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Bullying

Teen bullying: A part of growing up?



Most adults can remember being teased or bullied when they were younger. It may be regarded as a regular—albeit nasty—part of growing up, but research has shown that bullying has far-reaching negative effects on adolescents. This all-too-common experience can lead to serious problems for young people at a critical time in their development, including poor mental health and dropping out of school.

Estimates from a 2002 CDC survey reveal that approximately 30 percent of teens in the United States, or over 5.7 million teens, have been involved in bullying as a victim, spectator, or perpetrator. In a 2001 national survey of students in grades six to 10, 13 percent reported bullying others, 11 percent reported being the target of school bullies, and another 6 percent said they bullied others and were bullied themselves. Teen bullying appears to be much more common among younger teens than older teens. As teens grow older, they are less likely to bully others and to be the targets of bullies.

Bullying involves a person or a group repeatedly trying to harm someone they see as weaker or more vulnerable. Appearance and social status are the main reasons for bullying, but young people can be singled

WARNING SIGNS

- Damaged or missing clothing and belongings
- Unexplained cuts, bruises, or torn clothes
- Lack of friends
- Frequent claims of having lost pocket money, possessions, packed lunches, or snacks
- Fear of school or of leaving the house
- Avoidance of places, friends, family members, or activities teens once enjoyed
- Unusual routes to and from school or the bus stop
- Poor appetite, headaches, stomachaches
- Mood swings
- Trouble sleeping
- Lack of interest in schoolwork
- Talk about suicide
- Uncharacteristic aggression toward younger siblings or family members

SOURCE: The Youth Connection, January/February 2005, Institute for Youth Development, www.youthdevelopment.org

out because of their sexual orientation, their race or religion, or because they may be shy and introverted.

Bullying can involve direct attacks—hitting, threatening or intimidating, maliciously teasing and taunting, name-calling, making sexual remarks, sexual assault, and stealing or damaging belongings. Bullying can also involve the subtler, indirect attacks of rumor-mongering or encouraging others to snub someone. New technology, such as text messaging, instant messaging, social networking websites, and the easy filming and online posting of videos, has introduced a new form of intimidation—cyberbullying—which is widespread on the Internet.

Debunking the myth of the bully

The typical portrait of a young bully is someone who is insecure and seething with self-loathing. The latest research indicates the opposite is often true, that teen bullies—both boys and girls—tend to be confident, with high self-esteem and elevated social status among their peers.

Despite bullies' social status, their classmates would rather not spend a lot of time with them. Nonetheless, bullies' stature means that other teens tolerate bullying behavior. This can

TAKING THE BARK OUT OF BULLIES

Bullying should not be shrugged off as a normal rite of passage in adolescence. It is abusive behavior that is likely to create emotional and social problems during the teen years and later in life for both the victim and the aggressor. Here is how adults can help:

- **SPEAK UP** after a teen tells you about being bullied at school or elsewhere. Take his or her concerns seriously. Go to the school and talk to the teachers, coaches, and principal. Speak to the parents or adults in charge if a teen is being harassed by a peer or social clique.
- **OBSERVE** your own behavior. Adolescents look to adults for cues as to how to act, so practice being caring and empathetic, and controlling your aggressions. Avoid engaging in physical violence, harsh criticism, vendettas, and vicious emotional outbursts.
- **ADVOCATE** for policies and programs concerning bullying in the schools and the community. Anti-bullying policies have been adopted by state boards of education in North Carolina, Oregon, California, New York, Florida, and Louisiana.

One successful program used throughout the country has been developed by Dan Olweus, a Norwegian psychologist and bullying expert. The program focuses on creating a “caring community” as opposed to eliminating bad behavior. For more information on the Olweus Bullying Prevention Program, go to <http://www.clemson.edu/olweus/>.

pose challenges for those addressing bullying problems.

Bullies also tend to be physically aggressive, impulsive, and quick to anger, which fits in with the profile of a classic intimidator. Most often, adolescent bullies are mirroring behavior they have seen in their home or observed in adults.

School bullying

School bullying occurs more frequently among boys than among girls. Teenage boys are more likely both to bully others and to be the targets of bullies. While both boys and girls say others bully them by making fun of the way they look or talk, boys are more likely to report being hit, shoved, or punched. Girls are more often the targets of rumors and sexual comments, but fighting does occur.

While teenage boys target both boys and girls, teenage girls most often bully other girls, using sly and more indirect forms of aggression than boys, such as spreading gossip or urging others to reject or exclude another girl.

Harassment hurts

Bullying can make teens feel stressed, anxious, and afraid. Adolescent victims of bullying may not be able to concentrate in school, a problem that can lead to avoiding classes, sports, and social situations. If the bullying continues for long periods of time, feelings of self-worth suffer. Bullied teens can become isolated and withdrawn. In rare cases, adolescents may take drastic measures, such as carrying weapons for protection.

One of the most common psychiatric disorders found in adolescents who are bullied is depression, an illness which, if left untreated, can interfere with their ability to function. According to a 2007 study linking bullying and suicidal behavior, adolescents who were frequently bullied in school were five times as likely to have serious suicidal thoughts and four times as likely to attempt suicide as students who had not been victims.

Even after the bullying has stopped, its effects can linger. Researchers have found that years later,

adults who were bullied as teens have higher levels of depression and poorer self-esteem than other adults.

Bullies also fare less well in adulthood. Being a teen bully can be a warning sign of future troubles. Teens, particularly boys, who bully are more likely to engage in other delinquent behaviors in early adulthood, such as vandalism, shoplifting, truancy, and drug use. They are four times more likely than non-bullies to be convicted of crimes by age 24, with 60 percent of bullies having at least one criminal conviction.



CYBERBULLIES

Text messaging, social networking sites, blogs, email, instant messaging—all these are ways teens stay connected to each other and express who they are to the world.

However, this new technology can make young people vulnerable to the age-old problem of bullying. Unmonitored social networking sites and chat rooms can be a forum for messages that are sexually provocative, demeaning, violence-based, or racist.

Cyberbullies send harassing or obscene messages, post private information on a public site, intentionally exclude someone from a chat room, or pretend to be someone else to try to embarrass a person (for example, by pretending to be a boy or girl who is romantically interested in the person).

Cyberbullying can spiral into a “flame war”—an escalation of online attacks sent back and forth, either privately through text and instant messaging or on a public site. On public sites flaming is meant to humiliate the person attacked and drive him or her away from the web site or forum.

Often, the information used for cyberbullying at first appears innocent or inconsequential. A teen could post or text what he or she thinks is run-of-the-mill news about a friend, teacher, or family member, but others could use it for harassment or bullying purposes.

Although there is still very little research on cyberbullying, it appears to occur at about the

same rate as traditional bullying. A 2007 study of middle schools in the Southeast found that boys and



girls are equally likely to engage in cyberbullying, but girls are more likely to be victims. Twenty-five percent of girls and 17 percent of boys reported having been victims of cyberbullying in the past couple of months. Over one-third of victims of electronic bullying in this study also reported bullying behaviors. Instant messaging is the most common method for cyberbullying.

Cyberbullying differs from traditional bullying in that it can be harder to escape. It can occur at any time of the day or night, and it can be much more public, since rude and obscene messages can be spread quickly. It also can be anonymous.

In the same 2007 study of middle school students, almost half of the victims of cyberbullying did not know who had bullied them.

Cyberbullying is much more common than online sexual solicitation, another serious concern. Most online sex crimes involve adult men soliciting teens between the ages of 12 and 17 into meeting them to have sex. The common media portrayal of teen victims as naïve is largely false. The vast majority of teens who are victims of online sexual predators know they are communicating with adults, communicate online about sex, and expect to have a romantic or sexual experience if and when they meet. About three-quarters of teens who meet the offender meet them more than once. To help teens avoid becoming victims of online sex crimes, it is important to have accurate and candid discussions about how it is wrong for adults to take advantage of normal sexual feelings among teens.

Teens are more vulnerable to sexual solicitations online if they send (not just post) private information to someone unknown, visit chat rooms, access pornography, or make sexual remarks online themselves.

There is no evidence that use of social networking sites such as Facebook or MySpace increases a teen’s risk of aggressive sexual solicitation.

SOURCES: Gengler, C. (2009). Teens and the internet. *Teen Talk: A Survival Guide for Parents of Teenagers*. Regents of the University of Minnesota. Available at <http://www.extension.umn.edu/distribution/familydevelopment/00145.pdf>.

Gengler, C. (2009). Teens and social networking websites. *Teen Talk: A Survival Guide for Parents of Teenagers*. Available at <http://www.extension.umn.edu/distribution/familydevelopment/00144.pdf>.

WAYS ADULTS CAN PROTECT TEENS

FROM CYBERBULLIES AND PREDATORS

Stress to teens what is not safe to put on the web or give out to people they don't know: their full name, address, cell phone number, specific places they hang out, financial information, ethnic background, school, or anything else that would help someone locate them. Although it is important to protect young people's privacy, it may be necessary to review a teen's social networking site to make sure they do not reveal too much personal information.

Emphasize that in cyberspace, there's no such thing as an "erase" button—messages, photos, rants, and musings can and do hang around forever. Information that may seem harmless now to a teen can be used against them at any time—maybe in the future when applying to college or looking for a job. Photos posted on the sites should not reveal too much personal information about teens.

- Shut down a personal website or blog when the adolescent is subjected to bullying or flaming. If necessary, it is possible get a new email address and instant-messaging (IM) identity.
- Make clear to young people what kinds of messages are harmful and inappropriate. Enforce clearly spelled-out consequences if young people engage in those behaviors.



- Encourage teens not to respond to cyberbullying. The decision whether to erase messages is difficult. It is not good for teens to revisit them, but they may need to be saved as evidence if the bullying becomes persistent.
- Keep all computers out of teens' bedrooms so that computer activity can be monitored better.

SOURCES:

Kowalski, R.M. & Limber, S.P. (2007). Electronic bullying among middle school students. *Journal of Adolescent Health*, 41, S22-S30.

Wolak, J., Finkelhor, D., Mitchell, K.J., & Ybarra, M.L. (2008). Online "predators" and their victims: myths, realities, and implications for prevention and treatment. *American Psychologist*, 63(2): 111-128.

For additional resources, please refer to *The Teen Years Explained: A Guide to Healthy Adolescent Development*. Science-based and accessible, this guide is a practical and essential resource for parents and all people who work with young people.

*"Add this book to the
'must-read' list."
—Karen Pittman,
Forum for Youth
Investment*



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