

Counselor's Corner
Campaign Against Bullying

by
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The harsh reality is that bullying will probably never be eliminated in schools. Research has suggested that 15% to 20% of all students will experience bullying during their school years. The U.S. government estimates that 160,000 students are absent each day due to fear of bullies. Bullying is generally defined as intentional, negative actions against someone with the purpose of inflicting discomfort through words, gestures, or physical actions. Bullying is a way of establishing dominance over a person that has been identified as weaker in some way to the bully or group of bullies. Bullying can be viewed as direct or indirect. Direct bullying is described as open attacks on a victim, such as physical violence, name calling, or obscene gestures. Indirect bullying can be in the form of a group of peers ignoring a person with the intent of inflicting emotional pain. A new form of bullying that is becoming more prevalent is cyber bullying. It is a form of indirect, sometimes anonymous bullying that is done on-line.

Children who are continually victimized by bullies may develop a variety of problems from poor concentration, to anxiety, to school phobia (fear of attending school). When school is not a safe place, children will learn to fear and avoid school. Experts have found that victims of bullying can develop severe problems later on in life such as depression, a negative self image, and problems relating to the opposite sex. In extreme and rare cases, victims turn on the bullies, such as the tragedies that take place in the form of revengeful school violence. Some children have difficulty dealing with witnessing bullying incidents; the child may never have been a direct victim, but the fear of becoming a victim after witnessing a bullying incident can be traumatic.

Bullying is learned, not inherited through biology. Although there is cutting edge research suggesting that some children do have abnormal levels of hormones such as cortisol, DHEA, and testosterone, these chemicals only may provide the energy for the bully to take their aggression out on victims. Children learn to be aggressive, they learn to pick on "weaker" people through parents, peers, and/or society. Bullies learn the attitude of "blaming the victim" for being weak, and sometimes, their peers encourage them to pick on weaker people. Ironically, bullies themselves are victims; Many children who are bullies were bullied themselves by parents, siblings, and/or peers. In addition, bullies learn to feel powerful when picking on children, which may very well develop into significant relationship problems later on in life. For example, an adult bully may never have learned how to relate to peers without showing force, intimidation, and/or dominance. Not surprisingly, a school bully may turn into a work place bully later on in life. Those children who are aggressive bullies are more likely to be involved in criminal activity, domestic violence, and/or substance abuse.

Reporting and identifying bullies is difficult and complex. Children may be reluctant to report incidents of bullying due to fear of direct or indirect revenge. They may fear retaliation not only from the bully, but from friends of the bully too. Younger children may not understand the difference between playfulness and bullying. Some younger children are not well adept at reading "cues" accurately, and they may naively assume another child is being playful when they are actually being malicious, or vice versa. Teachers are typically trained in identifying bullies and counselors and administrators are trained in treating the bullying behaviors. Unfortunately, identifying bullying behaviors again becomes difficult. An adult may see playful behavior where a child may misinterpret the behavior as malicious. Typically, bullying occurs when the bully believes they can get away with it; locker rooms, P.E. classes, lunch rooms, and buses are more likely places that bullying occurs. These places are more difficult to monitor by school personnel.

What can be done? Much. Parents can talk to the children about bullying and/or being bullied; Teach your child the difference between assertiveness and aggressiveness. Teach them how to be assertive to a bully, and report the bully to a teacher. Teach them not to be aggressive and not to bully other children. Parents can enroll their children in counseling with a qualified therapist that targets aggression or being a victim of aggression. Parents can give support for anti-bullying campaigns in local schools. School counselors and teachers can continue pursuing training on treating and identifying bullying (many school Bullying Prevention Programs exist

today). A highly recommended technique is creating a partnership between children and teachers; a *campaign against bullying*, beginning with identifying what is and what is not bullying and teaching children multiple options for dealing with bullying. Bullying may never be eliminated, but with some effort it can be greatly reduced in schools.

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