending mean, vulgar or threatening messages or images*
- \* *Posting sensitive, private or embarrassing information about another person*
- \* *Pretending to be someone else in order to make another person feel badly about themselves*
- \* *Purposeful exclusion of someone from an online group*

There are numerous conduits for cyber-bullying including:

- Emails***
- Instant messaging***
- Text messaging or digital image messaging***
- Web pages***
- Blogs***
- Chat rooms or discussion forums***
- Social networking sites (e.g. Facebook, MySpace, etc)***

Cyber-bullying has, in the past, been a medium used mostly by older children and adolescents but as children start using cell phones and internet at increasingly younger ages, it will soon be a medium for bullying across all ages. Its abuse potential differs from traditional bullying in that it can happen at any given time, it can be entirely anonymous and any harmful information can be spread quickly to a very large audience. To combat this type of bullying, adults need to remain vigilant and aware of their child's internet, communication and media habits. Parents should also try to notice any sudden changes in their child's behavior and mood regarding the cyber-world such as constantly checking the computer or phone paired with anxiety, depressive symptoms or a drop in academic performance.

## **VI. What to do of your child is .....**

### **A Bully**

Recognizing that your child could be the aggressor in a peer victimization situation is always

difficult. Kathy Catenacci, head of adolescent therapist and licensed professional counselor at Central DuPage Hospital in Winfield, Illinois says, "Most mom and dads assume their child is on the receiving end. It's harder to face the music when your son or daughter is the manipulator instead of the target. You tend to have blinders on and don't always address the poor behavior when you need to." Bullies have little awareness that they are peer victimizers and therefore it is all the more important for their parents to learn to recognize the traits and intervene on their behalf.

Parents can begin by **re-examining their parenting style**. Children often learn by example, and an overly authoritarian parenting style can lead them to enforce the same strictness with their peers. Conversely, an overly permissive parenting style can allow children grow without definitive moral boundaries and little accountability to social norms and rules. Parents should make an effort to **identify what triggers the bullying behavior**, make it clear that bullying is not acceptable and set reasonable and fair consequences for failing to comply with those rules. As bullying is often a sign of poor interpersonal social skills, parents may want find methods to help their child **learn healthy social skills** and bring out the best traits in their child by redirecting their energies toward healthy and contributory activities. Such activities can include:

- *volunteering (to practice compassion and generosity)*
- *martial arts (to practice self control)*
- *Boy/Girl Scouts (to form friendships and practice cooperation toward achieving a common goal)*

It is imperative to have a support system in helping restructure your child's behavior. Having regular communication with your child's school teacher can make sure that there is consistency in monitoring your child's behavior as well as in the disciplining and redirection of inappropriate actions. Further support from a school counselor, family psychologist or even the school principal can help make correcting your child's behavior or altering your parenting style that much smoother and easier. Finally, a child who bullies is not just an aggressive force; they often have insecurities and vulnerabilities of their own that need to be addressed in order for them to truly change into a more socially healthy person.

## **A Victim**

Learning to recognize the signs of a victimized child are equally as important as recognizing the signs of a bully. If you feel your child is showing signs of being bullied the first thing you should do is simply talk to them. Asking questions, voicing your concern can show your child that you would like to help.

Some direct questions may be:

- \* "I'm a little worried about you. Are there kids at school who pick on you?"
- \* "Are there any kids at school who tease you in a mean way?"
- \* "Are there any kids at school who leave you out on purpose?"

More subtle questions may be:

- \* "Do you have any special friends this year? Who do you normally hang out with?"
- \* "Who do you normally sit with at lunch?"
- \* "Are there any kids at school you really don't like? Why don't you like them? Do they leave you out or make you feel bad?"

Similar to parents of bullies, it is important to maintain a relationship with the staff at your child's school. Setting up an appointment to talk with your child's teacher will best help you understand your child's group dynamics at school (where he/she spends a large portion of their time). Asking questions about how long well your child gets along with others, with whom do they spend the most time with, or has the teacher ever noticed any signs of your child being excluded or bullied? It is also important to focus on not only physically bullying but also relational aggression as well. You can also make an effort to contact other adults your child may interact with outside the academic setting such as, coaches, bus drivers, music teachers, etc. Understanding the social environment your child lives in will aid greatly in understanding if and why they are being victimized. Finally, just remaining vigilant regarding your child's moods and behaviors (and if they suddenly change) as well as their friends (or lack thereof) will help you detect bullying early on and intervene as quickly as possible.

## **A Bystander**

Why should I care if my child is a bystander? As long as they are not being victimized, nothing is wrong, right? Actually, the role of the bystander is incredibly important to the social atmosphere from which the bully draws his/her power and therefore bullying potential. Bullies like to have an audience, yet bullying rarely ever happens when there are adults present. However, sometimes, "kids don't know what to do in all situations...If they see someone being cruel to someone else, it's not always easy for them to know what to do," says Stan Davis, a bully-prevention counselor and author of *Empowering Bystanders in Bullying Prevention*. **Studies show that if a bystander discourages the bully there is a 50% chance that the bully will stop.** Empowering the bystander is the newest weapon in the arsenal to stop bullying and it could prove to be a powerful one as well. Almost two-thirds of children say they would intervene but only one-third of children reported actually doing so. These percentages decrease with age, only one-quarter of high school students reported intervening on behalf of a victim. As children get older, the aggression they experience is more relational and subtle and sometimes happens on the internet; kids don't really know how to intervene in these situations.

Confronting a bully is an incredibly scary and courageous thing to do, and sometimes dangerous to the bystander, whether physically, emotionally or socially. However, there are other things you can instruct your child to do as a bystander that is safer and easier. Telling an adult is always a good and if your child doesn't want to be specific they can simply ask the adult to observe a certain location at a certain time. Bystanders need to understand that, "[telling] is not tattling, it's being a witness to a crime," says Davis. If your child is not comfortable going to an adult they can help on the level of their peers. A bystander can

show support for a bullied child simply by becoming their friend. Friendships are the biggest buffer a child can have against bullying. Since, bullying is predatory in nature, those who travel with others are inherently safer. If your child has witnessed bullying, you can explain how that child must feel and how he/she would really appreciate a phone call or a quick conversation saying, "I saw what happened today, I didn't know what to do but I don't think you deserved it." Any support is good support.

## **VII. Intervention**

The point of seeking intervention is to enhance your child's interpersonal abilities and help them form and maintain healthy relationships with their peers in the present and future. Parents and adults in a child's social sphere need to strive to help that child relate to others in a positive manner, help them achieve social goals and use power in a positive manner.

### **FOR BULLIES**

Children who bully others are trying to assert their social power and they have learned that aggression is the best method to do so. To challenge this thought process and attitude, they must learn to find positive ways of gaining power and status such as leadership roles in their school or community. They need formative versus punitive consequences to their bullying and they need to learn awareness skills, empathy and compassion. For example, children who bully may help implement anti-bullying programs in young grades. The key is allow them to gain and use power through positive leadership and service rather than negative dominance.

### **FOR VICTIMS**

Rejection is one of the key factors that lead to peer victimization and therefore creating positive friendships and relationships for rejected children is the leading intervention method. Teachers can help promote positive relationships by creating buddy systems or peer mentors so that children are not alone, perpetually outside any group. Every victim is different just as every bully is different. Some need assertiveness training, some hostile attribution bias children need to learn self-calming techniques and practice reading non-verbal cues correctly. Support from parents, teachers and peers are crucial for a victim to break the cycle of victimization.

### **Lepage Associates**

Sometimes a psychologist can have the right resources and training to help your child, whether they be a bully or a victim or even a bystander, learn better social skills in order to reduce bullying. At Lepage Associates, we have child and adolescent psychologists with specialties to help both aggressors and victims, to include social skills and assertiveness training of kids being bullied as well as therapy to address any resultant depression or anxiety; and social skills, anger management, and empathy building for aggressors.

## **Resources**

### **"Studies Reveal Why Kids Get Bullied and Rejected"**

Robin Nixon, LiveScience, Feb. 2, 2010

[http://news.yahoo.com/s/livescience/20100202/sc\\_livescience/studiesrevealwhykidsgetbulliedandrejected](http://news.yahoo.com/s/livescience/20100202/sc_livescience/studiesrevealwhykidsgetbulliedandrejected)

### **Bullying, Rejection, & Peer Victimization: A Social Cognitive Neuroscience Perspective**

Editor: Monica J. Harris, PhD

Publication Date: 05/2009

### **U.S. Department of Health and Human Services**

<http://www.stopcyberbullying.org>

~ website has extensive list of print resources for reading about victims, bullies, parenting styles, studies and correlational data ~

### **"The Social Context of Young Children's Peer Victimization"**

Hanish, L.D., et. al.

Arizona State University, Feb. 2005

### **The Nature and Consequences of Peer Victimization**

Presentation by: Dr. Stephen E. Brock, PhD, NCSP

California State University, Sacramento

### **How to tell if your Kid's a Bully**

Jessica Young

GateHouse News Service, Feb. 02, 2009

### **If Your Child is a Bully**

Laura Broadwell

<http://www.parents.com>

### **The Bully and the Bystander**

Marian Wilde

[www.greatschools.org/parenting/bullying](http://www.greatschools.org/parenting/bullying)

### **Parents: Cyber Bullying Led to Teen's Suicide**

### **Megan Meier's Parents Now Want Measures to Protect Children Online**

Nov. 19, 2007

<http://abcnews.go.com/GMA/story?id=3882520&page=1>

### **Bullying, Interventions, and The Role of Adults**

by Debra Pepler and Wendy Craig

<http://www.education.com/reference/article/role-of-adults-in-preventing-bullying/#>