

# **BULLIED TEACHER: BULLIED STUDENT**

*How to recognize the bullying culture in your school and what to do about it.*

**LES PARSONS**

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## Introduction: Who's Bullying Whom?

Educators have been slow to recognize what students have known all along: we're losing the war on school bullying. In spite of widespread concern, the best of intentions, and a host of diverse, well-publicized anti-bullying programs, student bullying remains firmly embedded in our school cultures. Our failure to change what bullying is doing to our schools, however, is forcing us to come to grips with the full extent of school bullying. We're starting to realize that bullying in schools isn't just a childhood disease like chicken pox. Bullying is an adult contagion that erupts most noticeably in our schools among students. But principals also bully; so do teachers; and so do parents. What we're coming to realize is that bullying can be eradicated only if everyone in a school environment — adult as well as student — takes the cure.

### The Plague Persists

According to the United Nations Charter of Rights for Children, students have the right to be safe and the right to an education. Governments enact laws and school boards develop policies to ensure these rights. But just because these laws and policies are invoked in extreme situations doesn't mean they're working. When newspapers report a student suicide as result of student bullying, the arrest and prosecution of the bullies should set alarm bells ringing. If anti-bullying policies were being effectively implemented, why did it take a death to trigger them?

According to the American Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the suicide rate for 10- to 14-year-olds increased 109% between 1980 and 1997. A survey in the *American Journal of Public Health* disclosed that gay high-school students in Massachusetts were four times more likely than heterosexual students to take their own lives. Yet these tragic statistics are merely the most violent tip of the bulk of the day-to-day bullying iceberg that floats invisibly below public perception.

We know that all schools have a problem with student bullies. All schools are plagued with physical assaults, relationship bullying, cyber bullying, severe name-calling, untrue gossip, exclusion, unwanted sexual touching, intimidation, threats, and coercion. The only differences among schools are how widespread and oppressive the behaviors might be and how schools challenge and deal with these behaviors. We know that student bullying occurs most frequently in the schoolyard, on the way to and from school, in school corridors, in classrooms and lunchrooms, and in washrooms. Although bullies are most likely to strike in these locations, no area in or around the school is safe. Wherever students congregate, supervised or not, for any purpose in any school, bullying can occur.

Researchers are compiling a wealth of data to substantiate the mass of anecdotal evidence attesting to the scale of the bullying problem. International studies find that anywhere from a third to three-quarters of children have been involved in bullying situations. Gray's *Guide to Bullying* states that 160,000 students in the U.S. miss school each day due to bullying. A 2001 study of more than 15,000 students from Grades 6 to 10 by the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development found that 16% of U.S. school children said that they had been bullied by other students that term, and that more than 40% of the boys who had bullied carried a weapon in school. In the April 2005 issue of the *Canadian Journal of School Psychology*, two researchers from the University of Calgary, Dr. Tanya Beran and Dr. Leslie Tutty, discovered that half the students in their study had been bullied and that the students in Grades 1 to 3 were bullied as frequently as the students in Grades 4 to 6. New Zealand researchers Lind and Maxwell discovered that 90% of the incidents of emotional abuse and physical violence between children occurred at school. No wonder zero-tolerance policies regarding bullying have spread worldwide.

We also know a lot about the bullying problem itself: bookshelves are lined with comprehensive examinations of bullies, their targets, the role of bystanders, and the complex and disturbing dynamic that links bully, target, and bystander. Researchers frequently discover a correlation between bullying and depression and suicide. In their book, *Bullies, Targets, and Witnesses*, for instance, the Frieds reveal that boys and girls who both bully and are bullied are more liable to suffer depression than other students. Girls who both bully and are bullied and boys who are bullied are more liable to seriously contemplate suicide. We have discovered, as well, why some children are more likely to become bullies than other children, and that bullies are more likely to become enmeshed in violent and criminal behavior as they grow older.

More than thirty years ago, Leonerd Eron led a group of researchers in a comprehensive examination of bullying. The group's longitudinal studies demonstrated that most children identified as bullies in Grade 3 were also identified as bullies by the end of high school. By the age of thirty, one out of four of those bullies had criminal records. The male bullies had greater tendencies to be abusive in their relationships than non-bullies, and the female bullies more abusive to their children. The researchers also discovered a correlation between bullying and a range of social problems, including employment difficulties, alcohol and drug dependency, and divorce. More importantly, their studies indicated that the children of bullies were more likely to become bullies themselves. These findings were replicated in the years that followed.

How important is the home environment in the development of bullying? A long-term Canadian study, The National Longitudinal Survey of Children and Youth, confirmed an essential link. A group of 4100 children and parents were surveyed in 1994–95 when the children were between two and five years old, and again eight years later in 2002–03 when the children were between ten and thirteen years old. Preschoolers who were parented with fewer incidents of hitting, yelling, or threatening at home were, eight years later, found to be less aggressive as preteens and less likely to be involved in fighting and bullying at school. This trend emerged regardless of the child's gender, the family's economic situation, or the area of Canada in which they lived. Additionally, if parents changed their parenting style over those eight years and became either more or less punitive, their children displayed a corresponding change in their behavior, becoming more or less aggressive.

A number of books offer a wide-ranging palette of suggestions for stamping out bullying in schools, from applying strict sanctions to “no blame” mediation. We have profiles to help us identify bullies and targets; we have strategies to effect change in the critical behavior of bystanders. With everything we do know about bullying in schools, one perplexing gap remains: we seem to have trouble accepting and understanding why our progress in the war against bullying seems to be stalled.

Research into the implementation of anti-bullying programs indicates that some schools make dramatic inroads into student bullying behaviors, at least for a short time. In general, however, for all the time, effort, money, and focus placed on eradicating bullying from our schools, the results have been disappointingly meager and difficult to maintain. Overall, the effect of these programs on bullying in most schools is negligible.

In 2005, Dr. David Smith from the University of Ottawa published a paper in the *School Psychology Review* in which he synthesized the existing evaluation research on whole-school anti-bullying programs. He discovered that the majority of programs yield insignificant outcomes on measures of self-reported victimization and bullying, and that only a small number yield positive outcomes. Wendy Craig of Queen’s University found that slightly more than half the schools implementing whole-school anti-bullying programs reported positive results, while 15% reported that bullying had *worsened* in spite of the programs. It seems that the culture of bullying in schools is more resistant to change than we would like to believe.

## Looking Beyond Student Bullying

When researchers delve into the effectiveness of anti-bullying programs in schools, they refer to staff commitment as one key factor, and the implementation of a whole-school approach as the other. In other words, if all the adults in the building aren’t part of the solution, they become part of the problem. Granted, focusing an entire school staff on any program initiative is problematic. But anti-bullying programs contain a unique and critical design flaw: they don’t address the nature and extent of adult bullying in schools and the impact these bullies have on student bullying.

All schools bully and all schools possess a bullying culture. Within these cultures, student and adult bullies mix and merge in complex and disturbing patterns. While not exhaustive, the following examples illustrate the entangled nature of these relationships:

- Some students bully other students; some of these student bullies are themselves bullied by other student bullies; some of these student bullies bully teachers.
- Some teachers bully students; some teacher bullies bully other teachers; some teacher bullies bully parents.
- Some office staff bully teachers, students, and parents.
- Some principals bully teachers, office staff, students, and parents.
- Some parents bully teachers, office staff, principals, and their own children.

As these examples demonstrate, student–student bullying can’t be resolved in isolation from the other components of a school’s bullying culture. Anti-bullying programs can solve the problem of student–student bullying only by simulta-

neously addressing the full nature, extent, and interrelationship of both student and adult bullying.

## What Is Bullying?

What constitutes bullying? Why do people bully? What are the differences between student bullying and adult bullying? These questions are central to the issue of bullying in schools, but the answers aren't as clear-cut as we might like them to be. In the first place, we tend to think of bullying in terms of stereotypes: the big, tough kid in class who has repeated grades several times and who threatens other students with beatings unless they do as he says; the grim-faced teacher who strolls around the class whacking students with a ruler and taping mouths shut with masking tape; the volcano-tempered principal who terrorizes staff and students alike with his deafening tirades and dictatorial style. But bullies aren't often that blatant in their behavior or that easily characterized. Would your own definition of bullying include the following behaviors?

- The popular, personable, high-achieving student who presents to adults as a positive role model and classroom leader but who wields social influence to dominate, control, and selectively exclude peers
- The hard-working teacher who presents to parents as a demanding professional with excellent classroom control and rigorous standards but who regularly reduces students to tears with sarcasm, humiliation, and taunts
- The principal who carefully targets and systematically harasses perceived rivals on staff while presenting to the board superintendent as mild-mannered and obsequious
- The aggressive parents who stifle their child's aggression at home while responding to the child's pent-up release of aggression at school with irate, vicious, public condemnations of the school and staff, and who constantly harass board personnel over each and every perceived slight

Researchers have struggled to develop a definition of bullying that includes all these behaviors and more in one descriptive statement. The struggle is revealed in the diversity of their approaches. Loreleigh Keashly at Wayne State University prefers to define a set of verbal and nonverbal behaviors independent of racial and sexual content and label it "emotional abuse." Some researchers perceive bullying in terms of a continuum of behaviors ranging from the occasional and uncharacteristic to the habitual and ingrained. The position of the behavior on the continuum influences how it is regarded and handled. When discussing student-on-student bullying, they even balk at using the term "bully," for fear of labeling children. They insist on a clear distinction between rejecting a child's actions and rejecting the child. While we certainly need to avoid labeling individuals when confronting and modifying bullying behavior, for purposes of discussion we need to avoid misunderstanding: people who bully are bullies.

In 1991 Peter Randall defined bullying as "the aggressive behavior arising from the deliberate intent to cause physical or psychological distress to others." The national School Safety Center's definition added another wrinkle that a number of researchers insist on: the hurtful or aggressive behavior needs to be intentional and repeated. The keystone of all definitions, however, seems to be the systematic abuse of a power imbalance.

When examining the issue of bullying in schools, an aggregate definition combining essential elements from a number of definitions will serve as a guide:

- Bullying can occur anywhere in a school and can be perpetrated by anyone in that school. Bullies can be students or adults.
- Bullies can operate alone or with accomplices.
- A target may be a single individual or a series of individuals.
- Bullying is a repeated act against an individual or a series of individuals who fear the bully's power. An imbalance of power exists.
- Bullies intentionally mean to harm someone physically, emotionally, or socially.
- Bullies often feel justified in their behavior.
- Bullying is often organized and systematic.
- Bullies rely on bystanders or onlookers either to do nothing to stop the bullying or to actually support the behavior.
- Bullying can occur over a short period of time or go on indefinitely.

Although the basic dynamics of student and adult bullying are the same, an adult's motivations, experiences over time, and fuller appreciation of power and sanction structures create differences in tactics and targets. Adults have a more comprehensive understanding of the power they wield and the control they need to exert over their impulses. In most cases, they eschew physical abuse for a more sophisticated and incisive use of emotional and social intimidation. They also clearly understand where they are in the educational pecking order, recognizing the need to bully "down" but toady "up."

Students are targeted by student bullies for any number of reasons. Simply being a newcomer to a school without immediate friends or alliances might be enough to attract a bully's attention. A perceived slight, a manner of dress or deportment, or even success in school can be reason enough for one student to bully another. Student bullies also search for vulnerabilities in their targets. Perceptions of social or physical ineptness, physical or psychological disability, sexual orientation, and ethnocultural or socio-economic inequity can be enough to drive a wedge between targeted individuals and their peer groups. At the same time, if a student bully is popular, attractive, personable, and influential, someone with similar qualities could be targeted to eliminate a potential competitor for top spot in a clique. Anyone can bully; anyone can be bullied.

Adults exploit vulnerabilities when targeting students, and also target other adults who appear most vulnerable: anyone new to a school who hasn't had a chance to secure allies; anyone displaying insecurity about their role or abilities; and anyone hesitant about resisting racist, sexist, or homophobic harassment or other forms of domineering behavior. When targeting adults, adult bullies are also likely to target perceived threats to their positions of control and sense of superiority. How many outgoing, charismatic, confident teachers with leadership potential are stunned when targeted by their superiors?

The chapters that follow highlight and examine the various modes of student and adult bullying, and place them in the context of a school's culture and community. The "red flag" that drew attention to the problem of bullying in schools in the first place and the reason that educators and public alike have been galvanized to act is the continuing dilemma of student-student bullying. An investigation into that crisis in chapter 1 will provide the background necessary to fully understand how invasive and destructive bullying can be to an entire school and to the twin goals of nurturing and educating our young people.