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Understanding Bullying and Its Impact on Kids with Learning Disabilities or AD/HD

Bullies! Every classroom has at least one. Whose name comes to mind when you hear the word "bully"? Who was the kid who could upset your day with his verbal, physical, or emotional insults? Most adults who were bullied remember such childhood events vividly.

Bullying among elementary school children and teenagers is a growing problem in many schools in the United States. It's happening in urban, suburban, and rural schools. Kids who have learning disabilities (LD) or Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (AD/HD) are especially vulnerable to bullying problems.

While bullying isn't new, professionals today have a new level of understanding of the problem. **Bullying is a learned behavior that can be prevented!** Effective bullying prevention programs are being used in progressive school systems throughout the country. It's important for parents, students, teachers, and school administrators to understand and learn to manage bullying that occurs at school and elsewhere.

What is Bullying?

"A student is being bullied or victimized when he or she is exposed, repeatedly and over time, to negative acts on the part of one or more other students. It is a negative action when someone intentionally inflicts, or attempts to inflict, injury or discomfort upon another," says Dan Olweus, a prominent researcher on bullying behaviors. **Bullying may involve physical aggression such as fighting, shoving, or kicking; verbal aggression such as name calling; or more subtle acts such as socially isolating another child.** With the increase in numbers of personal computers at home, youth have also learned to use email and websites to bully or harass others.

It is important for adults and youth to understand the difference* between bullying and normal conflict.

Normal Conflict	Bullying
Happens occasionally	Happens repeatedly
Accidental	Done on purpose
Not serious	Serious — threat of physical harm or emotional or psychological hurt
Equal emotional reaction	Strong emotional reaction on part of the victim
Not seeking power or	Seeking power or

attention	control
Not trying to get something	Trying to gain material things or power
Remorseful — takes responsibility	No remorse — blames victim
Effort to solve the problem	No effort to solve the problem

*Summarized from *Bullying at School*

Why Focus on Bullying?

Given the rising concern about violent crime among youth, parents, schools, and communities are concerned about reducing "bullying" behaviors because:

- **Persistent bullying can leave long-term scars (e.g., low self-esteem, depression) on victims.** Some victims of bullying may turn to violent means of retaliation. Some severely bullied victims have tried suicide as a means to escape their tormentors.
- **Students who bully others are especially likely to engage in other antisocial and delinquent behaviors** such as vandalism, shoplifting, truancy, and illicit drug use. This antisocial behavior pattern often will continue into young adulthood.
- **Bullying may contribute to a negative school social climate** that is not conducive to good social relationships or learning. Everyone is affected by bullying, even those not directly involved in the conflict. Youth who are "bystanders" often watch bullying but don't intervene, because they don't know what to do and may fear retaliation from the bully.
- **Bullying is a widespread problem among school children.** Surveys of 4th-6th graders in several states indicate that 25 percent of all children had been bullied at least "several times" within a two-month period; about 10 percent had been bullied at least once per week. One in five (20 percent) children reported having taken part in bullying other students at least "several times" within the last two months.

Profile of a Bully

Boys and girls who bully **do not** have low self-esteem as was once thought. Bullies, in fact, may be average students or even classroom or athletic leaders. At school, bullies typically tease and taunt their victims repeatedly in a nasty way. They intimidate, make fun of, and ridicule other students. They shove, hit, kick, and push their victims around, often damaging the victim's belongings. It is common for some bullies to manipulate other kids to do their "dirty work" for them while they stay in the background and watch. Youth who do the bullying for others are referred to as "henchmen." In such cases, it can be difficult to see who the bully really is.

Bullies usually select weaker and relatively defenseless students as their targets. They have a strong need to dominate and subdue other students, to assert themselves with power and threat, and to get their own way. They may brag about their actual or imagined superiority over other students. They may be hot-tempered, easily angered, impulsive, and have low frustration tolerance. Bullies are seen as being tough, hardened, and having little empathy with students who are

victimized. When confronted about their behavior, they are likely to try to talk themselves out of situation by denying they did anything wrong. **Bullies often to try to place blame on their victims**, saying something like, "They deserved it."

Profile of a Victim

Typical victims are children who can be overpowered (physically, mentally, or emotionally) by the bully. They are usually more anxious and unsure of themselves than other students. These children often have a negative attitude toward violence and the use of violence in dealing with others.

Victims usually suffer from low self-esteem and view themselves negatively. They often consider themselves failures and feel stupid, ashamed, and unattractive. They may come to believe that they "deserve" to be bullied. They are often lonely, friendless, and abandoned at school.

In his pioneering research on bullying behaviors, Dr. Dan Olweus has described two types of victims:

The Passive or Submissive Victim

- Is nonassertive and through his actions may signal to others that he is insecure and won't retaliate if attacked or insulted
- Is cautious, quiet, or anxious
- Cries easily and collapses quickly when bullied
- Has few friends and isn't connected to a social network
- Lacks humor and pro-social skills
- May be physically weak

The Provocative Victim

- Is both anxious and aggressive
- May cause irritation and disruption around him
- Is easily emotionally aroused
- Prolongs the conflict even when losing

****The above profiles have been adapted from *Bullying at School*.**

How Bullying Affects Kids with Learning Disabilities and AD/HD

If your child has a learning or attention problem, he may easily become involved in bullying situations. Let's take a look at some of the reasons for this:

- People often assume that kids with AD/HD are bullies because of their hyperactive, impulsive, aggressive, or demanding nature. According to a national survey on school discipline conducted by Children and Adults with Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (CHADD), about 32 percent of kids with AD/HD are "egged on" by their peers to act out and get into trouble. The study found that many youth with AD/HD were victims of bullies, but when they reacted to the bully, they were punished for poor behavior and the bully was not. **Without understanding the dynamics of a bullying situation, adults can further**

“victimize” the victims of bullying.

- Victims of bullies (especially boys) are often physically weak, over-sensitive, and have poor social skills and low self-esteem. This describes many kids with LD or AD/HD.
- Many kids with hyperactive/impulsive AD/HD are provocative victims because they annoy and over-react to bullies.
- Kids who are victimized often learn to get what they need by becoming bullies themselves. In fact, about 16 percent of kids will act as both a bully and a victim at one time or another.

Gender Differences in Bullying

Most scientific research on bullying has focused on boys. Books that address bullying in girls are starting to appear, but most are written from the personal experience of the authors rather than from scientific research projects. **New studies are underway that will help us better understand the dynamics of gender differences in bullying.** This is what is currently understood about gender differences in bullying:

- Boys tend to bully with direct physical or verbal aggression.
- Bullying by girls is more difficult to observe. Girls tend to bully with indirect or “sneaky” means of harassment such as social isolation or covert aggression such as spreading rumors or manipulating the friendship relations within the class (e.g., depriving a girl of her “best friend”).
- Boys who bully tend to be older than their victims (whether the victims are boys or girls).
- Girl bullies tend to target other girls who are the same age.
- Girls are more likely to be bullied by a group, which is emotionally devastating.
- Girls are more likely to involve both boys and girls in their bullying pursuits against a victim.
- Boys identify their aggressive behaviors against victims as “bullying” more often than girls.

Adult Intervention is Key

For most children, bullying experiences will be nothing more than an unpleasant childhood memory. **But for those who are more severely bullied, the pain runs deep.** Because their days and weeks are filled with fear, humiliation, and pain inflicted by bullies, they find it difficult to concentrate and participate in class. Kids who are bullied are often absent from school. They are lonely and may become depressed or lash out at their bullies in violent ways.

Bullies who are not stopped are more likely to have criminal records in young adulthood than youth who don't bully. **Bullying, therefore, is a serious problem for both the bully and the victim.** Both bullies and victims need positive adult intervention to make the bullying stop. Remember that bullying is a learned behavior that can — with adult intervention — be prevented or stopped!

Whether your child is a bully, victim, or bystander, there are steps you can take to coach him toward more positive behavior.

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Other Resources

Books

Bullying at school: What We Know and What We can Do

<http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/tg/detail/-/0631192417/schwabfoundation/>

By Dan Olweus, Ph.D.

Bully-Proofing Your Child: A Parent's Guide

<http://www.sopriswest.com/swstore/product.asp?sku=573>

By Carla Garrity, Ph.D., Mitchell Baris, Ph.D., and William Porter, Ph.D

Websites

The Olweus Bullying Prevention Program

<http://www.clemson.edu/olweus/>

American Medical Association

Violence and Bullying Resource Links

<http://www.ama-assn.org/ama/pub/category/2285.html>

NYU Child Study Center

Social Life in Middle and High School: dealing with clicks and bullies (pdf)

http://www.aboutourkids.org/aboutour/letter/2005/sept_oct.pdf