

UNDERSTANDING BULLYING

Bullying in schools is a complex, corrosive dynamic. No longer considered a “normal” childhood behaviour, bullying is now recognized as a very painful, damaging, and sometimes even life-threatening experience. Its effects can last far beyond childhood. Testimonies from adults who were systematically taunted and tormented throughout their school life reveal the trauma and impact of their experience. Many targets of abuse do poorly at school, leave school early or change schools frequently in an effort to find a safe place.

Childhood and adolescence are complex times. Healthy surroundings and supportive adults are essential to the positive development of each child and teen. Teachers want to provide these surroundings and support. They want to intervene. But recognizing the complexities of bullying and preventing it are far from simple matters. The electronic forms that social and emotional bullying can now assume only add to the challenges teachers face as they tackle this pervasive problem.

Understanding bullying, how it affects all of us, and recognizing it as a form of aggression is the cornerstone of efforts to prevent it.

True/False Quiz

1. Bullying is more prevalent in schools in lower socio-economic areas or with poor academic records. (F)

Research indicates that bullying can be a major problem in any school, anywhere. The key factor in a school's success with bullying prevention programs is linked to the degree of commitment among staff members. Staff members who customarily operate with a high level of collaboration will achieve positive results regardless of other factors.

2. Relatively little bullying is found in the primary or junior grades. (F)

Research has revealed that bullying is as prevalent in the early grades as in later years. In the April 2005 issue of the *Canadian Journal of School Psychology*, for example, Dr. Tanya Beran and Dr. Leslie Tutty, from the University of Calgary discovered that half the students in their study had been bullied and that the students in Grades 1 to 3 had been bullied as frequently as the students in Grades 4 to 6.

3. Students who bully are usually the unpredictable, aggressive class troublemakers. (F)

A student who bullies could just as easily be an admired athlete, a successful academic student, or the articulate, personable class leader. Stereotypes are misleading: power isn't restricted to physical force. Since bullying depends on an imbalance of power, students who bully can also display their dominance by exerting emotional or social control. Anyone can bully; anyone can be bullied.

4. Students who bully suffer emotional and social problems as a consequence of their behaviour. (T)

Leonard Eron's longitudinal examination of bullying of 30 years ago demonstrated that most children identified as "bullies" in Grade 3 were also identified as "bullies" by the end of high school. By the age of 30, one out of four had a criminal record. In the

study, males who bullied had greater tendencies to be abusive in their intimate relationships than those who did not bully, and females who bullied had a tendency to be more abusive to their children. The research also discovered a correlation between bullying and a range of social problems, including employment difficulties, alcohol and drug dependency and divorce.

In their book, *Bullies, Targets, and Witnesses* (2003), SuEllen and Paula Fried report that boys and girls who both bully and are bullied are more liable to suffer depression than other students. Girls who bully others and are bullied themselves are more likely to seriously contemplate suicide.

An effective whole-school bullying prevention program needs to include provisions for assisting those who bully to reflect on and change their behaviour as well as protecting and supporting their targets.

5. Students who bully and targets of bullying form two distinct and separate groups. (F)

In a survey of nearly 2,000 Grade 6 students, UCLA psychologist Jaana Juvonen found that 7% were engaged in bullying behaviour exclusively, 9% were targeted exclusively, and that 9% were both aggressors and victims of bullying, depending on the circumstances.

6. Targets of bullying often bring the trouble on themselves. (F)

Students who bully are seeking power and choose to target others to gain that power. Simply being a newcomer to a school without immediate friends or alliances might be enough to attract negative attention. A manner of dress or deportment, religious affiliation, success in school, or a physical or intellectual exceptionality, for example, can be enough for one student to bully another. Responsible, respectful students with a low propensity to violence, a mature level of emotional development, and a preference to resolve conflict with dialogue can be targeted for these very qualities. Ironically, in

the face of bullying, these same students are often labelled as “too sensitive,” “passive,” “timid,” or “meek.”

7. Bystanders often agree with the actions of the person who is bullying. (T)

According to a 2005 report by Debra Pepler to the Canadian Initiative for the Prevention of Bullying, bystanders witness 85% of school-based bullying, and three-quarters of the time they contribute to the actions of those who bully by either passively watching or actually helping in the bullying. In abstract discussions, students will articulate the negative aspects of bullying and the appropriate way to respond. However, when they witness one student bullying another, they often perceive the act in emotional rather than intellectual terms. They seem to feel that the targets of bullying deserve to be hurt: if they didn't want to be treated that way, they would not act the way they do. Targets of bullying are often viewed as weak or deficient in some fashion and onlookers want to avoid being associated with them.

8. Bullying behaviour among students is best handled with a peer-mediated conflict resolution process. (F)

Face-to-face encounters in a conflict resolution format are effective only when both parties have similar influence and power. Putting the person who bullies with the person who has been targeted, especially in the presence of others, will serve to exacerbate the problem. Students who bully possess greater power and influence and will use such opportunities to trivialize their own negative behaviours, question their victim's reactions, or incite others to blame the victim. Peer mediators and bystanders will either sympathize with the students who bully or feel reluctant to challenge their power and status. At best, the person who is bullying may offer a perfunctory apology and continue with the behaviour. The target of the bullying will likely feel vulnerable and afraid. The exercise becomes further proof that they are indeed unsupported, and that nothing can be done about the situation.

Instead, those who bully should be held accountable for their behaviour in a constructive manner that effectively interrupts the cycle of abuse.

Targets of bullying need peer and adult support and guided opportunities for exploring their feelings and developing strategies for responding creatively and constructively to the situation.

9. Parenting styles influence bullying behaviour. (T)

Aggression in the home, a reliance on corporal punishment, a primarily punitive approach to child rearing, or an inconsistent parenting style, in which expectations are set but seldom followed up on, can all contribute to aggressive, bullying behaviour in children.

The National Longitudinal Survey of Children and Youth, for example, examined a group of 4,100 children and parents in 1994-1995 (when the children were between two and five years old), and again eight years later in 2002-2003 (when the children were between 10- and 13- years old). Preschoolers who were parented with fewer incidents of hitting, yelling or threatening at home were, eight years later, found to be less aggressive as preteens and less likely to be involved in fighting and bullying at school. Additionally, if parents changed their parenting style over those eight years and became either more or less punitive, their children displayed a corresponding change in behaviour, becoming more or less aggressive. This trend emerged regardless of the child's gender, the family's economic situation, or the area of Canada in which they lived.

10. Using cooperative learning strategies is a proven way to influence positive social behaviour. (T)

Cooperative learning is one of the most powerful learning/teaching tools yet devised for classroom use. These talk-based strategies can be employed in any subject area and with any age group; they advance a wide range of intellectual goals, helping develop the

critical-thinking and problem-solving skills students need to identify and be able to counter bias, discrimination, and bigotry of all kinds.

Cooperative learning helps students build more caring interactions with each other, reducing the likelihood of hurting peers or standing by while others are hurt.

11. Teachers intervene in about two-thirds of bullying situations. (F)

In *Making a Difference in Bullying* (2000), Debra Pepler, and Wendy Craig report that 71% of teachers perceive that they almost always intervene. However, Pepler and Craig's research shows that teachers actually intervene in just 14% of classroom bullying situations and only 4% of playground instances. People who bully become quite adept at hiding their inappropriate behaviour from teachers so that they don't get caught.

It is estimated that 80% of bullying goes unreported mainly because many students believe nothing can or will be done about it even if they do tell someone.

12. Not enough teachers consistently intervene to stop homophobic slurs, put-downs, and harassment. (T)

According to a recent survey by the Toronto District School board, "gay," used in a pejorative sense, is one of the first words learned by ESL students and "fag" is the most common put-down in schools in general. A 1997 survey on harassment conducted in Toronto schools by the Equity Department of the Toronto District School Board, confirmed that halls and classrooms were the areas in which students were most often tormented in this manner. A typical secondary-school student, for example, hears anti-gay slurs an average of 25 times a day. Both heterosexual and homosexual students are potential targets: *this type of harassment is about power not sexual orientation.*

Bullying based on homophobia is used to create an imbalance of power, isolate targets from their peers, and forestall a sympathetic response from bystanders. In his book,

Bullied Teacher: Bullied Student (2005), Les Parsons reports that fewer than 20% of high schools in North America have a non-discrimination policy that includes sexual orientation. This indicates an area that schools will need to address if they are to be effective in protecting all students.

If any part of an equity or bullying prevention policy is neglected, the whole policy is critically weakened; if some forms of bullying are ignored, bullying behaviours will flourish.

13. Behaviour codes and “zero tolerance” policies are effective ways to prevent bullying.

(F)

In schools across Canada and the United States, the term “zero tolerance” has come to be used to describe a non-discretionary policy for discipline enforcement in which mandatory consequences are used to punish students for transgressions, regardless of the circumstances that led to the (mis)behaviour.

“Zero tolerance” policies have limited impact on bullying, especially when a school only catches a fraction of bullying episodes. Even if most cases of bullying were addressed, however, implementing a school’s behaviour code and punishing student bullies according to that code will not stop bullying. Such punitive approaches simply reinforce a bully’s sense of how the world operates: the people who have power use it. They can’t understand why someone would aggress against them simply for aggressing against someone else. Furthermore, the student who bullies (who may also be the victim of bullying elsewhere) will not develop a new understanding of his or her actions through a punitive approach.

The formal and informal suspensions prescribed by most punitive behaviour codes may have short-term impact. These actions may momentarily stop a particular bullying episode, signal that the school takes the behaviour seriously, and emphasizes that the student who is bullying has a severe antisocial problem that requires attention.

However, they also indicate that whatever has been done up until then to control and change the student's behaviour has not been effective.

Bullying behaviour in schools requires creative and constructive responses involving clarity, compassion and creativity with respect to those who are bullied and those who bully others.

14. In a study of 35 countries, Canada ranked near the top in terms of bullying prevention.
(F)

A World Health Organization (WHO) Health Behaviours in School-aged Children (HBSC) survey (2002) ranked Canada 26th out of 35 countries on measures of bullying and 27th on measures of victimization. The survey also found that while other countries were improving their performance, Canada's ranking actually dropped.

What is bullying?

Bullying is the abuse of a power imbalance with the intent to harm someone.

Generally, bullying is repeated behaviour; however, depending on the impact on the individual student, it could also be a single event. The person who is targeted usually fears or learns to fear the power of the person who is bullying them.

People who bully may act alone or with accomplices against a single target or a series of individuals to inflict physical, emotional, or social damage. These bullying episodes may occur over a short period of time or go on indefinitely and are frequently organized and systematic. People who bully often rationalize their behaviour and feel justified in their actions. They rely on bystanders either to do nothing to aid the targets of bullying or to be an ally in their bullying behaviour.

Bullying includes such behaviours as physical assaults, unwanted sexual touching and assault, intimidation, threats, coercion, exclusion, rejection, gossip, spreading rumours and name-calling. It can be carried out in person or through text messaging, Internet sites or other parts of cyber space.

In September 2007, the Government of Ontario introduced a Policy and Program Memorandum (P/PM) on Bullying Prevention and Intervention for use by schools across the province. This P/PM includes a definition of bullying:

Bullying is typically a form of repeated, persistent, aggressive behaviour directed at an individual/s which is intended to cause (or should be known to cause) fear, distress and/or harm to another person's body, feelings, self-esteem, or reputation. Bullying occurs in a context where there is a real or perceived power imbalance.

Scope of the Problem

Bullying is a widespread phenomenon, considered to be a serious problem by students, parents and staff from many school communities. Painful memories of bullying experienced during childhood may continue well into adulthood.

According to bullying prevention expert Les Parsons (*Bullied Teacher: Bullied Student* (2005)), international studies have found that anywhere from a third to three-quarters of students have been involved in bullying situations. In *Gray's Guide to Bullying* (2004), Carol Gray reports that some 160 000 students in the United States miss school each day due to bullying. In their 2005 study, Dr. Tanya Beran and Dr. Leslie Tutty from the University of Calgary report that half the students in their study had been bullied and that the students in Grades 1-3 were bullied as frequently as the students in grades 4-6. Various studies have also found that 80% of bullying in schools is never reported.

Those who bully, those who are targeted, and those who witness bullying, are all susceptible to long-term, social and emotional problems. Researchers frequently discover a correlation between being bullied and depression and suicide. Between 1980 and 1997, the suicide rate in the United States for all 10-14 year-olds increased 109% (Les Parsons (2005)).

An increase in the use of electronic media has provided a new platform for bullying. According to a recent study by the York Region Parent Health Connection in Ontario, 60% of all students use chat rooms and instant messaging, 25% report receiving bullying messages, 16% admit to posting threatening messages, 14% have been threatened on the Internet, and 44% possess an email account without their parents' consent. Targets of cyberbullying are often reluctant to report the abuse in case their parents restrict or severely supervise their computer time.

Homophobia is frequently used to drive a wedge between the targets of bullies, whether heterosexual or homosexual, and their peers. A typical secondary student hears anti-gay slurs an average of 25 times a day. Among gay and lesbian youth, 80% report being

verbally abused and 17% physically attacked. Gay and lesbian youth comprise 30% of all teen suicides (Les Parsons (2005)).

In the face of so much and so many different types of bullying, some schools have had difficulty finding effective solutions.

Who Gets Bullied?

There is no logic or common element to who gets bullied. Students who bully are seeking power and choose to target others to gain that power.

A bully's attentions may be drawn by anything. A manner of speaking, (especially for students who are not perceived as sufficiently masculine or feminine), success in school, socio-economic factors, or a physical or intellectual exceptionality, for example, can result in a student being targeted. How people act, who they associate with, even the way they look or the clothes they wear can draw a bully's attention and turn someone into a target of bullying. The logic is only a perception of the person who bullies, rather than any fault of the person who is targeted.

Ironically, responsible, respectful students who possess a low propensity to violence, a mature level of emotional development, and a preference to resolve conflict with dialogue can be targeted for these very qualities. In the face of bullying, these same students are often labeled as "too sensitive," "passive," "timid," or "meek."

Dynamics of Bullying

When examining the issue of bullying in schools, a definition combining essential elements from a number of definitions serves as a useful guide.

- Bullying is aggression in any form: verbal, emotional, psychological, sexual or physical.
- When bullying occurs there is an imbalance of power; the person who bullies intends to subjugate the will of another person.
- Those who bully intend to harm someone physically, emotionally, or socially.
- Bullying is an act against an individual or a series of individuals who fear the bully's power. It is usually characterized by repetition, but not always. In all cases, an imbalance of power exists.
- Bullying is often organized and systematic.
- Students who bully often feel justified in their behaviour.
- In a school, bullying can occur anywhere and can be perpetrated by anyone. Those who bully can be students or adults.
- Those who bully can operate alone or with accomplices.
- Those who bully rely on bystanders or onlookers either doing nothing to stop the bullying or actually supporting the behaviour.
- A target of bullying may be a single individual or a series of individuals.
- Bullying can occur over a short period of time or go on indefinitely.

Peers and Bullying

Research indicates that at least 80% of bullying episodes go unreported. Some bystanders either fear the bully's power or want to avoid being labeled a "tattle-tale". A 2005 report by Debra Pepler, from York University's LaMarsh Centre, indicates that 85% of bullying episodes are witnessed by other students. It also reveals that three-quarters of the time, the witnesses contribute to the actions of the students who bully. That dynamic, coupled with the belief by about 50% of students that nothing effective would be done even if they did report a bullying episode, helps to explain why bystanders are so reluctant to intervene.

Although peers intervene infrequently, when they do intervene, their actions are highly effective.

Impact of Bullying

Bullying has a profound effect on those who bully, those who are bullied, and those who witness the bullying. More than 30 years ago, Leonard Eron's longitudinal examination of bullying demonstrated that most children identified as "bullies" in Grade 3 were also identified as "bullies" by the end of high school. By the age of 30, one out of four of those who bullied had a criminal record. The males who bullied had greater tendencies to be abusive in their adult intimate relationships than those who did not bully, and the females who bullied were more abusive to their children. The research also discovered a correlation between bullying and a range of social problems, including employment difficulties, alcohol and drug dependency, and divorce.

Other studies indicate that boys and girls who both bully and are bullied are more liable to suffer depression than other students and that girls who both bully and are bullied are more likely to self-mutilate or seriously contemplate, attempt or commit suicide.

Targets of bullying fear an increase in bullying if they tell, and suffer from a sense that nothing can be done about it anyway. Their shame and guilt at their inability to cope with the bullying make them anxious and unhappy. Targets suffer from the isolation and exclusion that removes them from the company of other children. Not surprisingly, they often feel less capable and less assured than those around them and need constant reaffirmation from adults. They may have difficulty forming interpersonal relationships and may present as academically troubled, regardless of their ability. Peter Randall indicates they may also have trouble sleeping, exhibit signs of depression, become physically ill, have trouble focusing on school work, and regularly resist attending school. Targets of bullying may begin taking the long way to or from school to avoid their tormentors, or may begin to steal to pay a bully's extortion.

Targets of bullying are often unable to remove the stigma of being a target no matter what they do. They may be put down by other students when working in groups, often picked last when teams are selected, or find that no one wants to work with them. They may be involved in and blamed for fights not of their own choosing. The more they're bullied, the

more isolated they become, and the more bullies are able to dehumanize them. As with bullies, targets are at significant risk of developing antisocial behaviours as adolescents and into adulthood. Bullying undermines the bullied child's sense of self and personal safety.

Bystanders also suffer negative outcomes as a result of witnessing bullying. They are often stirred up by the emotional content of the experience, frequently align with the student who bullies, learn to "blame the victim," or accept their own implicit failure by failing to intervene. A general lack of adult intervention can lead them to believe that those with power are allowed to aggress against others and achieve added status as a result of their behaviour. They may even take advantage of opportunities to adopt the same antisocial behaviour. For many children who witness bullying, it creates feelings of sadness, anxiety, and the sense that the world is not a safe place. It can greatly affect children's capacity to concentrate and to learn.

Bullying behaviour has a devastating impact on all members of the school community, including the students who bully. Some students who bully have learned attitudes and behaviours which undermine their ability to cooperate, to integrate themselves into their peer group, and to respect others' differences and rights.

Blaming of Targets

“Blaming the victim” is a common response to bullying episodes. In these cases, people often focus on the target’s behaviour rather than the behaviour of the student who bullies. The target is viewed as somehow weak, passive, or vulnerable and, therefore, someone who needs to be more assertive, to “stand up for themselves,” or to fight back, all in the mistaken belief that they need to develop strength of character. Sometimes students who are viewed as somewhat “different” or “strange” are told that all they need to do is change, when this is not the issue at all.

As well, if students who bully are respected athletes, class leaders, or popular, personable individuals, adults tend to like and believe them more than their targets, especially targets who also bully. In the case of students who bully but who are also bullied, adults may rationalize that they’re only “getting what they deserve”, or “asking for it” because of previous problems.

Some people also tend to underestimate the power and influence that students who bully hold, both over their targets and the witnesses to their bullying. Those who bully will assert that they were only “kidding around” and that the target of the bullying took it too seriously or was actually to blame for the behaviour. Bystanders will often substantiate the bully’s account and the intimidated target may even back the bully’s fabrications.