



Bullying: An Imbalance of Power

When Fran enters the school cafeteria, she is confronted by Cheryl and a group of Cheryl's friends. They make it clear that if Fran does not hand over her lunch money, she will be beaten up, her clothes will be torn, and her hair will be cut.

In a separate incident, a teacher berates a student in front of the entire class: "Jeremy, you must have left your brains at home again. When are you going to start shaping up?"

These scenarios are examples of bullying — a form of aggression in which there is an imbalance of power between the instigator and the victim. The first instance illustrates face-to-face bullying. The second is more subtle in that it is an aggressive act exhibited by an authority figure. Both scenarios reinforce the pervasive notion that the powerful have the right to intimidate the powerless.

The Melissa Institute addresses the issue of school



bullying through workshops, community education programs, seminars for teachers and counselors, as well as activities for students. In addition, the Institute helps raise awareness about the link between bullying and school violence.

Many people harbor misconceptions about childhood bullying. They believe it is usually perpetrated by boys, and that the victims of bullying may have been "asking for it." They also incorrectly feel that children who are bullies will eventually grow out of it.

"As adults, we often see bullying behavior in children and think, 'Well, that's just how kids are,'" said Debra J. Pepler, Ph.D., an international expert on childhood aggression and a member of The Melissa Institute's Scientific Board. "We have all had some painful experiences in the past, so we tend to detach from it. But now we are realizing that we can't do that."

For many children, the effects of bullying are not severe. However, nearly 20 percent will require some kind of intervention and support.

The problems are very serious for 10 percent. For them, the victimization may be more severe, more frequent, may follow them wherever they go, and may persist over an extended period of time. These children will carry the scars of their victimization through their entire lives. They often develop depression, sometimes severe enough to lead to suicide.

While 75 percent of teachers say that they usually intervene, only 25 percent of students agree with that statement. Out of desperation, the severely bullied child may resort to antisocial behavior and violence as a form



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of retaliation. A noted example resulted in the tragic events at Columbine High School in Colorado. A report by the Columbine Review Commission states that “bullying is a risk factor in assessing the potential for school violence, in that many of those who have carried out lethal acts of violence had in fact been taunted and bullied at their schools.”

Bullying, however, is not just something that happens in school. It is a pervasive — often glorified — element of our society. From hostile corporate takeovers to violent video games, from national politics to the media’s treatment of aggression, children are sent the unambiguous message that might makes right. Today’s childhood bullies and victims may become the policymakers and cultural icons of tomorrow.

“Bullying is a covert behavior,” said Dr. Pepler. “Attacks can be physical, verbal or psychological, and can take as little as 10 seconds to happen.”

“It is a community problem involving all ages and both sexes,” said Suzanne Keeley, Ph.D., president of The Melissa Institute. “When it becomes a pattern of behavior, it can lead to sexual harassment, gang involvement, date violence, workplace harassment, child abuse, marital abuse and elder abuse.

“That’s why The Melissa Institute educates people about bullying,” Dr. Keeley said. “We need to have every-one step up to the plate and get involved in prevention.”

Donald Meichenbaum, Ph.D., research director for the Institute, agrees. “The Melissa Institute plays a vital role in linking research with community awareness,” he said. “That’s why we host a one-week bullying education series each November in which we work with local police, school administrators, psychologists, students and groups such as D.A.R.E. (Drug Abuse Resistance Education).” The Institute also gives presentations by request throughout the year.

The need for bullying education and violence prevention is a basic one, according to Dr. Pepler. “Kids have a right to be safe and to feel safe at school,” she said.

FACTS ABOUT BULLYING

- Female bullies are more likely to use verbal and social methods. Males are more prone to use physical violence.
- One in four high school juniors and seniors has experienced date violence.
- Girls are as likely to initiate date violence as boys.
- Bullies are more likely to have been abused themselves.
- Exclusion and gossip are indirect forms of bullying.

SIGNS OF VICTIMIZATION

- Fear of going to school
- Missing possessions (money, clothing, etc.)
- Injuries
- Withdrawal or depression
- Low self-esteem
- Disturbed sleep/nightmares

Art by Reinaldo Sonchen
Grade 8
Centennial Middle School

