



Editors' Comment

Although bullying among school children is an old phenomenon, it was not until the 1970s that the practice became the subject of more systematic research. As a result, parents, schools and mental health professionals have become increasingly aware that bullying is a pervasive problem and that its negative effects on the victim, the bully, and the school climate are considerable. According to the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, 50% of children are bullied and 10% are victims of bullying on a regular basis. A number of children and adolescents have reported that they suffered side effects of bullying – a drop in grades, an increase in anxiety, depression, a loss of social life.

In this issue of the *NYU Child Study Center Letter*, we discuss the critical importance of peer relationships in promoting healthy social development in the pre-adolescent and adolescent years, the nature of cliques, the characteristics of bullies and victims. Emphasis is placed on strategies for intervention and prevention by both parents starting at an early age and schools. In view of recent research that environment plays a major role in shaping children's social behavior and that children may learn bullying by example, prevention efforts become even more critical.

AG/HSK

Social Life in Middle and High School: dealing with cliques and bullies

Introduction

As children grow they experience many biological, cognitive, and socio-emotional changes. Along with these developments, come changes in their social interactions with the world in which they live. In the toddler and early elementary years, children's social experiences are determined mostly by family and school contacts. By the end of elementary school, children have begun to form relationships independent of their families.

As their children's social world expands parents have less control over their activities and children make their own social choices. In the middle school preadolescent years, they begin to develop more advanced interpersonal relationships, and peer approval and acceptance become more important. In the high school adolescent years peer relationships become even more critical. As teens form close relationships with others, they struggle to understand who they are and where they fit it; they start to form their own identity in relation to others – a critical component of healthy social development.

Adolescence is a tough and exciting time, with many biological, cognitive, and social/emotional challenges, as well as the potential for many accomplishments. Most teens navigate these years successfully, but for some these transitional years are socially difficult. Social styles differ -- some teens want to join groups, others prefer one or two close friends. Some adolescents prefer to be alone but some are socially neglected – they may not be actively put down or excluded from a central group of kids, rather,

they're just ignored and often alone. Teens who are different physically, emotionally, or behaviorally may fall in this category. There are also teens who are socially rejected. These youth often make repeated attempts to be part of a group of students but are rejected because they are antagonistic or unable to behave in a socially appropriate manner, such as teens with untreated ADHD or overly aggressive behavior. Some children and teens become victimized by bullies and often feel isolated and insecure; they are at risk for loss of self-esteem, depression and other long-term effects. The problem is pervasive, and each day at least 160,000 children in the United States miss school due to bullying.

Why do some kids act so mean? Why are some kids victimized? Is it just part of growing up, the ordinary give-and-take among kids? Research shows that bullying can take an emotional, as well as a physical, toll.

Joanna, a 7th grader, likes to wear her favorite cap backwards, a style that was mocked by a group of girls in her class. When Joanna continued to wear her cap backwards two girls grabbed it, ran off, and tossed it into a garbage pail. Joanna has begun to find excuses not to go to school.

Eddie, a high school sophomore, wanted to join the track team. Because he's overweight, Eddie was teased by track team members when he tried out; they taunted him by calling him "tub of lard" or "fat blimp." Since then Eddie has complained of vague physical symptoms and has not pursued other sports.

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When do cliques and bullies start to matter?

Some children show preferences for friends at an early age. By 9 or 10, as children become aware of differences, they begin to form cliques. At 10 to 12 years of age, as they separate from parents, identification with peers may become exaggerated and cliques may form and change frequently. By middle and high school, as the issue of belonging becomes even more critical, cliques and bullies become more prominent. Bullying in schools peaks in middle school and drops off by grades 11 and 12.

Defining cliques

Cliques are small, exclusive groups of friends who share common traits and common interests (music, dress, sports, etc.). Each member is either directly or indirectly connected to each other member. Cliques usually refer to groups of girls; however boys are also involved in cliques. There are usually hierarchies of cliques among teens, from the populars to the losers, and there are often many cliques in schools, including jocks, arties, brains, nerds, druggies, freaks, preppies and normals.

Cliques have a positive side

Normal adolescent development often revolves around cliques - joining cliques, wanting to join cliques, or being excluded from cliques. Cliques can have a strong positive effect on self-worth. They provide a social niche and help kids develop a sense of belonging, support, and protection. Cliques boost self-esteem by making kids feel wanted, and they enable the clique member to develop a sense of identity and to regulate social interactions.

The downside of cliques

Cliques can be hostile to other kids and other cliques. In some cases clique members can become nasty to outsiders by putting them down, using teasing, taunting, backstabbing, and even violence. Although girls are socialized to suppress physical displays of aggression, it can take the form of belittling and intimidating behavior. Cliques can blur individuality and prevent members from mixing with

members of other groups. They usually require some degree of conformity – in appearance, attitude, or behavior. They can oust members for no apparent reason, and they can pressure kids into group activities in order to fit in, creating interpersonal conflict and bully behavior.

Defining bullying

Some teasing is inevitable in childhood and adolescence. When, however, teasing becomes taunting, the situation becomes serious. Bullying is an unhealthy situation in which a student or group of students use superior size or power to win concessions over a vulnerable student or group of students. A victim of bullying can be exposed repeatedly and over time to negative actions by one or more students.

Negative actions can occur:

- verbally through threats, teasing, and name-calling
- physically through hitting, pushing, kicking, pinching, or restraining
- nonverbally and nonphysically through making faces, obscene gestures, intentionally excluding someone from a group, refusing to comply with someone's wishes, and spreading rumors.

What kids say about being bullied

They made fun of me about my hair. It was always frizzy. And it really hurts when I get teased, so I skip recess. - Anna, 12

They say I'm stupid; I try to ignore it but they keep saying it and they wrote it on my locker. - Dennis, 13

All it did was make me more of a loner. - Alex, 14

I get teased 'cause I'm friends with the nerds. - Cindy, 13

They told everyone I was a slut but it wasn't true. - Elke, 14

Gender differences

Both boys and girls bully, but there are differences in their actions. Boys who bully are more likely to be identified because their acts are more physical. Bullying between girls

is generally verbal, more subtle, and indirect, such as ridiculing and starting rumors. Girls tend to bully in a group and victimize girls, while boys tend to bully both girls and boys.

Recognizing a bully

It is difficult to spot a bully through only brief observation. There are, however, some behaviors and reactions that typically occur between a bully and his/her victims. He may be feared or avoided, or peers may be ingratiating or pandering. He may be intolerant or judgmental and, although unprovoked, may express anger in verbal or physical actions.

What are bullies like?

In general bullies

- need to feel powerful and in control
- choose victims who dislike conflict
- are good at talking themselves out of trouble
- derive satisfaction from inflicting suffering
- lack empathy for victims
- explain their actions by complaining that they were provoked
- are unhappy at school and do not feel a sense of belonging
- are angry, impulsive, and have low self-esteem
- are likely to engage in problem behaviors (criminality and drug use) later in life.

Recognizing a victim

A victim may be reluctant to go to school, complain of frequent illnesses and make trips to the nurse's office, show a drop in grades, come home with torn clothing, bruises, and report "lost" possessions, be afraid of new things, avoid going to the bathroom in school, show increased anger and irritability, and have few friends.

What are victims like?

In general victims are

- quiet and shy in temperament and sensitive
- less inclined to fight back or to be assertive
- likely to have few friends and little social support
- not confident in their physical

abilities and strengths

- youngest or newest in a group or school
- insecure and have low self-esteem
- prone to be anxious, depressed, have physical complaints
- sometimes irritating, socially awkward, or insecure
- physically weak, easily submit to peer demands, reward attacks by displaying distress or giving up desired resources
- often recipients of repeated acts of bullying.

Victims can be passive or proactive. Passive victims are often lonely, have difficulty asserting themselves in a group, react to bullying by crying or withdrawing, and seem to prefer adult company. They tend to "normalize" in adulthood but continue to have low self-esteem and are prone to depression. Proactive victims tend to be hot-tempered, hyperactive, and aggressive. At times they can be annoying or irritating to others. They often provoke incidents only to become victimized by their own actions. They may be clumsy or immature and may, in turn, try to bully weaker peers. These kids can be mistaken for bullies because they always seem to be in the middle of fights and arguments.

How Schools Can Help

School administrators and teachers must establish school wide initiatives to counteract bullying and to promote pro-social behavior, encompassing the following principles:

Differentiate between bullying and normal conflict

Conflicts are part of childhood and can develop within or outside of a clique. Students in middle and high school struggle to individuate and define themselves and are involved in many normal conflicts. Conflict is not necessarily bullying. It's not bullying when teasing is friendly and playful or when two students of about equal strength or power argue or fight. When children are part of normal conflict they are learning many new skills, such as negotiation,

compromise, and resolution.

Bully/victim conflicts, however, are not healthy under any circumstance, and children should not be expected to handle bullies on their own. Once a bully situation is identified adults must act immediately, take a strong stand, and trust the victim. Help and training to handle conflicts should be provided. Schools can use strategies such as anger management, conflict resolution, mediation and open communication. A brief description of each of these strategies follows:

Anger management teaches individuals to control anger rather than having anger control them. They learn to become aware of anger signs in themselves, to back off, cool down, and take time out. This gives them time to review their choices, consider the consequences of each choice, and pick the safest one.

Conflict resolution teaches individuals to think about the conflict and their own part in it, to talk about it and listen carefully to the other person. This will set the stage for working conflict out and arriving at a compromise so everyone wins.

Mediation involves asking a third party to help students talk and listen to each other. Each expresses their side of the conflict. Options for resolution are created and an agreement is reached.

Bullying prevention programs

Effective bullying prevention programs can be implemented in school settings. To be effective the program should be permanent, rather than temporary, and administered by adults who are positive role models. The program should work to develop a school (and ideally a home) environment characterized by:

Positive interest and involvement by adults
Firm limits to unacceptable behavior

Non-hostile, non-physical negative consequences for inappropriate behavior.
In addition, students must understand that the appropriate response to violence is reporting it to an adult, such as a parent or school faculty.

Three levels of intervention should be put in place:

- 1) **School-wide intervention**
 - a. Anonymous student bully/victim questionnaire
 - b. Bully Prevention Coordinating Committee
 - c. Staff training
 - d. School-wide rules against bullying
 - e. Coordinated system of supervision during breaks
 - f. Involvement of parents in anti-bullying efforts
- 2) **Classroom level intervention**
 - a. Reinforcement of school-wide rules
 - b. Regular meetings regarding bullying and peer relations
 - c. Class parent meetings
- 3) **Individual level intervention**
 - a. Individual meetings with students who bully
 - b. Meeting with children who are targets of bullying
 - c. Meetings with parents of children involved

Steps for individual intervention

- Intervene immediately; talk to the bully and victim separately.
- Make other students aware of consequences to bullying and reiterate school's no-tolerance policy.
- Phone parents of the bully and victim as soon as possible to involve them in the plan of action.
- Consult with school staff, alert and inform them of the situation.
- If the situation does not change remove the bully, not the victim, from the classroom.

How Parents Can Help

Parents can take an active part in helping children effectively navigate any difficult social experience they may face during the middle and high school years. As a parent you can:

- Monitor your own behavior and aggression.
- Provide an appropriate model of conflict resolution.
- Be concerned and responsive whether your child is the

bully or the victim.

- Encourage your child to shop around and to make friends on the basis of who they are, not which group they belong to.
- Know your child's friends.
- Help boost your child's self-esteem so that she can stand up for herself and her individuality.
- Help your child understand that it's important to be oneself, and if others don't like it, they aren't true friends.
- Be aware of the climate in your child's school and the attitude of the principal and teachers – you can get a sense of the quality of daily school life by volunteering to accompany the class or in some other capacity.
- Be alert and responsive if your child is having trouble.
- Let your child know that you don't expect him/her to handle all problems and that you're available.

The first source for outside help with a problem is the teacher. If you can't work things out with the teacher, go to the school guidance counselor, psychologist, or principal.

Participation of the whole school community in partnership with parents is the key to a successful anti-bullying program and the establishment of a climate of respect and learning. A clear and consistent message must be sent to bullies and victims alike that bullies are not in charge and that all children will be safe.

About the Author

Joshua Mandel, Psy.D., is the Director of the NYU Child Study Center School-Based Intervention Program which was developed within the weeks following the World Trade Center attacks and provides services to the Lower Manhattan schools. Dr. Mandel is currently a co-investigator of research exploring the efficacy of anger management programs in middle and high schools. He also works with schools to help develop crisis teams to react in emergency situations and is

co-chair of a School Working Group subcommittee of the National Child Traumatic Stress Network.

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