

The Bully Factor

By: Dr. Todd Huffman, for the Eugene *Register-Guard*, February 27th 2011

Unmentioned in the debate over threatened budget cuts for school districts and the income taxes proposed to avert them is the potential corollary outcome to furthermore swollen classroom sizes and shrunken staff numbers: a rise in bullying resulting from diminished adult supervision.

From the classroom to the lunchroom, down the hallways and in the bathrooms, and out to the playground and the surrounding school grounds where kids and teens aggregate before and after school hours, fewer teachers and support staff means greater opportunity for bullies to haunt and harm and otherwise victimize vulnerable classmates or younger children.

Unless, that is, the reduction in paid staff is equaled by an improbable surge in parent and community volunteers willing to be trained to stand guard against bullying and to intervene.

The number of children in the United States who suffer as a result of teasing and bullying is staggering. Roughly twenty percent of children in elementary and middle school – five million youngsters – have reported being a victim. Forty percent of high school students report having daily witness or been the victim of bullying.

Bullying is a form of aggression in which one or more children repeatedly and intentionally intimidate, harass, or physically harm a victim who is perceived as unable to defend himself or herself. Children in younger grades who are being bullied are usually either weaker or smaller, are shy, and generally feel helpless.

In higher grades, teasing and bullying increase, though the victim profile changes, and the forms become less physical. The latest research suggests that among adolescents various forms of aggression and victimization occur throughout the social ranks as students jockey to improve their status. Rather than going after the kids on the margin, teen bullying usually involves targeting kids who are perceived as social rivals.

Most troubling are the behavioral, health, and social consequences of teasing and bullying. Not only do these behaviors compromise child health and development, they may also lead, as the headlines too often report, to the tragic loss of lives through acts of violence and suicide.

Bullying can be obvious, or subtle. It can be in whispers or in Wi-Fi. Examples of bullying include being verbally humiliated, being physically hurt, being threatened or coerced, being the subject of false rumors, being isolated socially by way of intentional exclusion, having one's belongings taken repeatedly or damaged, or being the victim of electronic harassment.

The latter form of intimidation – popularly known as cyber-bullying – is a relatively recent and worsening phenomenon whereby individuals use the Internet, email, instant messaging, or the various forms of social media such as Facebook™ to threaten, verbally harm, single out, embarrass, spread rumors, or reveal secrets about others.

Both girls and boys can be bullies, and contrary to common perception girls engage in bullying behavior almost as often as boys. While male youth target both boys and girls, and are more likely to employ physical forms of aggression, female youth most often bully other girls, using more covert and indirect forms of intimidation than boys.

Because it frequently goes unreported, teasing and bullying are more common than most teachers, administrators, and parents realize. Although one-third of U.S. children say that they have experienced teasing and bullying at school, few have discussed their experiences with parents, and fewer have confided to school personnel.

Teasing and bullying are not synonymous. Teasing may be said to be pre-bullying, and is widespread across all school grades. Too seldom does it disappear with graduation from high school and into adulthood and supposed maturity.

Teasing is a provoking behavior that encourages reaction and interaction. It combines elements of hostility, humor, and ambiguity. Teasing is usually seen to start earlier than bullying, appearing first as expressions or gestures, and later as words. It often occurs in the presence of peers, making embarrassment more public.

Bullying has a more hostile intent than teasing, and relies – more so in elementary and middle school grades – on intimidation of weaker children by stronger ones, with the aim to scare and control. Bullying includes four key elements, the first being the most crucial: bullying is about the abuse of power.

A fight between two kids of equal power is not bullying. Bullying is a power imbalance between bully and victim, an unfair fight in which the child who bullies has some advantage over the child who is victimized. Bullying is not the same as “playing around”, and it cannot be justified as “boys will be boys”.

The other three key elements to bullying are intent to mentally or physically harm the victim; repetition of the behavior toward a single victim; and occurrence almost always when other children are watching.

Make no mistake: bullying is violence. It is an intentional act. The child who bullies wants to harm the victim; it is no accident. It is neither a random act nor a single incident. Rather, a child is repeatedly picked on by another child or is the target of harassment from a whole group of children.

It is the repeated nature of bullying that causes anxiety and apprehension and helplessness in the victim, to the degree that the anticipation of bullying becomes as problematic as the bullying itself.

The list of short-term consequences of bullying to the victim is long, and bleak: fear, loneliness, diminished self-esteem, low feelings of self-worth, social isolation leading to social withdrawal and depression, poor concentration at school leading to worsening academic performance or even school avoidance or truancy, and an increased risk of drug, cigarette, or alcohol use. Victims are more likely to suffer in silence than to retaliate.

Victims, especially adolescents, often suffer chronic psychosomatic symptoms of stress, and are more prone to excess use of medicine used for headache, stomachache, and nervousness. Medical attention is sought more than is typical for this age group.

Long-term, memories of childhood teasing and bullying are associated with higher rates of depression, social anxiety, lowered self-esteem, pathological perfectionism, and greater neuroticism in adulthood. In short, childhood bullying is a highly memorable experience and recollections of these events show no evidence of forgetting.

Many reasons brace the argument that increasing class sizes and decreasing educational and support staff – not to mention the number of school days – is detrimental to the development of bright and curious and someday successful students. To those reasons add one more: further reducing adult supervision gives potential bullies greater reign over which to rule.