

# 1

## The Nature of Bullying

*Dear Dr. Beane:*

*I was at the parent presentation you gave several weeks ago for our school system. I was inspired by your knowledge and passion for preventing and stopping bullying. Your son's story broke my heart. I am so afraid for my son. Your son's story sounded a lot like my son's. I have talked several times with his teachers and principal. They don't seem to understand the hurt caused by my son's mistreatment. I wish they were at the parent presentation. When I explain what is happening to my son, they seem to minimize it as normal conflict and say that all children have to learn to deal with conflict. How can I change their thinking? How can I help them see that my son is being destroyed by bullying?*

**I**t is important for you to know the difference between bullying and normal conflict. Some types of conflict are a normal part of life. Not all conflict is meant to be hurtful, and coping with such situations can help prepare your child for life in a positive way. Therefore, do not intervene too quickly when you observe conflict between your child and others. However, if you have verified that true bullying is occurring, you should intervene and teach your child skills to stop the bullying. Behavior has exceeded the bounds of normal conflict when

## 2 PROTECT YOUR CHILD FROM BULLYING

- It is meant to hurt and harm your child.
- It seems intense and has been occurring over a significant period of time.
- The person hurting your child seeks to have power and control over your child.
- No apologies are forthcoming.
- The behavior has a negative impact on your child.

### **What Is Bullying?**

Understanding bullying is an important step in helping your child. When we don't fully understand a problem, we deal only with the symptoms of the problem and not the root causes. After reading this book, you may be more knowledgeable about bullying than the teachers at your child's school. You may be able to provide leadership or at least encouragement to anti-bullying efforts in your child's school. The next few pages are designed to equip you with facts about bullying.

The term *bullying* describes a wide range of behaviors that can have an impact on a person's property, body, feelings, relationships, reputation, and social status. Bullying is a form of overt and aggressive behavior that is intentional, hurtful, and persistent (repeated). Bullied children are teased, harassed, socially rejected, threatened, belittled, and assaulted or attacked (verbally, physically, psychologically) by one or more individuals. There are unequal levels of affect (that is, the victim is upset and distressed while the bully is calm) and often an imbalance of strength (power and dominance).<sup>1</sup> This imbalance of power can be physical or psychological, or your child may simply be outnumbered.

There are times when bullying can be considered violent. All bullying is serious, but when it is intense and lasts for a significant period, it is very serious—it is violent. In fact, bullying is

the most common form of school violence. It is violence because it is so destructive to the well-being of children and can lead children to harm themselves and to harm others.

Some of the key words in our definition of bullying are *intentional*, *hurtful*, *persistent*, and *imbalance of strength*. Thus behavior such as teasing that is not intended to hurt and is not persistent is not considered bullying. However, even playful teasing can easily escalate into a bullying situation. Those who have power over the child may repeatedly use the teasing comments to hurt her.

## **What Does Bullying Look Like?**

Bullying behaviors come in a variety of forms: physical, verbal, and social and relational. When it comes to cruelty, children can be incredibly creative. In fact, it would be very difficult to list every possible behavior that makes up a bullying situation. But let's take a look at some of them.

### **Physical Bullying**

Bullying behaviors that are more physical in nature include the following:

- Hitting, slapping, elbowing, and shouldering (slamming)
- Pushing, shoving, and tripping
- Kicking
- Taking or stealing, damaging, or defacing belongings
- Restraining
- Pinching
- Flushing someone's head in the toilet
- Cramming someone into his locker

#### 4 PROTECT YOUR CHILD FROM BULLYING

- Attacking with spit wads, food, and so on
- Threats and body language that are intimidating

It is important not to minimize any of these behaviors. They all can be hurtful, even things that may seem like “horseplay.” One nine-year-old boy said, “When they push you in front of your friends and you fall down, it is very embarrassing and humiliating.” Restraining someone against her will can also be very hurtful because it is often accompanied by some other inappropriate behavior. For example, one sixteen-year-old girl was held down on the floor by a group of girls who then marked all over her face with a permanent marker. You can imagine how hurt she was emotionally.

Pinching and many other forms of physical bullying are beneath the radar screen of teachers. One teacher told me about an eight-year-old girl who reported at the end of the year that the boy sitting behind her had pinched her back all year long. She had bruises all over her back. The teacher did not know this was happening because the little girl was afraid to tell her.

When I speak to a group of students, it is not unusual for a significant number of students to raise their hands when I ask, “How many of you have had your heads flushed in the toilet?” This is called “swirling.” In one school, where the principal told the newspaper that there was no bullying in his school, about one-fourth of the students said they had had their heads flushed. Being crammed into one’s locker almost every day is also not uncommon. I have met several students who no longer use their lockers because they know they will be mistreated there. They carry all their books in a backpack.

### **Verbal Bullying**

Verbal bullying can sometimes be more hurtful than physical bullying. Unfortunately, some children learn very quickly that “Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words can hurt me

more and for a longer time.” The following are some examples of verbal bullying behaviors:

- Name-calling
- Insulting remarks and put-downs
- Repeated teasing
- Racist remarks and harassment
- Threats and intimidation
- Whispering about someone behind her back

Verbal bullying can be very destructive to the well-being of children. When I speak to students, I try to illustrate this point by hitting an apple with my fist. Then I ask, “What is going to happen to this apple?” Of course, they respond, “It’s going to be bruised.” When you look at the outside of the apple, it doesn’t look bruised, but it is. When you call someone a name, it doesn’t appear to hurt him, but it bruises him on the inside.

Many times, physical bullying is accompanied by verbal bullying. The following e-mail message from a parent describes this combination.

*Dear Dr. Beane:*

*I have been struggling with my seven-year-old son. He is in second grade at a wonderful school. We are making huge sacrifices for him to attend and hope that our other two children will also attend this school as they get older. In a nutshell, my son had his head slammed against a brick wall and his throat held while these two students were saying, “You had better not tell a lie again about my friend.” There have been many instances of verbal bullying over the school year. They*

*have said things such as, "Shut up, you stupid head,"  
and "You are going to get it on the playground!"*

Of course, racism is behind a lot of bullying. One seventh-grade boy told me that he had been made fun of ever since second grade, just because of the color of his skin. So when you help schools prevent bullying, you are also helping them combat racism.

### **Social and Relational Bullying**

When most parents think about bullying, they think about mistreatment that is physical and verbal. They do not realize that bullying can also be social and relational. The following are some examples of this form of bullying:

- Destroying and manipulating relationships (for example, turning someone's best friend against her)
- Destroying reputations (gossiping, spreading nasty and malicious rumors and lies about someone)
- Excluding someone from a group (social rejection, isolation)
- Embarrassment and humiliation
- Negative body language, threatening gestures
- Hurtful graffiti or notes passed around
- Cyberbullying (via web pages, e-mail, text messages, and so on)

These kinds of behaviors are prevalent among girls. I had a principal call me one day and tell me about two girls who were excluding others. The principal said she had several girls who went home crying and that their mothers called her because their daughters were so upset. After investigating the problem, the principal discovered that these two girls declared themselves so special that if any other girl wanted to have lunch with them in the cafeteria, she had to sign up and be selected. When I tell this

story to groups of students, I am amazed at the number of times I have been told of girls who get a kick out of excluding others, even labeling themselves as the “Royal Five” or some other name.

Exclusion is even seen in preschool children. They often will not let others play with them and encourage others not to play with someone.

Much of girl bullying seems to stem from jealousy, which leads to anger and then to efforts to destroy someone’s relationships or reputation. An example of such behavior is described in the following e-mail message.

*Dear Dr. Beane,*

*I’m sure you get e-mails all the time, but I hope you have the time to help me with a problem. My daughter, Brook, is a new student in a fairly small high school. She is very attractive and outgoing. In fact, I don’t think she has ever met a stranger. Brook seems to draw people to her. Of course, the boys at the new school got very interested in her, especially this one boy. He has a girlfriend, but he always wants to hang around and talk to Brook. Of course, his girlfriend is jealous and is now spreading rumors that my daughter is a whore and has had several nervous breakdowns. I hear my daughter crying in her bed at night. My heart aches for her. I don’t know what to do. She won’t let me call the girl’s parents and she doesn’t want me to talk to the school about it.*

## **Why Do Children Bully?**

Children bully others for a variety of reasons. Sometimes they are impulsive and mistreat others without thinking about their actions or the consequences. They often want to dominate

others, exercising power and control over them in order to hurt them. They like feeling big in front of their peers. This power seems to net them some social status. However, they may continuously seek to prove their status. They may have more family problems than normal and take out their frustration and anger on others. To do this, they pick on students who they view as weaker than they, exhibiting little or no sympathy for victims.

Some bullies mistreat others because they are experiencing or observing abuse in the home or have not been disciplined appropriately at a young age. Their parents may have also failed to teach them the importance of respect, sensitivity, empathy, and kindness. There are a host of other possible causes of bullying, which I address in Chapter Three.

### **Are There Different Types of Bullies?**

According to Olweus, there are three different types of bullies: the aggressive bully, the passive bully, and the bully-victim.<sup>2</sup> Aggressive bullies tend to be physically strong, impulsive, hot tempered, belligerent, fearless, coercive, confident, and lacking in empathy. Passive bullies tend to be insecure, and they are much less popular than aggressive bullies. They sometimes have low self-esteem, have few likable qualities, and often have unhappy home lives. The bully-victims represent a small percentage of bullies. These are children who have experienced bullying themselves, whether at home or at school. They are typically physically weaker than the bullies at school, but stronger than those they bully.

Dieter Wolke of the University of Hertfordshire, England, identified a fourth group of bullies: pure bullies.<sup>3</sup> They appear to be healthy individuals who enjoy school. They use bullying to obtain dominance. Pure bullies just seem to enjoy bullying others.

## **Are There Different Types of Victims?**

According to Olweus, there are three types of victims: passive victims, provocative victims, and bully-victims, which we discussed earlier.<sup>4</sup> Passive victims represent the largest group of victims. They do not directly provoke bullies; they appear to be physically weaker students and do not defend themselves. Passive victims also appear to have few, if any, friends. Sometimes they are children who have been overprotected by their parents. Some researchers have identified subgroups of this group of victims.<sup>5</sup> For example, vicarious victims are students who are affected by the fear and anxiety created by a school culture that allows bullying. They are fearful they may become victims. False victims are a small group of students who complain frequently and without justification to teachers about being bullied. Perpetual victims are individuals who are bullied all their lives and may even develop a victim mentality.<sup>6</sup>

Provocative victims represent a smaller group than the passive victims. They can actually be aggressive themselves, especially toward others who appear weaker than they are. Because they may have poor anger management skills, their peers may not like them. They often react negatively to conflict or losing.

## **How Are Girls and Boys Different in Their Bullying Behavior?**

Both boys and girls engage in physical, verbal, and social bullying. Because the behavior of boys has been more observable, we have thought boys bully more than girls, but now most experts aren't sure that this is true. We often underestimate girl bullying, as girls can be sneaky, and their bullying behavior is more frequently social and relational.

Typically, boys use more physical aggression than girls. However, it appears that girls are becoming more physical. Perhaps they are watching more television shows that teach

them that it is okay to be physically violent and to attack males. The following are some typical characteristics of girl bullies and boy bullies.

#### Girl bullies

- Are more likely to bully other girls—but may bully some boys
- Engage in group bullying more than boys
- Seek to inflict psychological pain on their victims
- Can appear to be angels around adults while being cruel to peers
- Frequently make comments regarding the sexual behavior of girls they don't like
- Attack within a tightly knit networks of friends

#### Boy bullies

- Are more physical (tripping, spitting, quick blows, pushing, and so on)
- Use verbal attacks regarding sexual orientation and family members
- Tend to attack physically smaller and weaker individuals
- Engage in sexual harassment
- Engage in extortion

### **How Frequently Does Bullying Occur?**

Because bullying occurs most often in secret, away from the eyes of adults, parents and school personnel often underestimate bullying. Therefore, they sometimes don't understand the intensity of the problem or the need to implement a schoolwide anti-bullying program.

Worldwide prevalence rates of bullying of students range from 10 percent of secondary students to 27 percent of middle school students. According to the World Health Organization, the prevalence of bullying is quite consistent across countries.<sup>7</sup> Bullying is so prevalent that it is a constant hum in our schools and in some neighborhoods. It is estimated that 30 percent of teens in the United States (over 5.7 million) are involved in bullying as a bully, a target of bullying, or both.<sup>8</sup> A study of fifteen thousand U.S. students in grades 6–10 found that 17 percent of students reported having been bullied “sometimes or more often” during the school year. Approximately 19 percent said they bullied others “sometimes or more often,” and 6 percent reported both bullying and being a victim of bullying. Some researchers state that 20 to 25 percent of schoolchildren are bullied. Six out of ten American students witness bullying at least once a day.<sup>9</sup>

Now that you understand that bullying is a frequent occurrence, it is important for you to know when and where it is most likely to happen to your child. Even though the majority of bullying is done in secret, there are some typical high-risk areas and high-risk times.

### **When and Where Does Bullying Occur?**

Unfortunately, bullying happens almost everywhere. It happens in homes, in neighborhoods and communities, and in workplaces. We know that bullying often starts in the pre-school years (around age three) and increases in frequency and becomes more physical toward the end of the elementary years. Bullying peaks during the middle school years and is often in its cruelest form during those years.<sup>10</sup> It decreases in high school, but can still be very hurtful. The physical severity of bullying may decrease with the bully’s age.<sup>11</sup>

At the beginning of each school year, bullies go “shopping” for easy targets, victims they can hurt and over whom they can

have physical or psychological power. This is why it is important for your child to tell a trusted adult right away if he is being bullied. Also teach your child how to look confident and to hide the fact that what a bully does or says hurts him. There are several tips in this book to help your child communicate that he is not an easy target.

Bullying occurs while children travel to and from school, but it is more likely to happen on school property. Bullying seems to happen everywhere, but the typical high-risk areas are places where there is no adult supervision, inadequate adult supervision, or lack of structure—areas where children have nothing to do or are free to do as they wish. Some of the school-related high-risk areas are buses, bus stops, bathrooms, hallways, cafeterias, playgrounds, locker rooms, gyms, parking lots, stairwells, between buildings, and even classrooms. Therefore, you should encourage your child's school to improve supervision, in terms not only of the number of adults but also of the quality of supervision they provide. They should be trained to supervise their areas, and schools should be encouraged to add structure to unstructured times.

When I work with schools, I suggest strategies that include the following:

- Increase adult supervision by using trained volunteers.
- Require and train school personnel to supervise high-risk areas.
- Assign seats in the cafeteria and rotate the assignments so that children are always sitting with other children their own age.
- Require students to engage in activities that include everyone prior to going to recess.
- Require assigned seats on the bus (that is, high school students in the rear, elementary school students in the middle, and middle school students toward the front).

- Require students to stand in designated areas by grade while waiting for school to start.
- Enforce behavioral expectations and rules for all the high-risk areas.

## **Why Must Bullying Be Prevented and Stopped?**

Your response to this question is, of course, “Because it hurts my child.” That is certainly reason enough, but there are more reasons. Bullied children are often so persistently mistreated that they do not have time to recover from the previous experiences. Bullying can thus have consequences that go well beyond individual incidents. It is not surprising to see children trying to “fly away” from the mistreatment, which can lead them to make destructive choices and sometimes creates more problems. Bullying is connected to many other problems that could touch the life of your child and others.

When a child is bullied, he may be afraid to go to school. He may get sick on Sunday night and nauseated on Monday morning just thinking about going to school and facing the bullies. Each day is a social minefield with several unknown, potentially dangerous events in the day’s path. The fear, anxiety, and stress may cause your child to pretend to be sick, skip school, or skip classes. According to the American Medical Association, about 160,000 students a day stay home because of bullying.<sup>12</sup> In addition to causing students to fall behind in their schoolwork, these debilitating emotions can lead to a sense of helplessness and depression—even posttraumatic stress. For some children, bullying is very traumatic; it may be traumatic for your child.

Fear, anxiety, and stress are closely followed by anger and helplessness—perhaps even hopelessness. This is a toxic mix of emotions that may create toxic shame. This is poisonous shame that can cause your child to question his ability to cope with the bullying. He may also question whether he can trust the adults around him to help him. Your child may come to feel that he

deserves to be bullied because he is defective in some way. He may feel additional shame because he cannot “stand up for himself” as you have taught him to do. If this shame and the accompanying misconceptions are not dealt with, your child could feel that he cannot trust life (especially school life) to be good to him anymore. This does not have to be the path your child takes. You can help him, and so can professional counseling.

---

### **TOXIC SHAME**

Toxic shame can cause your child to harm himself (self-mutilate) and/or even to commit suicide. I have met several students who cut themselves. They tell me they cut themselves in order to release the hurt caused by bullying or to cause a physical pain that may minimize the pain in their hearts. If your child is being victimized, I encourage you to examine your child’s body each night as he steps out of the tub or shower. Sometimes children cut themselves where their clothes will hide the cuts, but sometimes you can see scars between their knuckles or on their wrists. Make sure if you do find evidence of self-mutilation that you get your child professional help.

---

Children who are persistently mistreated and experience depression for a significant amount of time may have suicidal thoughts. Any talk about suicide is serious and needs immediate attention. Watch for signs that your child is at risk of committing suicide. (If you have observed some of the warning signs of suicide risk, please refer to Chapter Six for a list of signs and a list of questions to ask your child.) If your child talks about committing suicide, do not assume he does not mean it. If you suspect your child is suicidal, seek professional help and do not leave him alone.

Bullying also can lead a child to join a gang, cult, hate group, or drug group. Every child feels an intense need to belong and to be accepted by some group. When this need cannot be satisfied through typical peer relationships, your child may seek to belong to a destructive and possibly dangerous group of individuals.

Bullying is also a common theme in the majority of school shootings. After years of mistreatment, some victims of bullying travel a very sad and dangerous path from hurt to revenge. (See Chapter Twelve for more on why some victims retaliate.)

### KEY MESSAGES

- Behavior that is meant to hurt and harm your child should not be considered normal conflict.
- The term *bullying* describes a wide range of behaviors that can impact a person's property, body, feelings, relationships, reputation, and social status.
- All forms of bullying can be destructive to the well-being of children and can create unsafe homes, neighborhoods, and schools.
- Both girls and boys can be physical, verbal, and social and relational in their bullying. Girls tend to do more social and relational bullying.
- Bullying occurs to some degree in every school.
- Adults often underestimate the prevalence of the problem.
- Bullying happens everywhere, especially where there is a lack of supervision or lack of structure. Some of the high-risk areas are bathrooms, hallways, stairwells, cafeterias, locker rooms, parking lots, buses, common areas, bus stops, and classrooms.
- Bullying can create toxic shame and cause children to be sick, to hurt themselves, and even to commit suicide.
- Bullying can lead students to form or join gangs, hate groups, and cults.
- Bullying is a common theme of most school shootings.

