



Bullying Harms Victims And Perpetrators of All Ages

By DIANA ZUCKERMAN, PhD

Bullying used to be considered an unfortunate, inevitable rite of childhood, but researchers now tell us that bullying often occurs in conjunction with more serious aggressive and antisocial behavior. They conclude that bullying, therefore, should not be considered a normal and accepted part of growing up.

Usually defined as the use of physical or emotional power to control or harm others, bullying can include making threats, spreading rumors, physical or verbal attacks and name-calling or intentionally excluding someone from a group. To be called bullying, the behavior must have the potential to happen more than once.

Any type of bullying can be harmful to the person being bullied — and to the person doing the bullying. However, cyberbullying, which can happen to anyone at any age, has brought bullying to a different level for many children and adults.

According to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' website, stopbullying.gov, cyberbullying is bullying via social media, email, text messaging and other electronic means. Like traditional, in-person bullying, cyberbullying is an act of aggression characterized by a power imbalance, and the behavior often is repeated.¹ The cyberbully may be quite technologically savvy and use popular social media apps like Snapchat, Twitter, Instagram, Yik Yak and others to mock, spread rumors and otherwise harass the victim. The perpetrator can be

anonymous and perhaps untraceable, posting video, photos, messages, fake profiles, etc., at any time for wide distribution. Once sent or placed on the internet, a post is essentially beyond anyone's ability to stop or delete, especially if it has been passed around by others and distributed on multiple sites.

The perception that a cyberbully can be anonymous makes cyberbullying attractive to children and adults who would never be bullies in the traditional, in-person style. Anonymity also means that the bullies may not realize how powerful their impact has been, and therefore they may be less likely to feel empathy or remorse.²

Both bullying and cyberbullying have been implicated in suicides, attempted suicides and murder, and most states have anti-bullying laws and policies in place, as well as requirements for schools and school districts

to follow. But, even when bullying does not inspire those most extreme behaviors, there is no doubt that bullying harms children's

ability to learn and thrive in school, and it can have a lasting impact on self-esteem and self-confidence.

Whether they are children being bullied at school or adults facing bullying on the job, research indicates that the psychological distress is similar — though if the bully is anonymous, the victim may be much more frightened and feel even less control over the situation. For all types of bullying, however, the bully takes advantage of his or her target's perceived vulnerability in a form of emotional or physical violence.

The pain of being bullied can last for years. Even when victims become successful adults, the hurt doesn't necessarily go away. Lady Gaga is one of the world's most celebrated and successful entertainers, but in a 2012 interview with *New York Times* columnist Nicholas Kristof, she vividly recalled being thrown in a trash can and humiliated as a teenager, a victim of bullying.

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“I was called really horrible, profane names very loudly in front of huge crowds of people,” she said.³ “I didn’t want to go to class. And I was a straight-A student, so there was a certain point in my high school years where I just couldn’t even focus on class because I was so embarrassed all the time. I was so ashamed of who I was.”

Lady Gaga started the Born This Way Foundation “meant to empower kids and nurture a more congenial environment in and out of schools,” Kristof wrote, and she worked with Harvard University, the U.S. Department of Education and others. Her goal: “to make it cooler for young people to be nice.”

The ramifications of bullying at schools received a huge amount of attention in 1999 after a pair of Columbine High School students planted homemade bombs in their Colorado school and shot up the place with semiautomatic weapons, killing 12 students and a teacher, wounding many others and shooting themselves. The bombs never went off, but the impact of two boys indiscriminately shooting at dozens of classmates had a profound effect on how parents, teachers and school administrators thought about bullying.

Media reports immediately focused on claims that the two teens were taking revenge because they had been bullied. The Columbine killings and similar stories about other school shooters resulted in funding for serious research on behaviors that hadn’t been taken seriously before. By the time evidence indicated that the Columbine killings were unlikely to have been caused by bullying, studies had shown that bullying can result in a wide range of serious problems, including violence and suicide. Just as important, bullying was found to be a lifelong threat, years after we no longer worry about being shoved into a locker in the hall between classes.

In addition to the impact of childhood bullying continuing into adulthood, experts now identify bullying during adulthood as a common problem, especially in the workplace. An estimated 1 in 3 employees in the United States experiences workplace bullying, and 18 million employees in the U.S. report witnessing it.⁴ In some cases, adults who were bullied as children may become bullies as adults. Similar to what happens in childhood bullying, co-workers often distance themselves from the adult victims because they are afraid of being targeted themselves, or because they are

afraid of losing their jobs. In fact, research suggests that targets rarely can count on their co-workers for support.

Researchers tell us that about 30 percent of school children are bullies, victims, or both (called “bully-victims”).⁵ Females are bullied more often (24 percent) than males (16 percent) — in fact, the most likely student to get bullied is a white female in the 9th grade. Nationwide, 15 percent of

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students have been cyberbullied, and again, rates were highest among 9th grade, white females.⁶

The typical person of any age who is likely to get bullied is “observably vulnerable” in some way and is rejected and isolated by peers.⁷ The typical bully is not well adjusted psychologically and often has a problematic home life, is unable to handle emotions, and tends to have little empathy for others.⁸

Researchers divide childhood bullies into two types: those seeking status and those who go after more vulnerable victims.⁹ In a study of more than 16,000 6th through 10th grade students in U.S. public and private schools, researchers found that bullies who are motivated by social status tend to target their friends and other more popular schoolmates. Those who target vulnerable victims are less popular themselves, tend to be anxious or depressed and usually target less popular schoolmates. Males are more likely to bully in physically aggressive ways, while females are more likely to use verbal, social and cyberbullying.

Although the victims of bullying are not necessarily the kids most likely to be dangerous, researchers found that compared to children who never have been bullied, victims of bullying are more likely to feel that violence is a solution to their problems. Whether they are bullies or are bullied by others, children involved in bullying also were more likely to be involved in frequent fighting, to have been injured in a fight, to have



carried a weapon, and to have carried a weapon in school.¹⁰ Kids who are bullied tend to become depressed and anxious, may have trouble sleeping, have health complaints, and they tend to do more poorly in school.

One of the most common and damaging effects of bullying is the belief among the victims that bullying is their fault, which leads to self-blame and lowered self-esteem.¹¹ That finding is similar to studies of children and adults who are victims of physical or sexual abuse.

Research also indicates that it is not just the victims of bullying who bear emotional and behavioral consequences. An analysis of 47 different published studies found that youth who were either bullies or victims of bullying were more likely to commit suicide or think about committing suicide. Suicides and suicidal thoughts also were higher in people who were sometimes the bully and sometimes the victim.¹²

For bullies, other long-term consequences include increased likelihood to:

- Abuse alcohol and other drugs later in adolescence and adulthood
- Engage in early sexual activity
- Drop out of school
- Have criminal convictions/traffic citations as adults
- Be abusive towards romantic partners, spouses or their children as adults.¹³

A study of workplace bullying, published in 2015, found that adults bullied at work were more likely to report being depressed, anxious and under stress. These problems tended to persist, with workplace bullying related to mental health complaints over time. In addition, adults who reported having mental health problems were also more likely to subsequently report being bullied at work.¹⁴

While workplace bullying seems to be common, it is difficult to quantify or reduce because of the fear many employees have that they will be fired if they complain. In addition, since “workplace bullying” is not a hot topic, many bullied employees don’t conceptualize their situation that way. Instead, they will complain about co-workers or bosses who are rude, unhelpful, impossible to please, demoralizing or denigrating — not “bullying.” Sexual harassment also can be a form of bullying, but it usually is not

defined as such. Fortunately, a few successful lawsuits against large corporations have attracted the attention of employers, thus providing an incentive for managers to address the problem of workplace bullying more appropriately.

Programs developed to prevent bullying in schools show modest results. Research indicates that when the bullying is happening in front of other students, the observers can make a difference when they make it clear that the behavior is unacceptable. For the victim, having just one friend can offer some protection.¹⁵ Also, when adults at the school intervene swiftly and consistently, the “no bullying” message is clear. However, school-based anti-bullying programs aimed at convincing students to intervene when they see bullying are only modestly effective.¹⁶

The Olweus Bullying Prevention Program developed by Dan Olweus, PhD, a research professor in psychology affiliated with the University of Bergen, Norway, is used in many European and American schools. Olweus has earned international recognition for his expertise and studies of bullies and their behavior.¹⁷

A study of more than 56,000 students and more than 2,400 teachers from 107 Pennsylvania schools that used the Olweus program found that over a two-year period, the biggest improvements were a decrease in the number of student self-reports of bullying others, and a decrease in students reporting that their teacher had done “little or nothing” to address bullying.¹⁸ Unfortunately, the program had little impact on the percentage of students reporting that they, themselves, had been bullied.

For adults, there is little information about available programs and no systematic evaluation of effectiveness. Many online articles express opinions, but data are sorely lacking. Most articles

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extrapolate what is known about bullying prevention for children to develop similar strategies that could be suitable for adults.

Why is it so difficult to prevent bullying? Decades of psychology research shows that peo-

ple who witness others in trouble are more likely to help if they are the only ones available to do so. When bullying takes place in front of an audience, it is more difficult to stop.

In general, people are more heroic when somebody is completely dependent on them. Whether the problem behavior is bullying, a physical attack, sexual harassment or racial slurs, each “bystander” tends to look to see how others respond before saying or doing anything. As the bystanders see each other hesitating, subconsciously trying to figure out the “appropriate” way to respond, the minutes pass, they see each other doing nothing, inaction becomes the norm and the chances increase that nobody will help.

The bottom line is that while bullying is acknowledged to be a serious and widespread problem in the U.S., the only bullying prevention programs that have been evaluated are programs for children and teens, and those evaluations often lack rigor. Little is known about which programs work best in which types of schools or for which types of students.¹⁹

We have come a long way in recognizing that bullying needs to be taken seriously — but we haven’t made much progress in actually reducing it. To do so requires all of us to tackle a larger problem in our society: people who flaunt the power they have at the expense of others, and the hesitation of those watching to muster the courage to stop it.

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NOTES

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