



The Bully Cycle

by Joan Teach, PhD

BULLYING HAS BECOME A CRISIS

in this country and across the world. It is listed as the number one cause of school absenteeism in the United States, and is closely linked to teen depression and suicide. In a Harvard study of high school students, ninety-six percent reported having been bullied at least once in their lives, eighty-five percent reported witnessing bullying, and forty-six percent indicated that they refused to go to extracurricular activities because the bullies are there. Sadly, two percent of their classmates committed suicide after consistent bullying.

Other studies report that 282,000 students are physically attacked in our secondary schools each month. It is a sad reflection to learn that at least one event of bullying occurs every seven minutes. It is appalling to note that adults intervene in only four percent of these cases. Peers help eleven percent of the time, leaving eighty-five percent of the victims on their own with no assistance.

We know that children and adolescents with ADHD are often targeted by bullies and may later turn around and become the bully. Children play many roles in the bullying cycle. Sorting out each role can be difficult, as many of the bullying episodes are carefully carried out behind your back and out of the sight of any adult. What interventions can change this vicious cycle?

Defining bullying

Bullying is a form of aggressive behavior that is intentional, hurtful or threatening, and persistent. This aggression can be physical or psychological, and it is repeated. There is an imbalance of strength, allowing one individual power and dominance over the other.

Where is the line between friendly teasing and bullying? The bully intends to harm, intends to create fear, and intends to keep repeating the behavior. He or she is delighted with the power of intimidating another lesser-powered youngster. The key words here are intends harm and delights in control by power.

When the situation is one that involves teasing, both youngsters come to the situation with the same power or sense of ability. They banter about an issue and laugh at the outcome.

When the abuse becomes willful, the situation changes into bully-



ing. Bullying is unfair and one-sided. It leaves the victim feeling hurt, frightened, threatened, left out on purpose. There is a line between rough play and bullying when the one with the power sets out to hurt the other. It is a power play. Hitting, teasing, taunting, spreading rumors, gossiping, stealing, excluding, and intending to harm are all means of exercising power. When the activity is repeated and the thrill of the power is accelerated, the attacker is a bully on a quest.

Bullies seldom own up to their behavior. They make excuses to adults for what happened. They play innocent, insisting that it was an accident. They explain that they had no idea that the victim wasn't having fun, or felt embarrassed, intimidated, or hurt.

Bullies target their victims. They want power, so they look for and target students who are smaller, younger, or less adept. They seek out those who exude a lack of self-confidence. The shy child,

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and ADHD



FOR MORE INFO

Do you know the signs your child is being bullied? Or that your child may be bullying others? Visit chadd.org for more information on anti-bullying resources and programs.



the one with slowed speech, someone who walks awkwardly, wears glasses, keeps to himself or herself—all these children unfortunately become prey.

Students with ADHD are often targeted due to their acting-out behaviors. Sometimes they are cultivated as a friend and then attacked. Their impulsivity is seen as vulnerability; the bully taunts until the child with ADHD retaliates, and then the bully retreats so the child with ADHD is caught in the act and takes the brunt of punishment. After frequent attacks, the child with ADHD often turns and becomes the bully, reveling in the power of finally being in control. The cycle is vicious and needs to be diffused and understood.

Who is the bully?

Many people associate the bully with a ruffian from the wrong side of the tracks, a child from a poor family who has a history of violent behavior. This may be true, but not always. It is true that boys tend to be more physical, obvious, and direct in their tactics. Girls on the other hand tend to be more verbal and secretive, and enlist others to help do their dirty work.

Bullies come from all walks of life. Some are the most popular

leaders of the schools. Some are those who are aggressive and want more. Some are driven by impulsive behavior and find ways to gain recognition, although through the wrong means.

Children with ADHD are recorded as being four times more prone to bully. We must examine each case, however, to determine how the bully process emerged. We are not making excuses, just trying to see the process of this behavioral development. Those with learning differences are more likely to be both the victim and the bully as they try to defend themselves and retaliate. Thirty percent of children with learning differences find they are victims of peer rejection, and therefore are vulnerable targets.

Bullying behavior frequently emerges from victims who have had enough. The child who is being picked begins to have violent feelings. Retaliation at all cost becomes his or her new mantra. Witnessing physical abuse at home or being abused leads to lashing out at others. The power gained by bullying creates a rush that develops into a need for more power.

Cyberbullying

The National Crime Prevention Council reports that more than forty-two percent of teens with Internet access say they have been bullied online. Twenty-one percent reported receiving messages that were threatening. Yes, messaging is a way of life, but fifty-eight percent of teens admit to sending mean and threatening responses to one another. Of course, the “don’t-tell-an-adult” rule is alive and well. So, parents and teachers, you are purposely kept out of the loop.

Our ability to communicate instantly and respond in seconds makes the instant-messaging world a ripe field for attack, smear, and harassment. Unfortunately, anything in print is taken as gospel truth, so rumors can become rampant. Many times the cyberbullying victim is the last to know the ugliness written about him or her.

Attacks through technology come in two guises—direct attacks and attack by proxy. Direct is as it sounds, a frontal-attack text harassment, perhaps created through a blog or website. It is easy to slander by sending pictures, broadcasting internet polls or surveys, creating malicious codes, porn, impersonation. Intimidation by proxy involves getting someone else to do your dirty work. This includes, but is not limited to, passing slander between cyber buddies for an attack.

For example, a bully arranges a group attack by sending a widespread message to harass a student at lunch by ignoring her, bumping into her, and spilling food on her. This message is sent to many students and results in an unexpected, underhanded unstoppable catastrophe. Nowadays, if they see students ganging up on someone, teachers or other adults soon suspect cyberbullying.

Cyber messages may be just rude or vicious and are often written without truth. Passwords can be hacked, leaving the bully an open field to impersonate their victim. The reader has no idea the message was a fraud and the perpetrator cannot be tracked. There is no limit to the damage a true cyber bully can produce.



Sample Comeback Lines

Comeback lines are not return insults, but can help increase the vulnerable child's confidence—which discourages the bully. Encourage children to think carefully as to when these comeback lines may be appropriate, and to practice them with an adult before using them.

- › Oh, get a life.
- › How does it feel to be this mean?
- › Are you talking to me?
- › You're wasting your breath.
- › If you say so, okay.
- › I hear you, but I don't care.
- › Are you finished?
- › Are you satisfied?
- › I hope your nasty attitude makes you feel better.
- › I couldn't care less.
- › Keep talking. I'm not listening!
- › Congratulations for being the King of Putdowns.
- › Are you bored yet?
- › You should be making me feel bad, but you are not worth it.
- › I should report your behavior, but you're not worth it.
- › Mission accomplished, so move on.
- › You are really just wasting my time.



What are the consequences of bullying?

Victims of bullying are at risk for social, emotional, and psychiatric problems that may persist into adulthood. They tend to internalize their problems and are faced with bouts of depression. They feel insecure, cry easily, and are anxious and withdrawn, as well as feeling weak and submissive. Being unhappy leads to withdrawing from friends. Victims stop participating in extracurricular activities and feel unsafe in school. Often their grades drop, creating another issue that compounds their problem.

The bully loses his sense of life's balance and is often disruptive, hyperactive, aggressive, and depressed. Needing the feel of power she develops social anxiety, has difficulty concentrating, is highly impulsive, and becomes more distracted, inattentive, hyperactive, and socially maladjusted.

Both the victim and the bully experience an emotional interference and often have symptoms of reading and writing problems. If a learning difference exists, these symptoms are compounded. These students often experience elevated anxiety and have a greater risk of dropping out of school. The stigma of the bully cycle increases the incidence of drug and alcohol abuse. Adolescents displaying these behaviors are four times more likely to be convicted of a crime by age twenty-four. There is no winner in bullying.

Why victims don't just stand up for themselves

Remember, the bullying cycle is a situation of power. Victims want to please. They frequently believe that what has happened to them is really their fault. They have been told to behave, and try to. Their parents and their schools forbid fighting, and they try not to.

If the victim does fight back, the bully is savvy enough to back away, leaving the victim to take the blame for the altercation. The victim is told to ignore the bully, but the bully knows from the look of fright in the victim's eyes that he or she has won. The more scared the expression, the stronger the taunt, leading to greater bully power. Often the abuse accelerates to a level of danger. The victim's safety is in jeopardy and there is the possibility of a tragic outcome.

How does one stand up to a bully?

We've already determined that running from the bully is not the answer. Changing schools is not the answer. Schools must be safe environments where bullying ceases. A different school may only shift the child's vulnerability to the next bully. Instead, let's give our children survivor tools. But how?

› **Change the victim mindset.** First of all, the vulnerable child needs to get over the idea that he or she should be a victim. He or she did not create this abuse, and it is not his or her fault. Sensitive children feel that they caused the abuse and that no one can come to save them and make it right. Some become so frustrated that they react just as the bully expected. This makes them doubly vulnerable. Victims are not to suffer in silence and be pounded into submission. And they must not feel they can ignore the taunts and make the bully go away! That gives the bully the message that he or she has won.

› **Teach children to have an "I can and I will" attitude.** One of the best preventive interventions is body language. Show children how to create an assertive stance, and help them practice. Teachers can also make this into a classroom activity. Pride in self will support a child for a lifetime. Rehearse until the child can produce a look of confidence, by learning to:

- look the bully directly in the eyes.
- hold his or her head high.
- maintain eye contact and speak clearly.
- make sure of his or her movements.
- make his or her movements crisp and sure.

Parents and teachers can talk to children about the importance of personal hygiene and looking well put-together. Children and adolescents may be at the sloppy age and careless about their appearance, but encourage them that a change in appearance may be a first line of defense against being attacked.

› **Respond with appropriate assertive comeback lines in vulnerable situations.** Help children learn to use such statements wisely, so they do not backfire. (See the sidebar above.)

Some children with ADHD are not readily aware of social situ-

actions and need direct instructions for those times when they just don't get what is happening. They need to learn that their whole presence is their best defense. Teach them to:

- remain cool at all cost.
- avoid the temptation to throw in the next barb and foil with the next sword.
- use a comeback line instead, one that is brief and to the point, giving the message that the bully did not get to them.
- look the bully in the eye.
- have a poker face that shows no anger. Having hurt or anger on your face makes you vulnerable. Practice making a blank face in front of a mirror, a poker face that does not reveal any of your feelings.
- avoid trading insults.

➤ **Put STOP into action.** Once children have developed these vital assertiveness skills, teach them to use the STOP method to put their skills into action.

- Begin by looking your attacker **S**traight into his or her eyes. Hold your head high and stand with confidence, even if you are shaking.
- Next, be sure no emotion shows on your **T**otally poker face. Remember showing emotions makes you vulnerable.
- With a strong voice state your **O**pinion with your comeback statement.
- Now that you have shown your strength, **P**retend the bully does not exist. Totally ignore him or her.

See the sidebar on page 26 for tips to help you remember the STOP method of bullyingproofing.

What about the "bystanders"?

We've talked about the bully and the victim, but we have ignored the other players in this saga, the witnesses.

Seldom does a bullying event occur without witnesses. The bully needs someone to see how powerful she is and to verify her existence. She wants a following, to be a hero, so someone must see and tell. However, these witnesses, or bystanders, come in many "flavors":

- First there is the *vanilla* bystander. This youngster watches and sees, but does nothing. He is just there.
- Then there is the *strawberry* witness who continues the harassment, encouraging and cheering on the taunting.
- Next is the *neapolitan*, who takes on the flavor of the most popular. This bystander is afraid of making his own decision or taking a stand. He is unable to be anything but what someone else tells him to be or do.
- Then comes the *blueberry* witness. This bystander comes waving a flag for the victim. She boos the bully and sides with the victim. This show of force rolls over the

bully, diffusing the strength of power that the bully is fighting for.

Parents, teachers, and other adults need to encourage the role of the blueberry witness. We need children and adolescents to feel empowered by befriending the victim. We need to assist them in identifying the roles of bully, victim, and bystander. We need to give each child a right to be safe and secure. We need to instruct and encourage children to support one another. We need to make it acceptable to report bullying as inappropriate behavior. Developing a safe environment, we need to encourage the loners to stay on the more traveled paths, to encourage them to have someone with them, especially the supportive blueberry variety. Being safe is to be less vulnerable.

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The STOP Method of Bullyproofing

Here is a chart to help you remember the STOP method:

- S**traight into the bully's eyes
- T**otal poker face
- O**pinion—state your comeback
- P**retend bully is not there—total ignoring



Is your child's school truly involved?


As we know, a lot of bullying happens in or around school property and involves student-to-student interaction. Many schools have a no-bullying policy and really want to enforce it. Often action is impossible, as teachers do not witness the events, students have difficulty relaying what happened, and many denials and twistings of facts occur. Schools that make a difference use a preventive approach.

Psychologist Dan Olweus studied the school community and created the most impressive bullying prevention program to date, in which changing bystander behavior is the key. (See the article in the December 2009 *Attention*, and visit olweus.org, the Olweus Bullying Prevention Program website.) Students discuss and define bullying. They are encouraged to make a commitment to speak up when they witness a bullying event and to befriend and stand up for the victim. They are helped to express their

feelings and to speak openly and candidly through role-play and interactive activities. When the whole community works together, a difference can be made.

Assess the program that is in place in the school your child attends, or if you're a teacher, the school where you teach. What interventions have been put into action? What more can you do? Remember, there are positive messages for us all:

- The student who bullies and who receives help can become aware of his or her behavior and change his or her focus on life. Of course, the earlier the intervention begins, the better.
- The student who is bullied can be empowered to assert himself or herself, move beyond the attacker, and heal.
- Bystander witnesses can learn to become empowered to care and stand up against bullying.

We can change the bullying cycle if we all work together. 

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