

Bullies and Victims

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BULLIES

Most of us have some not-so-fond memories of being bullied as kids, or of even being the bully ourselves. Looking back as adults it may not make sense to have hurt others or, as victims, to have tolerated the wrath of a bully. But things look different when you're a kid—maneuvering for social position, vying for admiration or attention, and fitting in with the popular crowd may be all that seems to matter in the school years.

As parents, we want to help our kids to avoid this seemingly senseless situation, or to at least help them to understand why kids pick on others. To get a grip on this it's helpful to understand the latest research on bullies and their victims, and what researchers suggest are the best parental interventions.

Bullies are those who use negative actions (generally physical or verbal aggression) against others (their victims). Most research has focused upon boys rather than girls. The little we know about female bullying is that girl bullies tend to use tactics different than their male counterparts. Girls often employ “indirect bullying” such as socially isolating their victims by excluding them from the group, teasing or spreading rumors. Boys tend to use more direct tactics such as hitting, shoving, fighting or aggressive verbal abuse.

Boy bullies tend to be stronger, larger and more aggressive than their peers. Some research suggests that bullies are also perceived as athletic, handsome, outgoing and socially magnetic. Therefore, the stereotype of the bully as a social outcast may be more myth than reality. Indeed, bullies tend to hang around other aggressive kids, and make up about 10 to 15% of the school-aged population.

When interviewed, grade school bullies rate themselves as leaders, but they tend to be CEO's of aggressive cliques, those usually not accepted by more model students. They count on intimidation to raise and keep their status within the peer group. Even though bullies may be seen as hurtful to their victims, their intimidation often provides a certain social status. Other aggressive kids hang around them for protection and affiliation, and bullies are often rated as some of the most popular and socially connected children, especially in the elementary school years. The myth of the “low self-esteem bully” may be just that—a myth, since aggression, especially in males, often equates with status and popularity.

Therefore, bullies, especially those who assume leadership roles, may be those who use aggression effectively. There's a great deal of competition for social resources during the school day (attention, friends and allies), and effective bullies seem to be those boys who have learned to use their aggression to maintain their leadership role in the peer group.

VICTIMS:

Now let's take a look at who these guys are shoving around. Habitual victims (those who seem to be constantly picked on) make up about 18% of the school -aged population. Many of us have been pushed around or verbally berated by another kid while growing up, but there's a select group of kids who seem to be victimized, year after year. Studies suggest that victims tend to be smaller, weaker, and shyer than their peers. Kids with handicaps (physical, verbal, or learning), children who look different (are overweight, have a physical disability, or who even are just consistently out-of-fashion) are picked on significantly more often than those who don't stand out.

Victim's, especially those who endure teasing or taunts over an extended period of time, tend to develop a low self-esteem as well as depression. Statistically, victims are the least attractive, socially inappropriate kids, and generally are not aggressive in return. However, impulsive victims can overreact, feeding the bully's behavior by giving him just what he wants--attention. This can be seen by the bully as further provocation, and may actually heighten the taunts and teasing especially if the victim reacts in a highly emotional manner.

WHAT PARENTS CAN DO IF THEIR CHILD IS A BULLY OR IS BEING VICTIMIZED

First, let's take a look at what you can do to help your child not engage in bullying behavior. One very interesting study showed that bullies tend to come from homes where physical aggression is used by parents to punish their children, parents have a negative attitude toward their kids, and parents tolerate aggressive behavior between members of the family. So, try using consequences for inappropriate kid behavior that are not physical in nature (such as time-out or loss of privilege), set limits on how much physical or verbal aggression you'll let the kids engage in, and adopt a supportive, positive attitude toward your children. In this way, they may not need to resort, or learn to resort, to abusive behavior with their peers.

If your child is being bullied at school, contact the administration about the problem. One report showed that when students in schools do not tolerate bullying (kids report aggressive behavior to school authorities, interrupt bullying behavior, or defend victims), the rates of victimization and bullying decline. The administration may be giving "implicit tolerance" to bullying on the belief that students must learn to deal with bullies themselves, or that coping with victimization is a normal part of growing up. It doesn't have to be, though. It's clear that when teachers, school administrators, and the students themselves do not put up with bullying behavior that the incidence of this abuse decreases significantly. Don't be afraid to talk to school personnel about the issue—it could save your child a lot of grief and misery!