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Why do children bully?

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, Elizabeth, first became affected by bullying when I was bullied as a child. I couldn't understand why I was bullied, and why, even though some people were aware of this, it continued to happen. I was called racist names and physically assaulted, people used to spit in my hair, and sometimes, when I was hiding, several people would search for me to threaten and push me. As an adult looking back, I realise that as the bullying grew in severity, I became known and targeted as a 'victim'.

When I later researched bullying for my undergraduate degree, the academic literature made me feel ashamed of being a victim, particularly when I read a description from Salmivalli *et al.* about 'helpless' and 'provocative' victims¹. I remembered what my experience felt like as a child: the cold sweats, being frightened of school every day, unable to concentrate on my work. I became weak, anxious and I could hardly eat.

But then, as I read Salmivalli's suggestion that the best response to bullying 'is not to respond', I took a more critical stance. As an adult who has researched bullying and a practitioner implementing anti-bullying strategies in school, I do not believe that bullying should be reduced to something that should just be ignored. Bullying places children's safety at risk, can cause anxiety and even suicide.

Why do children bully?

Understanding why some children bully is the first step to preventing it. **Drs Elizabeth Nassem** and **Ann Harris** explore the reasons behind teasing that crosses the line, and outline a few ways teachers and pupils can work together to end it.

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Some pupils were ostracised, experienced violence, ridiculed for making mistakes, forced into bins – then put in isolation booths by teachers for several days.



When I was teaching, I became aware of how prevalent bullying was. Some pupils were ostracised, experienced violence, ridiculed for making mistakes, forced into bins – then put in isolation booths by teachers for several days. I discussed my concerns with other teachers, but I did not feel that we completely dealt with it. From this, I decided that instead of focusing on extreme cases, I would examine the mundane and everyday experiences of bullying.

What is bullying?

Bullying is usually defined as a specific form of aggression which is repeated, intentional and where the bully clearly has more power (physical or psychological) over the victim.²

This definition, however, is problematic. Just one experience of maltreatment can have long-lasting results and make children frightened long after bullying has been experienced.³ It is also difficult to determine if children who engage in bullying intentionally aim to harm others. Many say they 'didn't mean it'. Furthermore, how much does it matter whether or not bullying is intentional? Children can be just as hurt by inadvertent remarks as deliberate attempts to cause harm by those who engage in bullying.

In my own research, I found that children experience bullying in more complex and subtle ways than traditional research typically takes into account. Consider the following issues: when children are calling each other names, are they 'having a laugh' or does something more serious lie beneath it? Two friends are arguing and they both say they are being bullied by each other. When you see them the next day, they are playing together. Who is bullying whom, or is this nothing to worry about? A group of boys are playing a game where they whip others with sticks – is this bullying, violence or just a game?

Evidently, in certain cases, it can be difficult to clearly establish whether children are being bullied. Morita points out that teasing may add 'lightness to the day', but there are also cases where children have committed suicide because of it.⁴



Instead of objectively aiming to distinguish bullying from other forms of aggression, then, why don't we examine how children perceive the maltreatment they endure? Quite simply, teasing becomes bullying when the child becomes distressed by it. It is important, therefore, for children to develop empathy, so that they understand the effect their behaviour has on others – and when that behaviour is crossing a line – which could prevent them from inadvertently causing distress to their peers.

The pull of popularity

Bullies have been identified by researchers as being more likely than others to be anti-social, lack empathy and be involved in crime.⁵ However, I found in my research that the most common reason children engage in bullying is to be popular with their peers.

Bullying can be used to establish social dominance in a group. Through it, children can achieve respect, influence, admiration and leadership over their peers – sadly, at the expense of other children. Those who 'go along' with bullying may do so to feel accepted by children who are perceived as socially powerful. This gives them a sense of belonging, and makes them feel protected from being bullied themselves.

It could also be argued that when children bully others, they are simply mimicking the behaviour of adults. Reality shows on television such as *The X Factor* and *Big Brother*, celebrity news magazines and tabloid newspapers often ridicule individuals for entertainment. Children may be susceptible to being influenced by this behaviour and will ridicule others in order to entertain their peers and gain social approval.

The role of systemic inequality

Unfortunately, a school will inevitably reflect the inequalities of the society in which it is embedded. These inequalities construct some individuals as powerful and some as vulnerable, such as those with special needs or from a deprived background. These vulnerable children can often become involved in conflict with both their peers and teachers. For example, a child with learning difficulties may find it hard to engage in the lesson, and become distracted and disruptive as a consequence. A vicious cycle can emerge where they become frequently punished.

Several children in my research who could be classed as vulnerable in this way felt 'picked on', 'unfairly punished' and ostracised by teachers and pupils. A child who had dyslexia reported that she was sent out of class by her teacher for refusing to read out loud. A child who could not read said she felt she had no friends because of her disability. One boy reported that he attempted suicide because he was persistently called names such as 'fat', 'gay' and 'whale'; he was frightened to take his coat off because he didn't want everybody looking at him. He also felt that teachers frequently

punished and excluded him. He became self-conscious, felt abnormal and referred to himself as 'different to everybody else'. Of course, teachers do not create the systems that make certain individuals vulnerable to bullying. However, many are positioned to reinforce them.

Interestingly, none of the children in my study who engaged in bullying identified themselves as bullies – partly because they felt they were not solely responsible. In fact, it was considered the 'norm' that those children who do not conform to social expectations, or who display characteristics stigmatised by society, are bullied. Children are somehow being instilled with the accepted standard that those who do not 'fit in' should expect to be bullied. How, then, can we teach children that behaviours which appear to be normal are unacceptable?



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Ending bullying in schools

Green argues that bullying affects everyone, regardless of whether they actively participate.⁶ A climate where bullying is prevalent affects the learning and wellbeing of all children. It causes fear and tension. Children may be frightened of contributing to classroom discussion, because they have observed others being ridiculed when they get the answers wrong. To deal with bullying effectively, it is important for interventions to take into account the effects bullying has on all children who are involved, even if their involvement appears to be minimal.

In my experience, in-depth structured anti-bullying programmes work best, so long as they take into account the complex nature of bullying. This could be provided by an external consultant who works in school and specifically has responsibility for developing anti-bullying strategies and respectful relationships – an arrangement which would help teachers already strapped for time.

However, it is important for staff and students to invest in the programme and take ownership of it. Encourage children to take responsibility for their behaviour and the effect it has on others. To this end, Banwell Primary School in North Somerset delegates

anti-bullying campaigning to its school council – a diverse group made up of children from different year groups and backgrounds – who meet regularly to talk about and review actions on bullying.

One child explains: 'We wrote ideas on a big piece of paper about what bullying is, why it is wrong and what we would do if we were bullied. We want everyone in school to understand what bullying is and what they should do to stop it.'⁷ As part of the school's anti-bullying week, the students dressed up in blue for a day and raised money by selling 'beat bullying' wristbands. Many of the children still wear them.

It is also important to create a safe space to speak and reflect. Perhaps your school's anti-bullying programme could be implemented in workshops with small groups of children, rather than whole-class discussions. One theme for a workshop could be about communication, where children are taught ways to settle disagreements and assert their power in a less aggressive, more productive way. Another theme for a structured workshop could be choices and consequences, in which children discuss behaviour which has created difficulties for them and are supported in reflecting on how they can do things differently next time. It is also beneficial for children to reflect on how they can be inadvertently involved in bullying – for example, if they laugh when other children are being called names.



Dealing with bullies and victims

Children who are vulnerable to being bullied benefit from concerted efforts to enhance their self-esteem and resilience. Part of this should be consistent and intensive support to help them make informed decisions, learn about the opportunities they have and achieve their goals.

Children who are frequently punished and may feel they are unfairly picked on by staff may benefit from understanding the teacher's perspective and why they may be excluded when they are being disruptive. This could be partly implemented through role-play and by encouraging children to reflect on what they have learnt afterwards, which may help them to develop empathy and become more aware of when their behaviour is causing distress to someone else.

On the other hand, children who engage in bullying should be challenged by an educator and/or mentor whom they have a good relationship with. Intervention can be particularly potent when it's other children doing the intervening. For example, the aforementioned Banwell Primary School also trains groups of Year 6 children, known as the 'problem police', to intervene in arguments between younger students in the playground. Research has found that more than 80 per cent of disputes mediated by peers result in lasting agreements.⁸

Children respond well to responsibility, especially those who may otherwise turn to bullying for power or popularity. Could the pupils in your school who have engaged in bullying but have reformed their behaviour become anti-bullying advocates or peer mentors? Taking definitive steps to develop empathy in pupils will also encourage

those who still engage in bullying to take responsibility for their behaviour and the impact it has on others.

Above all, educators should work to keep dialogue open with their pupils in order to understand and deal effectively with bullying. Teachers do well to ask children about their experiences of bullying and how they think bullying should be dealt with. From this, strategies will develop that are directly relevant to children's individual experiences so that bullying can be more successfully reduced.



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Knowledge trails

1. **Using friends to combat bullying** – Could training children to act as peer supporters and protect the vulnerable individuals in their school be an effective way to combat bullying? Helen Cowie examines the evidence.
library.teachingtimes.com/articles/usingfriendstocombatbullying
2. **Working with bullies and their victims** – Dr Lynda Shaw describes how teachers can work with bullies, their victims and bystanders to promote mutual respect and bring an effective end to bullying.
library.teachingtimes.com/articles/working-with-bullies-and-victims