

Bullying on the Web

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Bullying is not new; most of us have experienced it to some degree growing up. And it's fair to say that until recent years it was not considered a societal problem. It was ignored, minimized or even accepted as a normal part of childhood and adolescence.

However, today bullying is getting a lot of attention, not only from parents, educators and mental-health professionals but from journalists and lawmakers as well.

Bullying here refers to repeated taunting specifically intended to hurt another individual. When digital technology in any form (i.e., e-mail and social networks) is used to cause negative consequences, the term cyberbullying is applied. Recent surveys have documented that bullying is pervasive. In one study over a quarter of all students reported being significantly bullied during their high-school career. A 2005 study found that 43 percent of teenagers 13-17 had been cyberbullied.

Bullying takes an emotional toll on its victims; depression, low self-esteem, academic failure and suicidal thoughts have been documented at higher levels in those who have been bullied. And the effects appear to be long-lasting: A study in the December 2010 American Journal of Psychiatry found that individuals bullied by childhood peers, especially during middle school, had higher rates of anxiety, depression, hostility, irritability and drug use as adults. Significant alterations in brain structure were associated with the history of being bullied.

Bullying clearly deserves our attention and efforts to prevent it, but two questions continue to vex me: 1) What makes teenagers bullies and 2) what has changed to make bullying recognized now as a real problem?

Although there are exceptions, most teenagers who bully their peers are not budding sociopaths or highly deviant. Nor is bullying the sole province of the physically intimidating football player or the catty prom queen. Cyberbullying lets even small or shy children join the ranks of bullies.

What all early teenagers have in common is a powerful urge to "belong" to a peer group, which begins to substitute for the family as adolescents start the quest for their own identity. Unfortunately, the rules for belonging to middle-school peer groups tend to be crude and arbitrary: Cool is good, different is bad, and one's status is always shifting — a set-up for teens to try to reduce their own insecurity at the expense of others'.

Add to this mix adolescents' tendency to think in all-or-nothing extremes and their proneness to doing things impulsively with little concern for consequences and it's not surprising that teenagers can say or do shockingly mean things to their peers.

Why all the societal attention to bullying in the last year or two?

One reason is that it seems more serious now. Some highly publicized suicides have

been directly linked to bullying. Of course, a generation ago similar suicides might well have occurred but not reached public knowledge because of the stigma associated with suicide and any psychiatric disorder; in the past, suicides were often listed as accidents and mental illness was a shameful secret. However the heartbreaking stories we all too frequently read of teens killing themselves after being tormented by their peers make it impossible to ignore bullying any longer.

While even trivial differences (hair style, manner of dressing) can make a child the target of bullies, two groups suffer disproportionately from bullying: those who don't conform to gender stereotypes (such as lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgendered — LGBT — youth) and those in special education.

Both groups were historically marginalized, and discrimination in various forms, including bullying, was tacitly sanctioned. As stigmatization declines and openness/acceptance increase, advocates for these groups have been assertive about addressing the problem of bullying — to the benefit of all teenagers.

Note that some socially conservative organizations — Focus on the Family, for example — are on record against anti-bullying initiatives because they believe that their purpose is to advance the “gay agenda.” It is unlikely, however, that their efforts will derail what is becoming a national effort to reduce bullying.

Pervasive access to the Internet, social-networking sites and cell phones (75 percent of 12- to 17-year-olds had a cell phone in 2009) has given rise to cyberbullying, leading to intensified bullying and, paradoxically, greater adult awareness because a permanent record exists.

Cyberbullying appears to be more harmful than in-person bullying because it follows a child everywhere, 24/7, with no avenue for escape; unlike schoolyard bullying, it is not episodic. Victims of cyberbullying say it makes them feel that everyone sees their humiliation, not just a group of kids in the hallway, and that it's permanent — easily shared and replayed again and again. Adults are shocked when exposed to the nastiness of cyberbullying, and such an awareness is a prerequisite for change.

Hopefully the combination of greater sensitivity, more assertive pushback by victims and compelling scientific evidence will result in a safer peer culture for children and adolescents.