

Bullying in our schools: A different perspective

A teacher might be able to turn a bully into a best friend.



Bullying is when someone (or a group of people) with more power than you, repeatedly and intentionally uses negative words or actions against you, which causes you distress and threatens your wellbeing. It is the rise and negatively impacts almost every classroom. Teachers everywhere are struggling with the issue, and valuable time is wasted trying to solve the problem.

From bully to buddy

It is not easy, but a variety of approaches can be used to stop bullies. I was asked to take over a Year 9 English class, and I was warned that the school's worst bully was in the class. Tommy certainly had attitude, and no one would sit near him in class or work with him. He looked lonely. I spent time building a cooperative, caring class environment by doing different activities, and the best one is paired sharing. This involves students choosing students they don't know, and doing a guided pair-share. I keep the time limit to 90 seconds and

ensure that only one person speaks and the other listens. Each pair share began with 90 seconds of sharing your life story, then swap. I continue with best play experiences from childhood; worst nightmares; favourite foods; if I had \$1million... I also enjoy using Jenny Mosley's circle time after the first week as this is a powerful way of building connectedness. After the second week, something interesting happened: Students were sitting next to Tommy, speaking to him and even working with him in groups. Tommy never put a foot out of place, and his studies improved dramatically.

In many ways, the increase in bullying is a sign that our adult world has changed. There is more violence in sport, road rage, violent computer games, alcohol induced violence, less manners, reality TV that makes fun of people, graffiti and high levels of youth homelessness – all sure signs we have lost social capital and a former culture of community cohesion and care. Despite these social changes, we still need to do everything we can to reduce bullying.

Both the bully and the victim are struggling with emotional illiteracy and a low sense of self. The bully covers his or her inadequacy by "acting out" when he or she is really struggling to cover up a low self esteem and a fear of rejection. Many victims are chosen because they appear vulnerable or just because they are different – not because they are weak. Then there are the victims who are chosen because they have what the bully values and wishes he/she had – good looks, wealthy family, courage to be an individual, a girlfriend/boyfriend, artistic talent, lots of good friends, school success or even a happy family. The bully's actions is what then causes the victim to struggle – being frightened for one's safety, being shamed, harassed, constant verbal and psychological abuse and being excluded all cause deep trauma within children and adolescents. The thinking processes become distorted and the inner critic voice of many victims will become negative, toxic and the cycle of self destructive and critical thoughts continually erodes the victim so that they then attack themselves. Effectively, they bully themselves and expect to be bullied. This is a difficult cycle to break and can have lethal consequences especially in adolescence.

Signs a student is being bullied:

- Unexplained cuts or bruises
- Ripped clothing
- Vague headaches or stomach aches
- Reluctance to go to school
- Asking for "lost" possessions to be replaced
- "Losing" lunch money
- Falling out with previously good friends
- Being moody or bad temper
- Doing less well at schoolwork
- Insomnia
- Anxiety

- Being quiet or withdrawn
- Unexpected outbursts and meltdowns

We are wired to be social beings, and schools are small societies. The two biggest threats that can happen to humans are to be rejected from the tribe and to appear weak because biologically this would mean death. We are instinctually wired to survive before being happy or clever. This instinctual behaviour still happens – to feel unloved and powerless means to feel rejected and weak. Dr Matthew Lieberman, a social cognitive scientist, has found that social pains, like being rejected, treated unfairly and being verbally abused, feels like a physical pain. The brain shows the same neural responses of distress in either situation and social pain, like bullying can be seen to affect victims much more deeply than previously believed. Dr. Lieberman has advised that we take this pain seriously, writing that, “we sometimes think someone should ‘get over’ their hurt feelings despite the fact that we would never think someone should “get over” their broken leg. Accordingly, we need to appreciate that however much reality we accord to physical pain we should also extend to social pain.”

In reverse, being treated fairly activates the same neural pathways as chocolate. This new finding was like a light bulb going off in my head. I rarely saw any bullying in my high school classrooms, and I speak to many teachers who experience the same. Yet some of my students were known to be bullies in other classes and in the play ground. When the primary needs of every individual – to feel safe, cared for, and valued – is fulfilled it removes the invisible threat of rejection and the unconscious trigger of the fight/flight/freeze response. Bullies are often triggered to fight when they feel unsafe, inadequate or rejected. Being treated fairly is a huge influence on student behaviour in our schools. This negates the primitive and instinctual needs to demonstrate power and strength. This is what happened with Tommy.



PHOTO: MANDY GODBEHEAR

Taking action

Schools can help prevent and overcome bullying by:

- Have a school focus on fairness - “Everyone matters – no matter what.”
- Increase playtime in classrooms and school grounds play is excellent way of building emotional and social competences.
- Teach calming and stillness to children from kindergarten.
- Build safer classrooms and playgrounds – reduce threats of rejection.
- Explore ways to build a sense of belonging for troubled individuals. A teacher “ally” is an essential part of helping bullies and victims to develop trust and understanding. To build a sense of inner value and worth, students need to help out others – eg. Read to preschoolers, help out with local elderly peoples, help in school gardens, help their teacher allies in some way. This technique builds self esteem instead of damaging it with more sanctions and discipline.
- Run as many programs as possible for as long as possible that build resilience, emotional and social competence. (eg Better Buddies is an initiative by The Alannah and Madeline Foundation and The Friends for Life by Pathways).
- Build school spirit with school songs, assemblies, school plays, fun days and fund raising activities.

Serious and prolonged bullying leaves scars for life. The modern world is contributing to the problem with busy parents, children playing less outside as well as with other children and a generation now wired to be entertained by screens. Today’s children are couch potatoes, hurried and over scheduled in many ways, and this causes a heightened sense of stress and stressed children are more prone to being bullies or victims. Children need adults to keep children in our schools and homes safe and maybe this is where the problem really begins. Maybe if we all slowed down a little, hurried less, allowed our precious children their whole childhood to grow up and invested heaps of time guiding our children how to be kind, caring and decent, bullying would disappear. Until then, we as educators need to do all we can to make our schools safe, friendly and fair places for our students. We need to value the art of good teaching, which includes “people making” as well as academic success. Remember, fairness tastes like chocolate to the human brain and that seems like an easy place to start. 