

Myths and Facts About Bullying in Schools

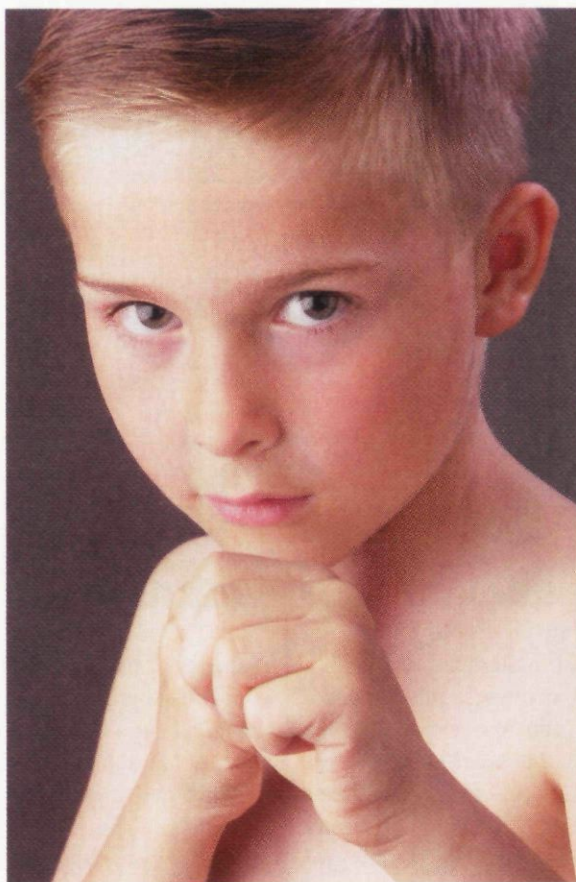
Effective interventions depend upon debunking long-held misconceptions

by Jaana Juvonen, PhD

Bullying among schoolchildren is receiving a lot of public attention. The news media implicates bullying as a reason underlying serious school shooting incidents. Popular press and entertainment media, in turn, depict bullying tactics that manipulate social relationships among girls as particularly mean and hurtful (for example, as in the film *Mean Girls*). The attention that bullying is receiving in the media has increased the public's awareness of bullying as a problem, but the portrayals also frequently promote misconceptions about bullying that are not supported by contemporary research. In this article, I question some of these depictions in light of the most recent empiric evidence. I start by defining what bullying entails and, after reviewing some of the common myths, conclude with guidelines for intervention.

One Definition, Multiple Manifestations

Bullying involves an imbalance of power between the perpetrator and the target, such as a strong child intimidating a weaker one. Intimidation can be achieved by many means.¹ Across multiple age groups, name-calling is by



far the most common form of bullying among boys and girls. Young children, and boys of all ages, are more physically aggressive than are adolescents and girls of any age. Although the popular media depicts girls as the masters of covert social tactics of meanness, boys engage in spreading rumors and social exclusion, as well. Most targets of bullying are victimized in multiple ways. Moreover, experiences of bullying hurt

regardless of the means. Based on the current evidence, we cannot presume a slap on the face hurts more than a nasty rumor, or vice versa.

Challenging Myths About Bullying

Myth: Bullies suffer from low self-esteem. When bullies are identified by means other than self-report (i.e., based on teacher or peer ratings), no evidence suggests that bullies suffer from low self-esteem. To the contrary, many studies report that aggressive youth perceive themselves in a positive light, at times displaying inflated self-views. Recent evidence shows that bullies are less depressed, socially anxious, and lonely than socially adjusted youth who are uninvolved in bullying.² These findings regarding positive self-perceptions and lack of emotional distress can

be understood when we consider peer status of bullies, which relates to the next common misconception.

Myth: Bullies are social outcasts. Contrary to the common stereotype, bullies are not social outcasts. Bullies are frequently members of social groups or networks.³ They are also likely to have friends. However, these friendships typically involve other aggressive youth who reinforce bullying

behavior. In addition, bullies are popular among their peers. In our research on middle-school students, we found that classmates rate bullies among the "coolest kids" in their classes.²

Some of the reasons underlying the high social status of bullies can be understood in the light of evolutionary principles, such as establishment of social dominance. Among primates, aggression establishes dominance within a group. It is therefore possible that children, and especially young teens, rely on bullying tactics to secure their place on top of the social hierarchy.

Myth: Victims of bullying become violent. One depiction of victims of bullying promoted by the news media is that targets of repeated peer maltreatment eventually lash out at their tormentors. This idea was reinforced by school shooting incidents since the late 1990s. However, research shows that

most victims of bullying suffer in silence rather than retaliate. Identified as *submissive victims*,⁴ these targets of bullying display psychological problems, including depression, social anxiety, and low self-esteem.⁵ When victims blame themselves for their plight and view the causes of bullying as beyond their control (e.g., thinking that they are bullied because they are obese or because of their cultural heritage), they are particularly likely to feel distressed.⁶

In contrast to submissive victims, a smaller subset of chronic targets of bullying—*aggressive victims*—are likely to retaliate or to provoke hostility.⁷ Aggressive victims display a distinct profile of social-emotional and school-related difficulties (they are extremely rejected by classmates and display academic problems) indicative of other underlying problems, such as

emotion regulation problems typical of children who have attention deficit disorders.⁸ It is possible that the psychological profile of aggressive victims fits that of school shooters. In spite of such similarities, we cannot presume that most aggressive victims will resort to violence. Furthermore, it is critical to understand that we cannot accurately predict who will become a potential perpetrator of school violence.⁹

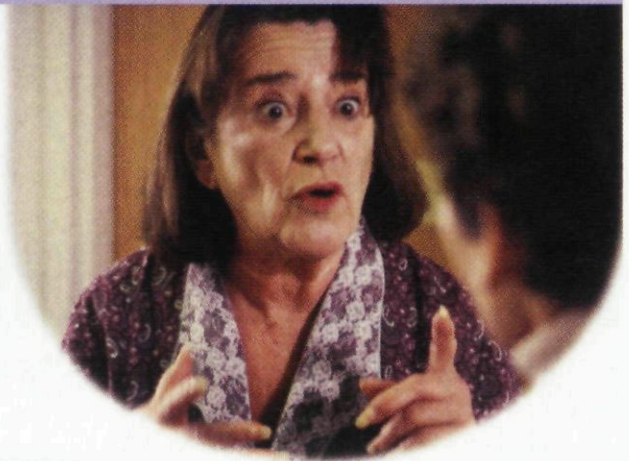
Myth: Bullying builds character. An old misconception of bullying was that such experiences are an important part of growing up. In contrast to this view, research clearly shows that bullying experiences increase the vulnerabilities of children. For example, passive and socially withdrawn children are at heightened risk of being bullied, and these children become even more withdrawn after incidents of bullying.¹⁰ Similarly, youth who have

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unfavorable perceptions of their social standing are at risk of being bullied, and bullying experiences have negative impacts on self-views.¹¹ Thus, certain characteristics or behaviors may mark a child as an "easy target," and bullying experiences exacerbate these same attributes. Based on the limited data available, it appears that for most youth the negative emotional effects of bullying are acute rather than long-lasting. However, sensitivity to harassment may be increased. Moreover, youth who are depressed and victimized have a higher risk of depression as adults, but to say that being bullied as a youth causes depression in adults is probably overly simple.

Myth: Bullying is a problem limited to bullies and victims. Many parents, teachers, and children view bullying as the sole problem of bullies and victims. Yet ample research demonstrates that

bullying involves much more than the bully-victim dyad. Based on playground observations, Craig and Pepler found that in 85% of bullying incidents, an average of four peers were present.¹² Furthermore, witnesses are not necessarily innocent bystanders but often play a critical part in bullying.

Scandinavian researchers (e.g., Olweus⁴) have identified various participant roles, such as assistants to bullies, reinforcers, defenders of victims, etc., who play crucial roles in reinforcing and maintaining bullying behavior. Assistants to bullies ("followers" or "henchmen") take part in ridiculing or intimidating a schoolmate. They do not initiate the hostile overture but rather join in and facilitate bullying. Reinforcers or supporters, in turn, encourage the bully by showing signs of approval (e.g., smiling) when someone is bullied.

Encouragement does not have to be active; passive responding (i.e., lack of interference or help seeking) is adequate to signal approval.

Implications for Intervention

In light of these misconceptions and empiric research, it is important for us to consider implications for intervention. For example, intervention programs that try to boost the self-esteem of bullies are highly questionable. Research findings suggest that bullies get sufficient "ego boosters" from their classmates, who consider them to be cool. Based on the evidence of bullies' high social standing and its effect on positive self-regard, it is the popularity of bullies that needs our concern.

Even if evolutionary principles help us understand why bullies have high

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social status, it does not mean that we cannot teach children principles of a democratic and civilized society in which all members have a right to fear-free schooling. This requires a major shift in whom we target with our interventions: Rather than focusing on bullies, we might be more successful in changing the peer group norms that reinforce bullying. This is the basic operating principle of school-wide antibullying programs. Bullying is not considered an individual problem of some students but a social problem of the collective. Such an approach to bullying might also alleviate the despair of the victims of bullying.

Changing a school's social norms or culture requires increased awareness of the problem's nature, heightened monitoring, and systematic and consistent responses to bullying incidents by school staff. Most school-

wide programs are based on a model developed by Olweus.⁴ I characterize the key elements of such an approach as follows:

- A strong *school statement* promoting positive social relationships and opposing bullying, along with a description of how the school deals with bullying incidents.
- A declaration of the *right of individuals* and groups in the school—students, teachers, and others—for a fear-free working and learning environment.
- A statement of the *social responsibility* of those who witness peer victimization to intervene or seek help. Both students and parents with bullying concerns are encouraged to speak with school personnel so that incidents can be followed up.

In addition to these general guidelines, U.S.-based programs influenced by conflict resolution models also include explicit *instruction of strategies* that can prevent bullying incidents or ameliorate their negative emotional impact (for a review of interventions, see the work by Sanders and Phye¹³). For example, as part of a program developed at the laboratory school of the University of California, Los Angeles, called *Cool Tools*, students are taught to leave or "exit" situations before they escalate (see sidebar). They also learn about communication strategies relevant either during or right after the bullying episode, such as talking to someone about the incident. Other strategies consist of internal coping responses (e.g., how to reframe incidents, how to problem solve, etc.). These skills are taught to all students, with the assumption being that it is not sufficient for students to




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know what *not to do*: They also need to be taught what *to do*. Most importantly, daily incidents of bullying are regarded as “teachable moments” during which the acquired knowledge can be applied and skills practiced. School staff probe and remind students of the strategies when they mediate bullying incidents in the school yard or hallways. Consistent follow-through of incidents is essential to the generalization of these invaluable life skills.

The many myths about school bullies and victims should not guide intervention efforts. Instead, we need to rely on the knowledge gained through research to help us deal with the pervasive problem of bullying and its detrimental effects on children and youth. **BHM**

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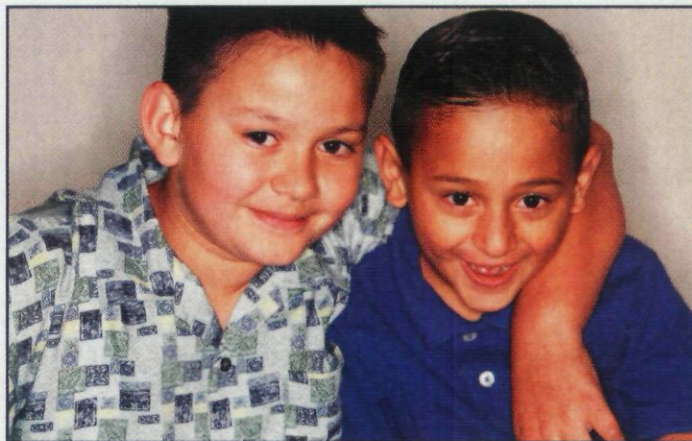
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Teaching Kids to Stay Cool

The general principles of school-wide antibullying programs incorporated by *Cool Tools* consist of school policy, focus on individual rights to fear-free schooling, and social responsibility for others; these are presumed to help reduce the number of incidents of bullying. Moreover, *Cool Tools'* specific goal is to teach children effective ways to deal with bullying. When students respond to bullying in ways that discourage the bully, incidents should be diminished. Furthermore, when students learn to better deal with “put-downs,” the emotional impact of bullying will be less distressing.

The philosophy behind *Cool Tools* is to provide children with a common core language for resolving conflicts and to learn lifelong strategies for coping with peer harassment and humiliation. The *Cool Tools* language helps children “cool down,” choose their words and tone carefully and, if necessary, exit a heated situation in a way that “saves face.” To be effective, *Cool Tools* needs to be taught at all grade levels to promote the use of a common core language among multi-age students who interact as a community. *Cool Tools* focuses on the whole school, not only problem cases; is proactive, not punitive; is responsive, not only reactive; offers strategies, not time-outs/suspensions; involves adult-guided mediation, not peer mediation; and focuses on incidents, not on “at-risk” students.

The toolbox used in *Cool Tools* features a variety of attention-grabbing “tools” that serve as concrete objects representing abstract social/behavioral concepts. These include inflatable shoes used to represent the ability to exit the situation, kaleidoscopes to promote an understanding of different points of view, and a Big Mistakes eraser to represent compassion and forgiveness. By using the tools as physical representations of abstract concepts, students are better able to grasp their meaning, as well as such corresponding values as self-reliance, empathy, and fairness.



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