

Beating the Playground Bully

Everyone seems to have a story. Whether it happened to us when we were young, or to our child, or someone we know, everyone has an experience with bullying.

Despite how widespread the problem is, the long term effects of school yard bullying are controversial. Due to the enormous number of variables, very few studies can provide consistent information on clear long term outcomes after bullying. However, the short term outcomes are far better documented, can be extremely severe, and include low self esteem, poor academic progress, depression, and even suicide.

There are usually outward signs shown by a person who is being bullied. In children and young adults, the signs can vary from feeling ill in the morning, continually 'losing' their possessions, becoming aggressive with siblings, being quiet, withdrawn or moody, bed wetting, insomnia, and refusal to socialise.

There are many underlying issues that create a bully. The intention of this two part series is not to pass judgment on the bully, but to help the target of the bullying understand their situation, and formulate strategies that will lead to a harmonious future.

The first step to combating the issue of bullying is to understand it. Firstly, it is important to remember that the behaviour is not considered bullying if it's an isolated incident. Bullying behaviour involves repeated attempts to cause distress, humiliation or isolation. The build up to bullying often begins deceptively. This is why targets of bullying are often far into the problem before they realise exactly what's happening.

There are five documented stages of bullying:

Stage One: Watching and waiting

During the early stages, the bully gains a sense of the characteristics of everyone in their class or social circle. They observe behaviour and gather information. They are most likely to target those that they dislike, feel are competition or are quiet and timid.

Stage Two: Testing the waters

Actions by the bully may include bumping into someone on purpose or knocking their book off a desk. If the target doesn't respond or seems embarrassed or timid, they will be considered a potential victim. Those who are not bullied are those who have shown signs at this very early stage that they are not easy targets. The bully may test the water with a number of people and gauge the response accordingly.

Stage Three: Something more substantial occurs

Very soon after this initial test, which may not be recognised by the target as the start of an assault, the real conflict begins. It is most likely to be a direct physical or verbal altercation. If the bully is pulled up over the altercation, it may be explained away by the bully as "just having a bit of fun". Terms like, "Can't you take a joke?" may be bandied about. The bully knows that this type of language will appease their target for now, and open the door for further bullying under the guise of camaraderie or a joke.

Stage Four: The bullying escalates

Once successful at stage three, the bullying will reach new heights because there will be nothing to stop it. If they get away with it in stage three, that's a green light. The bullying will be frequent and can take on one of three forms: direct physical, direct verbal or indirect. It could happen in school or work as well as outside it. The bully may also recruit others to their activity at this stage. The peer group is likely to remain passive on the whole for fear of being the next target.

Stage Five: Bullying is the status quo

The person being bullied is likely to be losing confidence, failing academically, and avoiding academic or social situations. Those who are bullying feel powerful and, as they get older, they may learn to commit other antisocial acts. The bystanders are now victims of their own inaction and may feel powerless in an unsafe and frightening world.

In the past, there has been a tendency to imply that it's up to the target of the bullying to stand up for themselves. However, once we understand the true definition of bullying and it's enormous short term psychological impact, we can start to see that this type of insistence is yet another way to make the already downtrodden person feel even more inadequate. We are not talking about a mutual conflict or an isolated incident of aggression. Bullying involves the consistent chipping away of a person's self esteem, confidence and inner

strength. Once in this mindset, it's very difficult to see how to conquer that force.

Victims of bullying need support, understanding and where necessary, protection. In next month's article, we will examine the three different types of bullying in greater detail and look at some strategies that families can adopt in order to resolve the ongoing conflict. 💡

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