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Words Can Hurt Forever

James Garbarino and Ellen deLara

Adults in middle and high schools must protect students from verbal harassment and emotional violence.

"Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words can never hurt me." It's an old rhyme from childhood, taught by parents and teachers to generations of children as a tactic for deflecting taunts and teasing. Usually the adult instructs the child to chant it back to the tormentors, like some kind of verbal amulet to ward off the evil spirits of teasing. But the essence of this childhood verse has never really convinced children—not in their hearts. They know that what other children think and say about them does matter. Sticks and stones hurt only for a while, but words can hurt forever.

As children grow into adolescence and enter middle and high school, they continue to suffer the harmful effects of bullying, harassment, and verbal violence. A survey conducted for the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development found that almost one-third of U.S. students in grades 6–10 were directly involved in serious, frequent bullying—10 percent as bullies, 13 percent as victims, and 6 percent as both (Nansel et al., 2001). And the U.S. Department of Education reports that 77 percent of middle and high school students surveyed have been bullied at some point in their school career (1998).

Many students experience bullying and emotional violence, and the majority of students admit to being sexually harassed at school (American Association of University Women, 2001; Garbarino & deLara,

in press). In any given specific instance of bullying, however, most students are bystanders (Atlas & Pepler, 1998). Few of them spontaneously intervene on behalf of the victim. Most watch the bullying of their peers with a sense of helplessness, guiltily relieved that it's someone else's turn to be the target. They are frozen in fear and then feel ashamed for doing nothing to help. Warren, a 15-year-old in New York, expresses the bystander's feelings:

> A lot of people . . . they make fun of people. Sometimes they try to push people around. You can get a nervous feeling in your stomach. There are people that it happens to every day. I see a lot of people who are picked on all of the time. I don't know if they feel unsafe. A lot of people just try to ignore it. I think it takes a really mentally strong person to just ignore it and forget it immediately. And I don't think many people do.

We heard Warren's story and many others as we conducted conversations with students throughout the United States to learn about their experiences with bullying, harassment, and school violence. These conversations were part of a research project that gathered information from hundreds of students across the country in grades 9–12, as well as recent graduates, teachers, support staff, principals, and superintendents. We used surveys, semi-structured individual interviews, and focus groups to gather information.

We learned from these students that emotional violence can create a dysfunctional social system that makes it difficult for participants to concentrate on learning. We also found that students want adults in the system to play a more active role in preventing bullying and verbal violence.

Forms of Bullying

Understanding bullying, harassment, and other forms of emotional violence starts with understanding the power of acceptance and rejection

in human motivation. Anthropologist Ronald Rohner studied 118 cultures around the world in an effort to understand how the phenomenon of "rejection" works in the lives of children and youth. He found that cultures differ in how they express rejection, but in every culture, rejected young people tend to turn out badly, sometimes by simply failing to reach their potential as a result of self-loathing, but sometimes by growing up to defy cultural norms and become lawbreakers. Rohner (1975) called rejection a "psychological malignancy."

Coopersmith and Feldman (1974) found that young people fear rejection. They crave acceptance, and will go to great lengths to get it. They will desperately try to look and act like "the popular kids." They will become addicted to smoking; shun their parents; and suffer through such painful initiation rituals as being "jumped into" a gang, getting tattooed or pierced, or breaking the law. The need for acceptance runs deep. Most human beings will pay any price to belong.

Although rejection is perhaps the most important and most fundamentally destructive form of psychological maltreatment, other forms also affect adolescents. These include *terrorizing*, *isolating*, and *corrupting*.

Terrorizing is the use of fear to torment and manipulate. Perpetrators use their victim's fear either to achieve dominance or to obtain specific payoffs, including money or other material items, status with peers, sexual gratification, or power. Bill, a 17-year-old from a large, rural high school in New Hampshire, says,

> I see a fair amount of bullying at my school. There is this one small kid who always gets picked on during lunch by a couple of bullies. I think they are all juniors. One of the bullies will go up to the kid with his fist in the air until the little kid flinches and then the bully starts laughing. It's a regular thing. I'd like to do something. But there is kind of like a social norm to *not* do anything. If it was anything more than verbal bullying and threats, then I would do something.

Isolating involves cutting someone off from essential relationships. As social creatures, adolescents need to be in relationships to flourish. Some students are pushed into a social "no man's land" by the exclusionary efforts of their peers. Once isolated, they can easily become disconnected from the moderating forces of mainstream society. Ironically, this state of isolation may bring together pairs of students who link up in their estrangement from the larger group and begin to develop strange and sometimes dangerous ways of thinking about themselves and their schools.

Michelle, a 10th grader, feels very isolated and lonely at school. Her words give us a direct view into the school day of many students like her:

> *Do you like school*? Not really. I like the classes, but not the people. If I could be home-schooled that would probably be better. The people in school pick on you all the time. Right now, I have a problem with people spreading rumors about me. I don't really like it. Most days I don't want to even come here. The teachers and guidance—they just know I'm here and that's all they really care about. People say that I'm fat, which I know I am but they don't need to pick on me about it. They spread it around that I'm pregnant and I'm not. Just dumb things. My ex-friend, she used to be my good friend but then a couple of weeks ago she started spreading rumors. So now she's not my friend no more.

Michelle's isolation and exclusion from friends and peers unfortunately reflects the experience of many students on a typical school day. These students rarely complain to a parent or to any other adult. They suffer terribly and in silence most of the time.

Corrupting means influencing a student to learn ways of thinking, speaking, and acting that make him or her increasingly unfit for normal or healthy experiences. During the middle and high school years, negative influences are always available to set in motion the process of

corrupting. Many parents are shocked when their previously sweet children begin to spout angry and obscene language as they move into the world of adolescent peer groups. Formerly positive students may start to slide toward antisocial behavior when their peers mock those who work hard in school or endorse such negative activities as cutting class.

Adults' Responsibility

Why do students feel powerless sometimes? Their sense of powerlessness flows from interactions with one another, interactions with teachers and other adults in their schools, and an inability to make a positive impact on the day-to-day life of their schools. Teachers and other school personnel often observe adolescent anger, but they typically don't see the profound feelings of helplessness or hopelessness that underlie much of this anger. Students say they will "take it" as long as they can, meaning they will handle difficult and disrespectful behaviors until they can stand it no longer. When they reach that point, they are likely to strike back at someone. Fifteen-year-old Sean comments,

> You hear about kids who get picked on all of the time and they can't take it anymore. That's what happened at Columbine. I don't think it happens that bad at my school, but you never know.

Students in our study often spoke insightfully about adults' lack of awareness of events that happened in the school. We have all heard about the extreme cases of school shooters whose distress signals and hints of homicidal or suicidal intent were missed by school administrators and teachers. In our interviews, students offered many smaller examples of adult inattentiveness and its consequences. One 16-year-old girl says,

> I feel unsafe in the cafeteria because people get in fights and start punching each other and the teachers don't take a strong hand. Lots of times, they don't even seem to notice.

Students believe adults should intervene long before they actually do. Sometimes those in authority delay reacting because they have not determined that a particular interaction among students constitutes a problem. Sometimes the adults have not even observed the upsetting situation. Other times, the delay in intervention arises deliberately from the adult premise that adolescents can work out their own problems, which the adults may consider mere teenage squabbles, scuffling, or repartee. Undoubtedly, some adults choose to remain unaware as a way to avoid doing anything about situations that they believe they can't control.

Students also spoke to us about the importance of teachers as "second parents," as supervisors in their environment, and as mentors for their social and academic growth. When given a chance to say so without the constraints of acting cool or defending a position, these adolescents expressed the need for more supervision and intervention by adults in the school:

> I think if there is enough supervision in areas around and inside the school, many physical and emotional problems could be solved. (boy, age 16)

> There should be more restraints on picking on people. It happens a lot here, and that is why school violence is happening. (boy, age 15)

Every public swimming pool has lifeguards because we know that swimmers need supervision in order to remain safe. Schools are no different in this respect.

Where to Start

One place to start is with concrete and grounded plans for monitoring student and adult activity in the building and on the school premises.

Here are some of the essential components of appropriate supervision in middle and high schools:

- Formulate a uniform plan for when, where, why, and how to monitor and intervene on behalf of students.
- Develop the plan with the cooperation and input of all stake-holders in the school—students, teachers, parents, admin-istrators, counselors, mental health professionals, security personnel, and concerned community members. Make sure that student input comes from every social group.
- Through survey instruments, group discussions, and inter-views, solicit students' perceptions of which places and activi-ties are unsafe—in the school, on the grounds, and on the way to and from school. Consider recruiting outside evaluators to ensure anonymity and to capture maximum reliability of stu-dent responses.
- Ensure that the adults who will enforce the plan feel commit-ted to it and regard it as purposeful and useful.
- Make it clear to everyone that adults will intervene in interper-sonal disputes quickly (for most schools, this means sooner than they currently do).
- Train every adult in state-of-the-art intervention strategies to de-escalate conflicts among students.
- Include in the master plan a uniform policy for intervening with students who come to school under the influence of alco-hol or other drugs.
- Avoid the temptation of relying on such technological quick fixes as surveillance cameras and metal detectors; in most instances, these do not help students feel safe.
- Most important, obtain continual feedback from students on the effectiveness of the strategies for supervision that you have implemented.

In addition, schools should provide teachers with inservice training regarding the consequences of allowing bullying and harassment in the school. Any inservice program needs to define forms of bullying and recommend appropriate means of interrupting bullying interactions from student to student and between teacher and student. Several countries already have successful programs from which our schools could make adaptations (see Mattaini, 2001; Olweus, 1993; Smith et al., 1999; Stein & Sjostrom, 1996).

Consequences of Inaction

What does bullying and other disrespectful behavior mean from a systemic perspective? First, our failure to prevent such behavior indicates that the system defines bullying too narrowly, as only physical aggression and extortion. Second, failing to prevent bullying behavior suggests a lack of understanding of the serious and damaging nature of all forms of bullying for many students. Third, our inaction reflects an unwillingness to see bullying as the responsibility of the system. When school personnel do not prevent students from bullying other students, these educators have, in effect, delegated a portion of their authority to the bullies in the system. This situation has many negative consequences, among them the rise of gang behavior in the schools.

When teachers and students participate in bullying activities or witness them and do nothing, they enable the school system to perpetuate this behavior and remain unhealthy and unsafe for all students. If adults do not provide the intervention students need, then students will take matters into their own hands—generally for worse, not better. Caring means demonstrating the will to stay aware and to act in a protective fashion, and in so doing create an emotionally safe school.

Although considered normal by school personnel and many students themselves, emotional bullying and harassment among students exact a high price in terms of the atmosphere of the school. Although student leaders can play a part in reducing bullying behavior within

the school, adults must fill a crucial role. We have to ask, What is our responsibility? When it comes to bullying, sexual harassment, and emotional violence at school, the buck stops with adults.

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