

Bullying: Children Hurting Children

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The number of children in the United States who suffer as a result of teasing and bullying is staggering. Roughly 20 percent of children in elementary and middle school – 5 million youngsters – have reported being a victim or teasing or bullying. Forty percent of high school students report having *daily* witnessed 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. Examples of bullying include being called names, being physically hurt, being threatened, being the subject of false rumors, being isolated socially, and having one's belongings taken repeatedly.

More troubling than the numbers are the behavioral, health, and social consequences of teasing and bullying. Not only do these behaviors compromise child development, but they may also lead to a tragic loss of lives through acts of violence and suicide.

Teasing is a provoking behavior that encourages reaction and interaction. It combines elements of hostility, humor, and ambiguity. Teasing is usually seen 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 on intimidation of weaker children by stronger ones. Bullying includes three key elements: a power imbalance between bully and victim, intent to harm the victim, and, usually, repetition of the behavior toward a single victim.

In both teasing and bullying, the victim is made to feel angry and embarrassed. Rarely, a victim may react with aggression towards the bully or self, at times with dire results such as homicide or suicide.

Because it frequently goes unreported, teasing and bullying are more common than most teachers, administrators, and parents realize. Although many 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.

Boys are generally more involved in bullying than girls. Girls more often are the targets and perpetrators of passive, indirect bullying, such as gossip and social isolation. Boys more frequently are the targets and perpetrators of aggressive, physical bullying. The peak age of bullying is second grade, and the percentage of students who report having been bullied declines steadily through advancing grade levels.

Bullies are often aggressive not only towards fellow students, but also teachers, parents, siblings, and peers. They generally have a more positive attitude toward violence, and often use terms of violence in their everyday vernacular.

Bullies have little empathy for victims of bullying. If male, bullies are more likely to be physically stronger than their victims. They have a strong desire for power and domination. They enjoy being “in control” and subduing others. They crave social influence. Prestige as well as

material goods coerced from victims rewards the bullying. Contrary to a common stereotype, bullies do not suffer from poor self-esteem.

Victims react more passively and anxiously to situations and are more insecure than most children. They tend to be physically smaller and weaker, and are often described as cautious, sensitive and quiet. Abandoned by peers at school, they are more likely to be alone, and therefore vulnerable, on the playground or in the cafeteria.

When attacked, victims commonly react passively by crying (at least in the lower grades) and withdrawing. Attempts at school avoidance eventually are possible; the victim may repeatedly feign illness, or become truant. Victims develop, if they do not already have, a negative view of themselves, often seeing themselves as failures, feeling stupid, ashamed, unattractive, and disliked by others.

A different type of victim is not common, known as the provocative victim. These children are characterized by a combination of both anxious and aggressive behavior. While the victims of bullying, they seem to seek out the further attention of bullies by teasing them, thus encouraging even more bullying.

Although certain types of children are more prone to being involved in bullying, it is important not to stereotype. Some of the most charming and helpful pupils can be vicious to their peers, and some of the most able and socially competent pupils can experience regular bullying.

Bullying occurs everywhere, but it is most frequent at school at the times and places that have minimal supervision. In elementary schools, most pupils who are bullied are victimized during recess breaks or during lunch. In middle and high schools, hallways and classrooms become more common bullying sites, as do common areas where students gather before and after school. Generally, the larger the school, the more bullying that occurs.

Teasing and bullying can cause significant and long-lasting health and mental health problems. The consequences may be especially damaging for children with an unstable family situation. School avoidance and failure, social problems, and somatic complaints such as headaches, stomachaches, and insomnia have been linked to teasing and bullying among children as young as five years.

Later problems related to teasing and bullying include substance abuse (smoking, alcohol, illegal drug use), gang affiliation, depression, chronic anxiety, poor self-esteem, conduct disorder (often beginning by middle school), early pregnancy, and chronic absenteeism. Any and all may lead to poor academic performance, which may eventually result in the adolescent dropping out of high school.

Whether a child is a victim of teasing and bullying, or a bully, peer relationships are affected. Peers tend to reject children whom they see as a victim. Bullies, especially those who are aggressive at an early age, remain at risk for poor relationships as adolescents and adults. Adults who were bullies as children exhibit greater tendencies towards violent behavior directed at loved ones.

Most families are unaware of bullying that goes on in their children's school. If you suspect your child is the victim of bullying, or a bully himself or herself, contact your child's school principal or pediatrician. All children should be safeguarded from mistreatment. No child should be afraid to go to school.