

there are no bullies

JUST CHILDREN WHO BULLY—AND YOU CAN HELP THEM

BY ADRIENNE VAN DER VALK ILLUSTRATION BY SCOTT BAKAL

BULLYING IS A HOT-BUTTON ISSUE. High-profile lawsuits and suicides have thrust bullying into the national spotlight. More schools are implementing policies designed to protect victims and crack down on perpetrators. In some schools, however, these efforts are outpacing education about bullying and the conditions that compel youth to engage in it. For the sake of all students, the time has come to look closely at two questions: Why do kids bully? How can we help them stop?

Why do kids bully?

Bullying is a behavior, not an identity.

For behavior to qualify as bullying, two conditions must exist:

- The aggressor must intend to hurt or intimidate someone less powerful.
- The behavior must be repeated.

A young person's behavior may meet these conditions in some situations but not others, which leaves schools, parents and researchers searching for underlying motives.

Jaana Juvonen, a professor of developmental psychology at the University of California, Los Angeles, explores the motives of power and control in her research on bullying. "We're talking about strategic behavior that is there

for a particular purpose ... to fill a need. And the need is being able to control others," says Juvonen. "These are kids who are very deliberately, intentionally trying to hurt another kid. They want to dominate and feel powerful ... Then the question in terms of how to help [a child who] bullies is to ask, 'Why do they have this need for control and power?'"

While attempting to answer this question, Juvonen has noticed that bullying behavior spikes during transition years, particularly the transition from elementary to middle school.

"It is during these times of social uncertainty where some kids resort

to ... primitive means to establish a social hierarchy," she says. "When you get into a new social environment you really don't have a sense of where you fit in, where you rank, who are your friends versus foes. It is helpful to have this dominance hierarchy."

Why some kids take this path and others don't isn't well established. What is clear is that aggressive kids often perceive ambiguous interactions—and even facial expressions—as negative or threatening. Kara Penniman, a school-based social worker in Columbus, Ohio, notes that students who bully often think their behavior is justified because others are "out to get them," and this belief touches off a cycle of negative interactions.

"Many kids who exhibit bullying behavior ... don't see themselves often as being particularly powerful," Penniman explains. "Sometimes they themselves are experiencing intimidation, threats, power and control

Youth who bully are at significantly increased risk for anti-social personality disorder as adults ... one of the most untreated and difficult-to-treat personality disorders.

—DSM V and US National Library of Medicine

problems with other people, so it can be really common for them to see themselves as the victim."

Ultimately, though, all youth who exhibit bullying behavior—victims of aggression or not—are using bullying as a tool to meet a strong need, says Juvonen.

"[There are] these incredibly powerful cyclical pathways," she says. "Kids learn that there's this unmet need to feel powerful, to be able to control others, then you act in certain ways and you get rewarded for it."

These rewards, however, exist in the short term only.

According to bullying experts Dan Olweus, Sue Limber and Sharon F. Mahalic, 60 percent of boys who bullied others in middle school had at least one criminal conviction by the age of 24; 40 percent had three or more convictions. A recent study published in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* reported that youth who bully are at increased risk for depression, conduct disorders, substance abuse and suicide.

Cyberbullying

Bullying and technology overlap to such a degree that addressing one necessitates addressing the other. Schools are increasingly being asked to respond to cyberbullying incidents that don't occur on school property, but bleed into the culture.

Youth and media expert Alissa Sklar recommends that educators take a proactive leadership role in educating students—especially students who exhibit aggressive behaviors—about digital citizenship and the unique dynamics of technology-based bullying.

THE BASICS

- Phone and computer screens lead many people to behave in ways they would not in person. Screens do not, however, decrease the painful impact of insulting or hurtful language and images.
- Targeting another person online can magnify hurtful consequences for the victim because of the public nature of the aggression. Bullying others online can also potentially magnify the consequences for perpetrators.
- Anything communicated digitally is infinitely replicable and impossible to delete. No one can truly "take back" anything posted to the Internet.
- The proliferation of technology (particularly smartphones) means that students targeted by bullying can no longer find safety at home, among friends or even by changing schools.



How can we help?

The painful effects of bullying lead many educators to focus on justice and safety for students who are targeted and to feel contempt for those responsible for the pain—an approach that often results in harsh disciplinary measures, such as suspensions and expulsions from school.

These zero-tolerance measures may appear responsive, but Juvonen and most experts who study school discipline warn against policies that make school a threatening, uncertain place. Juvonen notes that in addition to not addressing the root causes of bullying, such harsh tactics fuel the perception that youth have no choice but to fight for themselves.

The most effective bullying interventions don't focus on only one category of kids, but rather acknowledge that all students benefit when schools empower youth and teach them about healthy relationships.

Support students at risk.

Adopting comprehensive programming designed to promote social and emotional competencies is a great way to support students at risk of bullying. Judy Kerner, a special education teacher and behavioral support specialist, teaches one such class and works closely with youth who bully. She teaches skills that shift her students' thinking patterns—not only about others, but also about themselves.

Penniman, like Kerner, finds that individual conversations between skilled teachers or counselors and youth can be effective. She likes to ask kids what behavioral role models they're emulating when they act out aggressively and if the strategies they use are working. This approach opens up a conversation in which the youth's perspective is central to the dialogue.

"I also do psychoeducation about some of the long-term consequences of bullying," Penniman says. "So, providing information ... on what the impact is for bullies, what some of the long-term

Restorative Justice

Restorative justice can be an important tool in bullying prevention, but bullying experts caution that these interventions, particularly mediation, should always be facilitated by trained staff members. If your school doesn't have access to professionally trained mediators, consider other interventions.

consequences are for them occupationally and educationally." She doesn't deliver this information as a threat, but as a tool to empower students to take control of their choices and future.

Target transition years.

For students predisposed to aggression, changing schools can be the catalyst that leads them to bullying.

Mentorship or buddy programs can help transitioning students feel less fearful. First-year bridge or tutorial programs provide an excellent opportunity for students to develop relationships and talk about school culture within a small home-team group that promotes student input. For youth at particular risk, educators can implement a formal or informal transition plan. This might include regular check-ins or school-based visits with siblings, coaches, clergy, former teachers or anyone the youth identifies as a positive source of support.

Change the language of bullying.

Many educators think that the term bully has become an ill-defined buzzword that contributes to binary thinking (bullies are evil, victims are innocent) and feeds zero-tolerance approaches. Penniman says that she rarely, if ever, uses the word with her clients.

"It's kind of inflammatory for most kids because oftentimes schools have a zero-tolerance policy toward bullying," she explains. "So if kids acknowledge

that as a common cultural behavior within their peer group ... they are kind of admitting something that is completely not tolerated in schools, so there is not very much room for them to talk about change or growth or doing something different."

Experts recommend talking instead about healthy relationships, behavior, rights and choices. Ideally, schools should train the entire staff to align the way they talk about these expectations so students hear consistent messages. Talking about empathy and relationship choices also dismantles the perception that being a "bully" is a fixed identity.

Look to the future.

Empathy is key, not just for addressing bullying behavior, but for educators as well. It's important to remember that these tough kids are still young people—and the window of opportunity to work with them is small.

School is a social arena in which students try on roles, says blogger and cultural studies expert Alissa Sklar. Without guidance and alternatives, aggressive students may find that the role of "bully" becomes increasingly rigid, an outcome with potentially devastating consequences for them and others.

"A lot of the rhetoric of bullying ... paints the kids who are bullies as ogres or monsters," Sklar says. "But by doing this, we're really doing everyone a great disservice. We're missing a golden opportunity to teach them. We need to remember that kids and teens who [bully] ... are still growing up. When we help them, we're also helping those they target—and those who might have been bullied by them in the future. ♦



Toolkit

Help those who bully develop healthy relationships.

VISIT » tolerance.org/

build-healthy-relationships