

An inclusive peer mentoring class, character education, and highlighting the capacities and value of each person are excellent ways to increase protective factors of vulnerable individuals.

# UNDERSTANDING THE NATURE OF

# BULLYING



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*“You see that girl over there? She wants you to kiss her.” I looked across the crowded high school quad at the lovely young lady sitting under a tree. I could not believe my luck. How did the guys from the football team find this pretty girl who wanted to kiss me?*

*I did not understand why the girl screamed and slapped me when I walked up and kissed her. My heart hurt more than my face when I saw crowds of people watching, pointing at me and laughing. I ran off to hide where no one could see me.*

This true story from our experience is an example of bullying in its many forms. Setting someone up for humiliation is bullying. So are other forms of unwanted aggression like ridicule, exclusion, harassment, verbal abuse and physical harm. Cyber-bullying is using technology like social media and cell phones to gang up on someone, spread rumors and lies, ruin a reputation or engage in other forms of intimidation. Any child or teen, including youth with disabilities, may be involved in bullying and suffer significantly from it. This article explores the nature of bullying and offers ideas to combat it.

Statistics about bullying are alarming. Anyone may be a target of bullying based on race, ethnicity, gender, disability, religion, sexual orientation or other “differences,” particularly in junior high and high school. According to figures cited at [BullyingStatistics.org](http://BullyingStatistics.org), about 30% of students in the United States experience bullying on a regular basis either as a

victim, bully or both. About 80 percent of all high school students have been cyber-bullied! Youth with disabilities are two to three times more likely to be bullied than their non-disabled peers. Preliminary results from a recent national survey found that 63% of children with autism spectrum disorder have been bullied and are three times more likely to be bullied than siblings without autism. Students with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) and Learning Disabilities (LD) are also more likely to be bullied.

Bullying is a form of youth violence or abuse that hurts everyone involved, whether the person is a victim, a bully or a victim-bully (someone who has been bullied and then bullies others). The National Center for Injury Prevention and Control reports that victims of bullying can suffer physical injury, social and emotional distress, sleep difficulties and an academic slide. Kids who are cyber-bullied are more likely to be bullied in person, have self-



esteem and health problems, turn to alcohol and drugs, get poor grades and avoid school. Bystanders who witness bullying may feel distressed, helpless or guilty that they did not do anything to stop it. While bullying does not necessarily cause suicide or suicide attempts, the relationship between suicide and bullying needs to be better understood and prevented.

Bullies themselves run a greater risk of substance use, academic problems, and future violence. Studies indicate that bully-victims suffer the most serious consequences; they have a greater risk of behavioral issues and mental health problems.

**Why do bullies behave as they do?** Bullying is actually a question of power. Many youth who bully are trying to feel more powerful and in control because in reality they feel *less powerful* and *out of control*. They may be jealous, insecure or have something to hide. They may be hurt or traumatized (at home or elsewhere) and take their pain out on others. Perhaps they don't have an outlet for safe expression of their feelings so they lash out at someone who can't fight back.

Some students bully to increase their own power or social status. The social hierarchy in schools has existed as long as anyone can remember. At the top of the social ladder are the popular kids like athletes and cheerleaders, next are cool kids who seem confident and connected to others. A large group of students is in the middle; they are not particularly cool but they are not uncool!

Near the bottom of the social ladder are "wannabe" students who want to be part of the higher-status groups but are not. On the lowest social rung are "outcasts," those who have been rejected by their peers and are outside of the social mainstream. Both these groups of students may be prime targets for bullying because they have several risk factors:

- They are perceived as different by peers
- They don't have a lot of friends or have poor peer relationships
- They tend to be quiet and not speak up for themselves
- They often have low self-esteem.

## **ANYONE MAY BE A TARGET OF BULLYING BASED ON RACE, ETHNICITY, GENDER, DISABILITY, RELIGION, SEXUAL ORIENTATION OR OTHER "DIFFERENCES," PARTICULARLY IN JUNIOR HIGH & HIGH SCHOOL**

These perceived weaknesses can become "target factors" that are clear signals to those looking for easy prey. The connection between disability and bullying becomes clear: many students with disabilities have low social status plus all of these target factors, and limited ability to hide their vulnerability or protect themselves. When students are bullied because of their disability, the incident may move beyond bullying and be considered disability harassment. This is a violation of the person's civil rights, with more serious implications and potential consequences.

In spite of the pain they have suffered, someone who has been

bullied may turn and look for someone even less powerful than himself to take out his own aggression and frustration. This is how the bullied become bullies themselves. Students with disabilities like ADHD and LD may be more likely than students with other disabilities to experience this cycle of bullying.

**Knowing that bullying is really about power gives us direction to diffuse it.** In our experience, part of the solution

is to help students with disabilities become more socially powerful. How do you improve a student's social status? In our view this can be done by reducing risk factors and increasing protective factors:

- Turn "different" into something positive
- Widen the circle of friends
- Help youth find a way to feel capable, achieve, contribute and grow authentic self-esteem
- Help students find their voice and speak up for themselves.

We'll tell a bit more of our personal story to illustrate how we were able to work with others and

accomplish these things for Tom. As hard as the journey was, we helped create change in our community that has impacted thousands of students in the past decade! Hopefully the things we learned along the way will help others looking for solutions.

While we were struggling with many issues and looking for help, Tom was in general education doing the best he could. He didn't get a diagnosis of autism/Asperger Syndrome until he was 13. However, the kids in elementary school already had lots of labels for him like "geek" and "weirdo." Active bullying intensified from sixth grade on. By the time Tom got to high school he had suffered years of verbal and physical abuse, rejection, humiliation and even a written death threat. All of it was devastating to him and to our family. We tried to combat it in many different ways that did not work.

When Tom was in 9th grade, a 12th grader assaulted him in the weight room during gym class. This shocking event caused untold emotional distress, not to mention physical pain. It was truly the last straw. Tom did not know what brought on the attack. He felt anxious and unsafe, thinking something like that could happen again at any moment. We were advised to with-



draw him from the school or risk his mental health.

The school district agreed that the school environment was not safe for him and Tom was sent to a specialized school for students on the autism spectrum. For the first time in a long time, he felt secure and accepted. He fit in and belonged. He thrived, socially, emotionally and academically. He got his first-ever phone call from a friend from that school; he was 15 years old. Tom was valued at the school as a capable person and a student leader. His self-esteem grew along with his self-understanding.

**H**aving progressed so much, Tom was determined to return to the local high school for senior year and graduate with his original class. The question we posed to the Director of Special Education was, "Tom has grown and changed, but the peer group is the same! How can we help change the attitudes and behaviors of typical students so they are more accepting and open to people who are different?"

## **THE ANSWER TO OUR QUESTION CAME FROM SOME TERRIFIC TEACHERS WHO AGREED TO START AN INCLUSIVE PEER-MENTORING ELECTIVE CLASS BASED ON EQUALITY & MUTUAL BENEFIT.**

The answer came from some terrific teachers who agreed to start an inclusive peer-mentoring class at several school sites. The elective class for credit was based on the Yes I Can Program



for Social Inclusion, created by the University of Minnesota's Institute for Community Integration. It is important to note that the class was based on equality and mutual benefit. Mentor students who were socially connected got to know students with disabilities (and those with other differences) who were outside the social mainstream, that they would not normally meet. Mentor students were not considered "better than" the students they were mentoring.

They were given the opportunity to get to know some wonderful people who had lots to offer as friends, and help create bridges

# **BULLYING PREVENTION RESOURCES**

**NOTE:** The Yes I Can curriculum is now out of print, but the Institute of Community Integration (ICI) has developed an Inclusive Service Learning Curriculum for elementary and junior high/high school based on similar principles called Together We Make a Difference. Together We Make a Difference can be ordered through ICI or Dr. Brian Abery can provide a free .pdf version via "Dropbox-type" sharing. Contact him at abery001@umn.edu or Phone 612-625-5592.

## **Bullying and Children and Youth with Disabilities and Special Health Needs**

[www.stopbullying.gov/at-risk/groups/special-needs/BullyingTipSheet.pdf](http://www.stopbullying.gov/at-risk/groups/special-needs/BullyingTipSheet.pdf)

## **Bullying Statistics. Help, Facts and more:**

[www.bullyingstatistics.org/content/school-bullying.html](http://www.bullyingstatistics.org/content/school-bullying.html)

## **National Autism Association Bullying Information**

[www.autismsafety.org/bullying.php](http://www.autismsafety.org/bullying.php)

## **Interactive Autism Network, IAN Research Report: Bullying and Children with ASD**

[www.iancommunity.org/cs/ian\\_research\\_reports/ian\\_research\\_report\\_bullying](http://www.iancommunity.org/cs/ian_research_reports/ian_research_report_bullying)

## **The Relationship Between Bullying and Suicide: What We Know and What it Means for Schools**

[www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/pdf/bullying-suicide-translation-final-a.pdf](http://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/pdf/bullying-suicide-translation-final-a.pdf)

## **Stop Bullying**

[www.stopbullying.gov](http://www.stopbullying.gov)

## **Understanding Bullying Fact Sheet**

[www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/pdf/bullying\\_factsheet.pdf](http://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/pdf/bullying_factsheet.pdf)

## **Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance System (YRBSS) Results for 2013**

<http://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/pdf/ss/ss6304.pdf>



to new friendships and social inclusion.

The first step in the process was to break down the barrier of “difference” by opening up and sharing information about disabilities, cultural differences, gender identity or any other subject that needed demystification. Because it was safe to do so, students with disabilities helped lead the discussion, explaining their condition to classmates. Many students found that sharing was a powerful way to take away the stigma and shame associated with differences.

Typical students gained perspective and empathy through class activities like role playing, understanding what it is like to walk in someone else’s shoes. Students also talked about their experiences with bullying, whether they were perpetrators, victims or both. Students discovered things for themselves like “Different” is not bad,” and “We have more in common than I knew,” and “We’ve been through the same things.”

Mentor students had a chance to share tips for fitting in and making friends, things mainstream kids know and do to belong. Students with disabilities often miss out on peer-to-peer advice on subjects like fashion, hygiene and grooming, and many welcomed the input. For some students this turned out to be part of the antidote to being singled out as different.

Next, the group focused on the abilities and talents of everyone in the class, recognizing what they were good at and what they could contribute. This was a turning point where students who were typically considered “less valuable” were transformed in the eyes of their peers. Being valued by others is a great way to improve self-esteem! These gains translated into greater self-respect and social status.

A third aspect of the class was exploring what things classmates liked to do for fun, because common interests and activities are the basis of friendship. Based on their interests, students made connections with others and expanded social networks.



Remember the rule: “A friend of my friend is my friend.” Whether their new friends were typical students or other students with disabilities, their connection created a social safety net for everyone involved.

**E**mpowered with understanding, empathy, respect and connection, the students were ready to find their voice and make a difference in the community. In one instance, a student with a reputation as a very tough guy was riding the city bus. He saw some boys teasing a girl with cerebral palsy from his class. He stepped up and said, “Leave her alone, she’s my friend.” The bullies were clearly surprised; they stopped and shut up. That is the power of affiliation.

## **BASED ON THEIR INTERESTS, STUDENTS MADE CONNECTIONS WITH OTHERS & EXPANDED SOCIAL NETWORKS. THEIR NEW CONNECTIONS CREATED A SOCIAL SAFETY NET FOR EVERYONE INVOLVED.**

In another instance, the students organized a protest against a racist incident at another high school. Tom’s Yes I Can class rallied around the issue of a drinking fountain! The students found out that all the high school drinking fountains were too high for a classmate named Jason who used a wheelchair. The only drinking fountain Jason could access was in the school nurse’s office. The students banded together, identified laws that were being violated, and successfully advocated to have new, accessible drinking fountains installed!

It is clear that efforts to create schools where everyone is safe from bullying has to touch youth individually, at a personal level. An inclusive peer mentoring class, character education, and highlighting the capacities and value of each person are excellent ways to increase protective factors of vulnerable individuals. These tools can help disempower bullies, for their own sake and everyone else’s. •

### **ABOUT THE AUTHORS:**

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