

Bullying in Schools

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At the dawn of 2007, I continue to be haunted by mental pictures of the consequences of bullying in schools. These images may be triggered by the repeated eruptions of violence in schools, as well as by emerging information linking bullying in schools to domestic violence in the home, professional abuse in the workplace, and even police brutality in societies. *Bullying is now viewed as a form of harassment between peers, perpetrated by someone who would like to be seen as more powerful, physically and/or socially, than a perceived weaker person.*

Indelible memories recall that bullying scores were once settled in the primary school by an event on the way from school on a Friday afternoon. Having safely placed all books in a heap on the ground, a group of spectator-pupils would then surround the bully and bullied who, as pugilists, would fix the matter to the chant of “heave, heave.”

Nowadays, bullying adopts two postures—one is direct, the other indirect. In the direct mode, physical aggression is detected among schoolmates through fighting, kicking, pelting, cuffing, slapping, or spitting. In the indirect form, bullying is rather subtle and is detected among adolescents as mocking, spreading false rumours, or ridiculing peers about religion, dress, or lack of brand-name wear. Of late, students also extort snacks, lunch or lunch money, cell phones, “brands” and other *bling*, or even make victims tote their heavy book bags. Gangs are formed when bullies or their victims begin to recruit fan members.

The national component of the Caribbean **Adolescent Health Survey** in 1998 indicated that, 10.3 percent of the representative sample of 1,000 students, within the age group 10-19 years, were involved in fights where weapons such as guns, knives, or razors were used; and 6 percent reported having threatened a teacher. Later scrutiny of Caribbean-wide data from the same survey, by Sally-Ann Ohene and others from the University of Minnesota, found associations between fighting and carrying weapons, and early initiation of sexual intercourse.

Many of the students involved in shootings in schools in the US have claimed that their school administration never addressed their complaints when they themselves were being bullied. Acts of violence in the earliest stages in schools must therefore not be seen as child’s play and left unattended. Research has identified risk factors in childhood that can lead to bullying in adulthood, among these are temper tantrums, growing up in regimented home settings, and “spoiled” children who want their own way. Feelings of envy, insecurity, inadequacy, or resentment seem to fuel bullying.

School systems are now learning to detect early warning signs of violence in poor academic performance, substance use, uncontrolled anger, and preoccupation with video games and videos that promote violence. Without prompt treatment of behaviours demonstrated by school bullies at the earliest manifestations, these persons could eventually graduate into workplace bullies.

Workplace bullying has been defined by the **Workplace Bullying and Trauma Institute** in the US as “*repeated mistreatment of one employee targeted by one or more employees with a malicious mix of humiliation, intimidation, and sabotage of performance.*” Workplace bullies have a strong need to manipulate, control and dominate others. They sometimes damage the personal property of victims, constantly criticise them on trivial issues, could interfere with their correspondence, socially isolate them, disseminate emails and text messages to malign their victims, or even take credit for the victims’ ideas. They confer derogatory labels on the victim, and use undermining tactics within the organisation to deprecate the victim. Co-workers must be on the alert for these symptoms of bullying.

Specific types of bullying occur in certain occupations. For example, the definition of bullying by the **UK Ministry of Defence** is: *the use of physical strength or the abuse of authority to intimidate, or victimize others, or to give unlawful punishment.*

Onlookers often wonder why victims cannot shake off the bully who never seems to relent. Bullying results in feelings of humiliation and demoralization, and lowered self-esteem among victims. In the workplace it could lead to poor work performance, low productivity, traumatic stress, and, in the extreme, to the victim’s depression.

To diffuse the effects of bullying, school victims can attempt to ignore the perpetrator, to use humour, or feign psychotic behaviour when under attack. However, these coping skills will surely have to be learnt! Involving adult authority figures such as teachers, guidance, and safety officers who take the matter seriously, would be a better approach to lasting problem-solving in the school setting. Here, authority figures should begin to ensure that students obtain the required social skills to deal with their conflicts. In the workplace, trade unions should not only deal with financial matters but should be mediators in the incidence of bullying.

Without clear codes of conduct in the schools, workplace, or societies, bullies can loom large and contribute insidiously to the environment of crime in the wider society.

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