

The Bullying Epidemic

Thoughts by Dr. Joseph Mallet, Psy.D.

www.cops.usdoj.gov/pdf/e12011405.pdf

“Bullies have poor self esteem – that’s why they bully. Boys bully more often than girls. Bullies have trouble making friends. Victims have nothing to do with what is happening to them. My child is mean to others, but that’s OK because people just have different personalities. We can’t expect everyone to just get along. My child would never be mean to others. Bullying doesn’t happen in this (private) school – we pay good money and kids just don’t do that.”

These are all statements heard in conversations regarding bullying. Among the many misconceptions regarding bullying, the dominate thought is that bullies bully because they have poor self-esteem. However, the research shows that most bullies have high self-esteem and a sense of entitlement (<http://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/intense-emotions-and-strong-feelings/201010/do-bullies-really-have-low-self-esteem>) that gives them a sense of superiority over others. They may have an over inflated self-esteem. Bullies feel that as long as they can manipulate their victims they feel good about themselves. If the victim resists this victimization the bully then doesn’t feel as good about themselves and self esteem drops. Then bullies have to look for other victims (like a meanness “fix”) to keep themselves feeling good about themselves. They have learned to feel good about themselves by making others feel bad. Also shaming others may be a skill easily learned by those who bully. The person who bullies others may easily find the “shame trigger” in others and use it to increase their power and control.

Many reports from bullies suggest that they do not know “why” they bully, and many don’t see what they do to others as “bullying.”

(<http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=125065190>)

So there seems to be a “disconnect” between what we presume is taught in the home regarding care and respect for others, and what happens when children are away from their parents. My guess is that this is *not* from lack of education on the subject as schools have worked very hard with their bully prevention programs. How many times have educators said, “treat others as you want to be treated.” It’s the Golden Rule. Every kid can recite some version of it. So why does bullying continue? The “disconnect” may have something to do with empathy, desensitization from incredible exposure to media with all sorts of images and characters that are idolized for being “cool”. The “disconnect” may continue when adults discuss adult issues in front of “young ears.” That may be in the home or in the car on the cell phone when children can hear an adult’s discontent and anger directed toward another. They may not be able to put this into context. Whether the “disconnect” can be generated from overexposure, desensitization or lack of empathy - kids who bully can be particularly cruel. The “disconnect” really continues when one knows it is “easier” and “safer” to say mean and cruel things to others when there is not a face to face context. Things can be said online/texting/instagram/email/etc. that one would never say in person.

There are characteristics of the human species that start to demonize others because they are different. It is, in a sense, tribalism and human characteristic gone awry. From Wikipedia, “The Lord of the Flies” is a novel by Nobel Prize-winning author William Golding about a group of British boys stuck on a deserted island who try to govern themselves, with disastrous results. Its stances on the already-controversial subjects of human nature and individual welfare versus the common good have stuck a cord for those trying to understand this tribalism in human nature and how to rectify it. Tribalism in human nature?

<http://www.npr.org/2011/09/07/140256963/writers-reflect-on-childhood-torment-in-dear-bully>

What is Bullying?

Bullying is an act that is **done on purpose**. Bullies **use their power** (physical size, age, social status, computer skills, etc.) to threaten, harass, or hurt others. Bullying **happens over and over** to one person or a group of people. Bullying happens in four basic ways: physical, verbal, indirect, and cyber bullying.

Physical bullying happens when there is hitting, kicking, punching, taking peoples' belongings or other acts that hurt people physically and that happen repeatedly (not just one time).

Verbal bullying happens when people are teased in a mean way or called hurtful names.

Indirect bullying happens when people spread mean rumors about others, when people are intentionally kept out of a "group," or when mean gestures are made towards others.

Cyber bullying happens when people are teased, taunted, or threatened through the use of e-mail, cell phone, text messaging, instant messaging, or other electronic methods.

What to do?

I have noticed over the years many boys and girls who don't fall victim to bullying. What makes these kids different? These are not superhuman kids. These kids are sometimes goofy or nerdy or awkward. They are kids that don't allow other people to make them feel shamed or bad about themselves. They are confident, they stand tall and are even able to laugh at their own weakness – not be shamed by them. **These kids have found their confidence.** They can laugh at themselves. They find their strength by being kind to others.

Those who bully may excel at finding the "shame trigger" in others and use it to maintain power and control over the "victim".

"Nobody can make you feel inferior without your consent." Eleanor Roosevelt

Parents can help teach their children self-confidence and inner strength by:

1. using/practicing "scripts" (giving the right words for certain situations) for standing up for oneself and not letting bullies emotionally manipulate, and to help by preventing "bystander apathy" (basically helping out when they see someone being treated unkindly),
2. by encouraging child to ask an adult for help if the child's efforts are not successful, and
3. by communicating with the school, including teachers, administration and other parents about putting a stop to bullying.
4. helping the children understand that everyone is not going to be their BFF, but they can expect "kindness and respect" for others.
5. teaching tolerance and understanding of others differences; from race to gender, to likes and dislikes with foods, music groups, movies, sports etc. Everyone has likes and dislikes, but we are all the same.
6. being an example of tolerance and understanding in your lives and role model for your children, and
7. seeking outside professional help if needed.