

Some Reasons Kids Bully?

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In the overview section at the beginning of this chapter, we elaborated on why it is important to focus on removing the aggression rather than focusing on “improving” the target (there is always another to pick on). In that same vein, it is important not to dwell too much on all the reasons a child might be predisposed to bullying. For every “reason” or predisposing factor listed in these next few pages—**there are many, many kids with those same predisposing factors who choose to solve their problems non-violently.** In the end, it still becomes the personal choice of the individual to choose violence and aggression. This list is by no means comprehensive but does tackle some of the most common reasons.

One thing we do know is that bullies are taught to bully. They are not born that way. It may be their underlying temperament, combined with influences from home, school, community and the media that “allow” bully behavior to flourish.

Name-calling

Name-calling is so pervasive there is no one that has not been on one end of it. Michael Thompson, of *Best Friends, Worst Enemies*, says, “Being able to insult someone is a developmental achievement.” You evolve from protecting your toys with, “Go away. I hate you” to impressing your peers with “You’re stupid.” You see it hurts more, is more powerful. It gets even worse as it “becomes a weapon in the struggle to be cool. It also goes public. The cool kids are the ones who are able to creatively and effectively put down other kids.” Watch a few sitcoms with their putdowns for a laugh and you see where children learn it. One way to be funny is to be insulting, especially if it is in front of an audience. Kids know name-calling is wrong, that it is not moral, that it hurts. But they’ll come up with an excuse to justify it, “He asked for it,” or “He started it.” Translation” verbal abuse was the only weapon at hand. Anybody who is different qualifies for name-calling because they break the #1 group rule, “Be like us.” This is especially true if you are an overweight kid or are an effeminate boy. What is good news is that most children are resilient. They have friends and are accepted in a group. Then even though they are hurt by these insults, they can bounce back.

Uncontrolled anger

This is such a powerful predictor of aggression that it has its own page called “Anger, Impulsivity and Aggression.” There are few of us who can control our emotions when they have been “hijacked” by anger. How often as parents have we done or said something in anger that we regret. Anger can be the cause of the waffling back and forth from target to aggressor that occurs when a targeted child can’t “take it anymore” and flies out of control.

Revenge

Boys have a particular sense of justice, that it is fair to bully someone back who has bullied you. In fact, it is preferable if the retaliation is worse. This perpetuates a cycle of increasing violence. According to Rachel Simmons, author of *Odd Girl Out*, “keeping girls away from natural feelings of anger can lead them to cruel and inappropriate acts. They divert their feeling by backstabbing, spreading vicious rumors, excluding or giving someone the silent treatment, all the time saying, ‘Oh no, there is nothing wrong.’ Our culture has made truth telling and anger feel very wrong to girls. Girls must learn to expose their most uncomfortable feelings to ‘the air and light of relationship.’”

Surrounded by violence

For some people violence is a part of their everyday life, according to Joan Gaustad, author of “Schools Attack the Roots of Violence.” When parents or siblings interact abusively; violent behavior is the norm in their peer groups and community. In addition to the culture saying it's OK to be violent, they also don't have the skills not to be violent." These students may live in crime-ridden, drug territories where students join gangs or carry weapons just for protection and they use them when they need to for survival. They may be abused or neglected at home.

To act out problems from home

Beyond abuse there are many stresses that can come up: death or illness of a loved one, financial stresses that force a family to move a lot, substance abuse in a parent, learning disabilities and illness in the child that make every day at school a challenge. Children with leukemia said the WORST part of their illness was not the needles and chemotherapy but the teasing about their lack of hair they got on the playground.

Poor social skills

There are also children who bully others because of insecurity or lack of social skills. These are the kids who want attention, are jealous of others, are confused or overwhelmed by transitions (such as entering middle school), don't know how to control their anger, have an "attack first" defense mechanism, weren't taught how to interact appropriately, have very low problem-solving skills, lack empathy, or are unaware of their effect on others.

It might not be that kids have "poor" social skills. It is just that they don't have enough sophistication and confidence to get themselves out of situations without bullying. There is a lot of having to "save face." Plus when you think about it, most kids are stuck with their social situation. If we adults get totally fed up with how we are being treated, we can quit. We can even file a lawsuit if we think its bad enough. Attention deficit disorder kids often fall into this category. They often have trouble reading other peoples' social cues, especially the non-verbal cues, and they react impulsively, sometime to their classmates distaste.

Power, recognition, acceptance and "being cool"

These are traits every person seeks from their environment. Being an aggressor is a show of strength and power. You can actually gain power, popularity and attention from your peers by being an effective bully. Kids see that they can get a laugh out of their friends by making fun of someone else. They may even copy what someone else has done that they admire. These are called **provocative aggressors**, "premeditated aggression."

Children who are most adept at relational aggression can be the most socially skilled kids in the class. Often these are the kids who parents and teachers like best. They have pulled "the wool successfully over our eyes" and it allows their behavior to stay "under the radar." These kids have a unique social gift, too. They are adept at figuring out how other people feel and then exploiting it. They know when someone is eager to please, easily embarrassed or malleable. They know what "buttons to push" to get what they want.

High self-esteem/ low self-esteem

Dan Olweus, a Norwegian researcher, concluded that kids who bully generally feel good about themselves, even have an inflated ego. The bully with low self-esteem is a myth. Their peers have handed them power, and they like to strut it. This is part of what makes them resist help from adults. They may be in trouble for their bully behavior but why would they want to give up the valuable power they have been

given. These bullies tend to use direct verbal and physical aggression.

A girl bully may have a different profile. She may be insecure and jealous but she hides it behind exaggerated confidence that she uses to harm others socially. She acts caring, but it is a tool to manipulate others to abide to her wishes of exclusion and gossip. She is "popular," but by dominance, and not well liked or trusted.

A good offense is the best defense: bullied bullies

Many kids who are bullied, especially in situations where adults have little power, find that becoming a bully himself or herself is the only way to stop it. It is a defense mechanism that works very well for some kids, especially if the "imbalance" of power is just slightly off. We get misconceptions about this because targeted kids are often portrayed in movies where, despite all odds, against extreme bullying and without adult help, they figure out how to over-power their bullies. When the imbalance of power is too great, real life kids can rarely solve these problems by themselves. Yet we expect them to. Another situation is when someone who is bullied by same age peers will go home to the neighborhood and bully younger kids or someone lower on the social ladder

Rejected aggressive kids have the highest social risk

Kids who can't control their anger frequently interrupt the flow of the class and may even have a long history of aggression can scare other children. If the group punishes him/her for being scary or disruptive by rejecting him/her, the punishment may go on for years. It is not done by one big group decision. It is done by thousands of tiny incidents—"Did you see that," "I can't believe he did that," "What a jerk." These are **rejected-aggressive children** that are the least responsive to interventions. Teachers find it difficult to be sympathetic to an aggressive, disruptive kid. These kids are also hard to be around for other parents. They would rather their child not play with them. These kids need intensive coaching on their impact on others and their anger control and need cooperation from their parents. Otherwise these kids grow up turning inward with depression/substance abuse or outward with violence, disruptive behavior. The Columbine shootings are the extreme example of the violence they might inflict. (There are also rejected-submissive kids who accept their fate quietly as victims. They are more responsive to help)

Gender strait-jacketing; attacking behavior that doesn't "fit in"

Nothing will get you in more trouble than misbehaving outside the expectations of your gender. If as a boy, you are sensitive, are effeminate, cry or are interested in traditionally "girl" activities like ballet, you can be mercilessly bullied. On the other hand, if you are a girl who is totally uninterested in boys, dresses as if you don't care how you look and does traditionally "boy" activities as physical fighting, sexual promiscuity, you can be bullied.

Competition: Money talks and athletic ability rules.

Despite our desire to want to see our children's kindergarten class as a fair and just place, money and its power rears its ugly head even here. Rich or athletic kids have more power and are more popular than poor or un-athletic kids. Some rich kids wield this power to do harm, others to do good. Athletic boys can use their power for good or evil. Our society gives lots of leeway for bad behavior in our athletes. This is modeled everyday for our children in the professional sport arena by those superstar athletes they most admire.

Poor Role modeling and authoritarian parenting style

This takes us closer to a powerful influence in kids' lives: the way they are treated at home. Their first "friendship" is with their parents, who model from day one, what it is like to be a reliable, good friend. If the parenting style is authoritarian, "I'm the boss. Do as I say," it is not much different from the bullying they receive on the playground when their peers boss them around.

Honor Code-Behavior is determined by the culture of the school

In an article written by Roselind Wiseman in "The Hidden World of Bullying," (*Principal Leadership*, December, 2002), she describes two sets of cultures that can exist in schools. One is "an environment of safety and accountability in which all kids struggle through adolescence while learning." The other school culture is where kids learn "that there are students who have power and privilege and get to do what they want to those who don't—without consequences." In the first school climate students, and if needed their parents, are held accountable for their actions. In the second, even if the bullies are disciplined, the rest of the student body perceives their punishment as superficial." Here is a story she shares:

"A senior boy invites a ninth-grade girl (the year's designated freshman "hottie") to a senior party. When the ninth-grader walks into the party, three things occur. First, she sees older girls who look at her or even tell her that she has no right to be there. Second, in response to these girls, she sees the boy who invited her as her trustworthy knight in shining armor. Third, when his friends see him encourage her to drink and then take her to a bedroom, they won't say anything even if they think what he is doing is wrong because you don't get into the way of your friends expressing their masculinity—in this case, the senior's right to have sex. The next Monday gossip will circulate like wildfire about the ninth-grade girl who threw herself at the senior boy. If that girl was forced to have sex, she will probably never tell anyone because she thinks she deserved it. She may even think that no one would believe her. And that senior who feels comfortable and entitled to bully a ninth-grade girl at a party usually is the student who terrorizes smaller boys or hazes new recruits on athletic teams as well. A school culture is based on the power of that senior boy, not the power of the principal or other adults. Most schools have a written honor code or a code of conduct that explicitly condemns that kind of behavior. But most **students feel there are two honor codes: the one that is in the school manual and the one that the students actually believe are the real rules of the school.**"

Entertainment, humor, relieve from boredom

These are some of the most pathetic reasons to bully... nothing better to do. This can only thrive in an environment where there are no serious consequences when it is done. The humor is particularly used by boys. If you remember, the three traits that make boys popular are: #1 Athletic, #2 Tall, and #3 Funny. So if you are short and un-athletic and want to be popular, being funny is your best bet. A very easy way to be funny is to make fun of other people in front of your friends. Girls talk about stirring up trouble when they are bored. "Let's start a rumor" or "Let's start a club to leave Amy out" or they start whispering or passing notes about someone in class.

Group Bullying/Hazing

Group dynamics can sometimes take away good judgment, and kids will be cruel to another as a group in ways they would never consider doing as individuals. They just get caught up in the excitement of it all or just want to be part of the group. Hazing falls into this category. Their thinking is, "This abuse happened to me and now it's your turn."