

BULLIES

When I was a young boy, the bully called me names, stole my bicycle, forced me off the playground. He made fun of me in front of other children, forced me to turn over my lunch money each day, threatened to give me a black eye if I told adult authority figures. At different times I was subject to a wide range of degradation and abuse – de-pantsing, spit in my face, forced to eat the playground dirt....To this day, their handprints, like a slap on the face, remain stark and defined on my soul.

Eric E. Rofes –
Making our Schools Safe for Sissies

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What bullying is

With all the focus that has surrounded teenage gangs and gun violence, it may be easy to forget that the teenage years are not the only times that children face violent behavior. In fact, aggressive behavior and bullying are even more common in elementary school than in junior and senior high! Some studies suggest that around 20 percent of all American children have been the victim of bullying at some point in elementary school, and about the same number have described themselves as engaging in some form of bullying behavior. Bullying can range from teasing, to stealing lunch money, to a group of students physically abusing a classmate.

Even though bullying is very similar to other forms of aggression, there can be some distinctive features:

- The intention of bullying behavior is purposeful, rather than accidental
- The goal is to actually gain control over another child through physical or verbal aggression.
- Usually bullies make their attack without any real reason, other than they see their victim as an easy target.
- Bullies are usually more popular with their peers than children who are simply aggressive.

What bullying can look like in elementary school

Being a victim is the most common in second grade, and the likelihood of being bullied decreases each year after that (see Figure 1). Bullies in elementary school are more likely to pick on children younger than themselves. Bullying is often very physical in nature, with open attacks of aggression being the most common. Boys are more likely to be doing the bullying, but girls and boys are equally likely to be victims.

What bullying can look like in junior high school

Bullies in junior high school are more likely to pick on people their same age, with boys more likely to be both bullies and victims. Girls, when they do bully, are more likely to verbally harass someone than be physical. Boys sometimes use physical attacks, but they are also more likely to threaten and harass one of their peers in a verbal way.

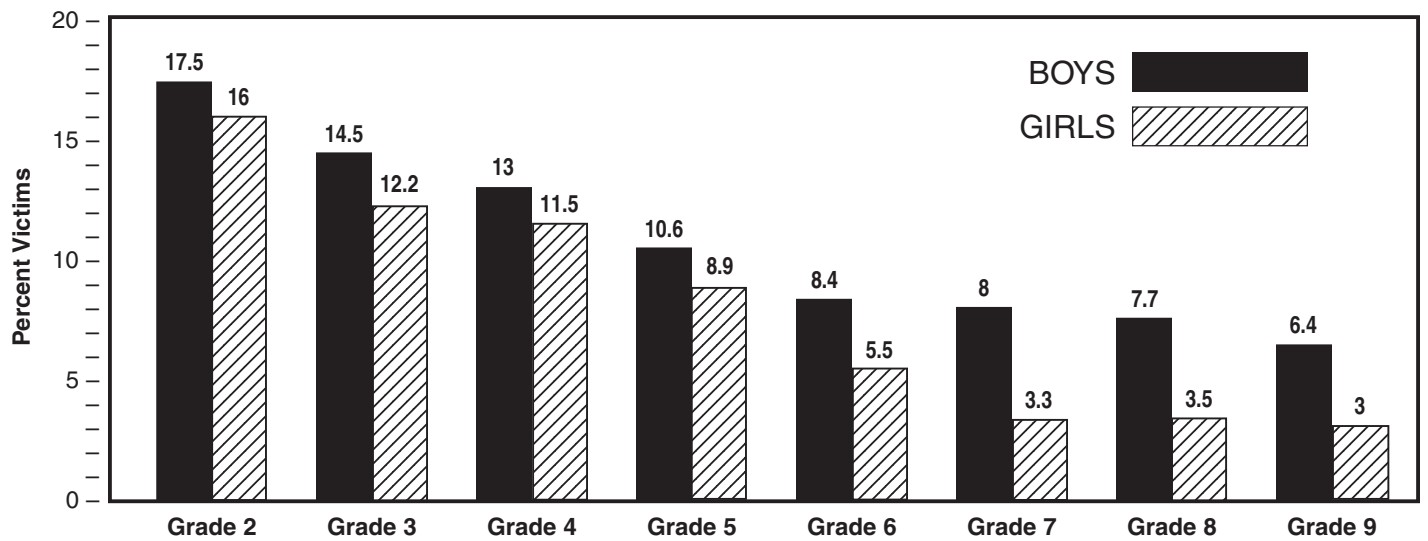


Figure 1. Percentage of student in different grades who reported being bullied (being exposed to direct bullying). (total number of boys = 42,390; total number of girls = 40,940.)

What it means to be a bully

Living in a society where wealth and power are admired, film heroes regularly beat up and kill others, and the weak and sick are often despised, it is no surprise that some children have learned to imitate these values. Research has shown that although bullies tend to have difficulty making friends, they do gain a certain level of popularity and peer status for their actions. It is possible that bullies may be enjoying more respect and admiration from their peers, and bullying behavior, especially among boys, can often be considered normal behavior.

Causes of bullying

Parental relationship

Bullies tend to come from families that are characterized as having little warmth or affection. These families also report trouble sharing their feelings and usually rate themselves as feeling less close to each other. Parent of bullies also tend to use inconsistent discipline and little monitoring of where their children are throughout the day. Sometimes parents of bullies have very punitive and rigid discipline styles, with physical punishment being very common. Bullies also report less feelings of closeness to their siblings.

School failure

Bullies are usually not model students. Very often they are not doing well in school and do not have good connections with their teachers.

Peer rejection

Researchers who are interested in how children form relationships with their peers have identified four categories that describe how children relate to peers, based on having children name children that they like as well as children that they don't like:

- Popular children are those that many children say they like, and few children say that they dislike. These children have developed positive social and communication skills.
- Controversial children are both actively liked and disliked by many of their peers. They tend to have good social skills, but also exhibit aggressive behavior. Class clowns often fit into this category.
- Rejected children are actively disliked by many of their peers and well liked by few of their peers. They show high rates of conflict, aggression, and immature play, and they have trouble taking the perspective of another person. They also have a hard time solving problems without resorting to violence. Rejected children are often prone to delinquency and dropping out of school later.
- Neglected children are seldom neither liked or disliked by their peers. Although they are very shy, and may have low self-esteem, many neglected children do very well in school and are able to develop friends as they approach adolescence.

Bullies come most often from the rejected category, but they sometimes are popular children as well. Victims can be selected from any category, although neglected children often are more likely to be victims.

What it means to be a victim

Unfortunately in recent years, our attitudes have changed about what it means to be a victim. Many parents and school officials are likely to blame victims of bullying for being weak and not being able to stand up for themselves. This, coupled with the fact that victims are usually warned by bullies not to tell anyone, makes it difficult for them to talk with parents and teachers.

Ten percent of children could be considered extreme victims who have been the victim of bullies at least once a week for a long period of time. These children are often considered younger, weaker, or sicker by their peers. Victims are just as likely to be boys as girls. They often report strong fears or dislike of going to school. These children often report closer feelings to parents and siblings, but whether this causes them to be victims or is simply how they cope with being bullied is unclear. Being labeled a victim is likely to follow children around from year to year. Most extreme victims report having few or no friends and being alone at recess and lunch.

Symptoms that a child might be a victim of bullying:

- acts moody, sullen, or withdraws from family interaction
- becomes depressed
- loses interest in school work, or grades drop
- loses appetite or has difficulty getting to sleep
- waits to use the bathroom at home
- arrives home with torn clothes, unexplained bruises
- asks for extra money for school lunch or supplies, extra allowance
- refuses to go to school (15 percent of all school absenteeism is directly related to fears of being bullied at school)
- wants to carry a protection item, such as a knife

Consequences of bullying

Short term effects of being a victim

Being a victim is very stressful for children. Many children develop a strong dislike of going to school, especially times like recess or gym class. Many victims begin to distrust all their peers at school and have problems making friends. Extreme victims can develop depression or physical illness.

Long term effects of being a victim

The long term consequences of being a victim vary a good deal. Most victims of bullying do well in school and are able to make friends as they grow older. Most victims, especially if they receive support from adults important in their lives, survive the experience of being bullied without long term effects.

Short term effects of being a bully

Even though bullies are sometimes viewed positively by their peers, they rarely are capable of maintaining close friendships. They are usually not doing well in school and not well liked by their teachers.

Long term effects of being a bully

Bullying is a behavior that is very often one of the first steps to more serious problems. Unless some kind of intervention takes place, the aggression of bullying often leads to more serious acts of delinquency and criminal activity. Bullies are also more likely to use drugs and alcohol as adolescents.

Suggestions for working with bullies:

- Work in small groups. It is often helpful to place bullies in groups with older children and have them engage in cooperative tasks. It will be necessary to provide a great deal of supervision.
- Reinforce children each time they engage in some degree of caring or pro-social behavior. It will be easier to establish more appropriate rules for interaction after they learn that there are more positive ways to gain attention and affection.
- Often children who are having a hard time relating to other children can learn some social skills with pets. Under close supervision, bullies may learn to care for and show affection to a dog or cat.
- Work with families to determine ways they can show warmth and affection to their children, and seek to develop a more consistent set of discipline. Sometimes it is helpful for families to become more involved in community activities and become friends with other parents.

Suggestions for working with victims:

- Often victims, particularly those who have been victimized many times, are withdrawn and are afraid of social interaction. These children often profit from social interactions with younger children, where they may be less afraid to open up or show some leadership.
- Practice with kids some strategies of ways they can respond when being bullied. Help them identify times when they are likely to be harassed, and see if there are

ways to avoid those situations. Determine the exact nature of the bullying behavior, and help them practice some things to say or do. Here are some specific strategies:

- *Laugh or ignore comments or teasing. Bullies delight in you being scared and getting a big reaction. Eventually they will leave you alone.*
 - *Tell them to buzz off or shout GO AWAY!! Say it as angrily as you can and walk away immediately. Practice in the mirror.*
 - *Stay with a crowd – bullies usually pick on kids who are alone. Suggest that children walk to school or sit on the bus with someone who can protect them.*
 - *If you are alone with a crowd that picks on you, ask him or her why she is mean to you.*
- For both groups, it is helpful to pair them up with children who are neither bullies nor victims, as they can be great teachers of appropriate behavior.

What schools can do:

- Get an accurate assessment of the problem. An anonymous survey is a very effective way to learn about the true nature of a problem at a particular school.
- Maintain higher visibility. Most schools report that most of their bullying problems disappear when playgrounds, bathrooms, etc., are properly monitored. Supervising recess is especially important.
- Have students develop class rules about bullying that are then consistently reinforced. It is important to start this in very early grades to gain a handle on this problem before it gets out of control.
- Conduct in-service training for both teachers and parents. Stress that bullying is not just boys being boys or high spirited behavior but potentially damaging for both victims and bullies. Bullying is not something that people grow out of, but one of the first signs of more serious problems. It is also important to remember that verbal harassment can be just as scary and intimidating as physical attacks.
- Have serious talks with bullies, and make them realize that you are aware of their behavior and are not going to tolerate it. It is also important to develop ways to help them learn more positive social skills.

What parents can do:

- Create a safe environment for your children to tell you about being bullied. Many times kids are embarrassed to tell their parents what happened, thinking that their parents will blame them. *Sometimes kids at school pick on other kids or say mean things to them. Does this ever happen to you at school?*
- Reinforce the idea that if they are being bullied, it is not their fault. Don't make your child feel like a wimp. *The person that is picking on you is the one with a problem, not you. Bullies pick on people for no real reason, but it is just because they have problems of their own, not because of anything you have done.*
- Don't teach your kids to hit or fight back; it will only make things worse. Here are five steps that are good to suggest:
 - *Ignore*
 - *Move away*
 - *Ask to stop*
 - *Tell firmly to stop*
 - *Tell an adult.*
- Notify teachers whenever an incident happens, be prepared to be persistent until some action is taken! *Ask the teacher: Would it be possible to have the class get involved in a discussion about bullies, or to separate my child from those who are bothering them?*
- If your child is unwilling to report another child's behavior to a teacher, offer to make the complaint yourself. Stress that it can be done in a way that is confidential.

Resources

- Verdine Ryder (Family Life Educator). *Beat the bully problem.* This book provides self-help skill and pro-active solutions of bullying behavior. Cost \$5.95, call 713-871-3172 to order.
- G.M. Batsche and H.M. Knoff. *Bullies and their victims: Understanding a pervasive problem in the schools.* *School Psychology Review*, 23, 2, 165-174.

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