# AD/HD AND BULLIES: What You Need to Know By Barry E. McNamara, Ed.D. and Francine J. McNamara, M.S.W., C.S.W.

Bullying is a serious problem too often neglected by school personnel. We need to be in the forefront of developing and implementing school-wide anti-bullying programs because the probability of our students being victimized is high (Olweus, 1991; Garrity, Jens, Porter, Sager and Short-Camilli, 1995; McNamara and McNamara, 1997 and Salend, 1997). This article will define bullying, discuss the characteristics of bullies and victims and address the implications for AD/HD.

## What Is Bullying?

Bully! Even the word conjures up uncomfortable feelings in adults who were victims of classroom or playground teasing, ignoring or put-downs. What may have been considered benign name-calling in years past continues to manifest itself in painful ways - from verbal teasing to acts of physical aggression. It is not something to be minimized. The National Association of School Psychologists reports that one in seven U.S. school children is either a bully or a bullying victim (McNamara & McNamara 1997). Moreover, some studies suggest that these victims feel that adults do little to reduce these incidents.

Bullies try to exercise control over their peers by verbally or physically assaulting them. They may be angry, afraid, hurt or frustrated themselves, but unable to deal with these feelings or they may have learned these behaviors for significant role models. For them, the outlet is to verbally or physically pick on others. Unfortunately, bullies seem able to select their victims with great precision. They most often prey on children and adolescents who are unpopular and vulnerable. The consequences of being bullied can even by fatal. In one highly publicized case, a seventh grade boy with AD/HD fatally shot himself because he was tired of being called "fatty" and a "walking dictionary." He shot and killed one of his classmates before killing himself. Reportedly, his classmates said, "He was just someone to pick on."

Too often, bullying is dismissed as an expected rite of childhood. Children who are teased are often told to "ignore it," but it's not that simple. Bullying can take a terrible toll on the lives of school children, especially those diagnosed with AD/HD. The fear, anxiety and social isolation suffered by the victims of bullying can result in a loss of productivity in school and unknown psychological distress.

Some experts feel that victims have lower self-esteem than bullies themselves (Olweus, 1991). For these students, school is no longer a safe haven. Rather, they are fearful playing on the playground and going to and from classes. Even mild forms of verbal abuse have resulted in absences from school, lower grades and overall anxiety. Children and adolescents can sustain short- and long-term psychological damage from bullying, as well as damage caused by parents and school personnel failing to intervene when they witness bullying.

#### Who Are the Bullies?

Bullies want to dominate others, and students with AD/HD are easy targets. Bullies may engage in a number of aggressive behaviors from verbally taunting other children, calling them names and spreading vicious rumors among their classmates, to threatening other children, sometimes even carrying out such threats. Bullies often engage in physical aggression toward others and may steal money and valuable items from their victims. While all of these acts are pernicious, the act of bullying is characterized by the persistence of these attacks - they are frequent and ongoing.

Bullies are very good at selecting those students who are likely victims. If the bully is wrong in selecting the victim, he can merely select another victim. Ultimately, some victims will give in to the demands of the bully, thereby reinforcing this socially unacceptable behavior. Bullies learn rapidly that aggression works for them.

Who are these bullies? What type of child would willingly inflict harm on others? The research findings are not entirely clear. Many feel that bullies engage in this behavior because it makes them feel important. They are basically insecure people who need to make themselves feel good by making others feel bad. They achieve less academically, socially, economically and occupationally. They are essentially school and job failures. Although not everyone agrees with these findings, they clearly represent the consensus of opinion on the characteristics of bullies (McNamara & McNamara, 1997). What does seem to be unanimous is the opinion that bullies are not born that way. They learn that being physically aggressive is a way to get what they want, a way to control people. Where do they learn this? Most experts point to parents and other role models. Bullies see their parents using physical force to get their way, so they emulate them. When parents resort to being verbally and physically aggressive with their children, they risk teaching their children that bullying is an effective way to get what you want - especially if you are bigger and stronger. The research on modeling is very clear. Children learn that those who are bigger and stronger can exert physical force on others. Therefore, the more the child is verbally and physically reprimanded by his parents, the more likely he'll find someone smaller and more vulnerable on whom to take out his aggression. Not surprisingly, most bullies tend to be bigger and stronger than their victims are. Bullies also tend to continue their behavior throughout their lives. It becomes a vicious cycle - bullies have children that they bully and their children become highly aggressive and bully others. Some experts also suggest that bullies learn their behavior from inappropriate role models on television and in movies. There is considerable debate over the effects of violence on television and the movies on children's behavior. For children whose parents are aggressive, other violent influences can only serve to reinforce bullying behavior. Research also suggests that there are temperamental differences in children that make them prone to being bullies. However, temperament factors are far outweighed by the other factors mentioned.

Bullies do not outgrow their behavior - it appears to continue throughout adulthood. And as they progress through the adult years, they are more likely to be involved with

the criminal justice system, having more arrests and more convictions, and they tend to be more abusive to their spouses.

#### Who Are the Victims?

There are two types of victims, passive and provocative. The passive victim is physically weak and doesn't fight back, while the provocative victim is more restless and irritable and frequently teases and picks on others. Many children with AD/HD fall into this latter category. They appear to have poor impulse control, act out and then become victims. Children with learning disabilities are also more at risk for being bullied.

Victims tend to be physically weaker than bullies and may be anxious and insecure children with poor social skills. These behaviors tend to set them apart from other youngsters in their class, playgroup, camp, etc. Most victims have a difficult time making friends and sustaining friendships. Not surprisingly, many are not motivated and lack interest in school, where the majority of bullying incidents occur. Imagine what it would be like if you were constantly worrying whether someone would be waiting to pick on you in the lunchroom or on the playground. All of your energy would be focused on the bullying, and school would not be an enjoyable place.

Constant bullying disrupts victims' academic performance. They may develop school phobia and therefore have frequent absences. Many avoid the lunchroom because they are preyed upon by bullies who will steal their lunch money or food. They are troubled even during the times when most children can relax and take a break from academics.

Victims are nonaggressive. They avoid confrontation at all costs and frequently cry when attacked. They readily give in to the demands of the bully. The bully identifies the victim and the victim gives in to the demands of the bully, thereby making bullying very rewarding. These children are not able to deal with conflict in a productive way. Their parents tend to be overprotective, so they have few opportunities to practice conflict resolution. Their low self-esteem, fear and anxiety are reinforced so frequently that the pattern is difficult to break. Over time, victims begin to believe that they deserve this mistreatment. They lack the skills necessary to combat the problem and can become hopeless and even suicidal. The long-term psychological effects of being bullied can be devastating.

# **Developing and Implementing a Schoolwide Program**

Bullying is much too complex an issue to be dealt with by administrative fiat. The most effective programs appear to be schoolwide programs developed in collaboration by the school and the community. The goals of a schoolwide program are two-fold: (1) to reduce, if not eliminate, the bully/victim problem in and out of school, and (2) to prevent future incidents of bullying. Victims need to feel safe in school and bullies need to learn how to assert themselves in more socially acceptable ways.

All school personnel and community members need to become aware of the serious nature of bullying. Once they are aware, they will be able to address it with timely, effective interventions.

Most school-wide programs have three major components: (1) clear cut rules, (2) reinforcement for those students who obey these rules, and (3) consequences for not following the rules. These must be adhered to by the entire school staff, as well as community members.

The first step in implementing a program is to provide training for the school staff. Children who are bullied frequently report that they cannot depend on adults in authority positions to do anything about the problem, so this first step is crucial.

Training should provide appropriate role models, intervention strategies and support for victims. Staff members can also use literature/ videos as a supplement. A number of books and videos provide excellent examples of dealing with bullies, empathizing with victims and preventive strategies (see Fig. 1 - Resources for Schools).

### How to Reduce Bullying in the Classroom

The individual teacher is critical to the success of any schoolwide program. Just as parents model appropriate behavior in their home, so teachers do in their classes. By providing a warm, supportive environment and clear, consistent rules about bullying, teachers send a strong message to their students. Teachers must also be aware of the characteristics of bullies and victims, and know when and where to get help in the school and community.

Verbal reinforcement (praise) of kind acts toward others is one way to demonstrate to students that it is okay to treat others with respect and dignity. Praise students who engage in this behavior. There are a few guidelines for the effective use of praise in the classroom: -- Praise should be delivered only after the student displays the appropriate behavior. The teacher should try to establish a link between the behavior and the consequence. If a student is praised when she is engaging in inappropriate behaviors, they will increase this behavior. -- At the outset of a behavioral program, praise should be given often, and immediately after the behavior occurs. This continuous reinforcement strengthens a behavior. When the behavior becomes more frequent, gradually reduce praise over time. -- Praise should be genuine. Most teachers are truly pleased when a student engages in appropriate behavior, and their praise reflects this.

Facial expressions and body language also provide powerful nonverbal models of behavior for students. Teachers may inadvertently give the message (through looks, eye rolling, etc.) that this kid is a pain in the neck and deserves the negative treatment from his/her classmates. This is particularly true for provocative victims. There was one incident where a young girl was frequently the recipient of verbal taunts from her peers. They commented on everything from how slow she was to how she never listened and on and on. When the classroom teacher was observed, it was clear that she found the

student's behavior annoying and in many ways gave the class license to bully this girl. There is good news and bad news regarding this incident. The good news is that the teacher was able to change her own behavior and eliminated these negative nonverbal statements regarding this student. The bad news is that the established pattern of behavior followed the child from class to lunch to playground.

If a child is a loner, which many victims are, a classroom teacher can find something the child does well and have him/her work with others students who are not as competent. A teacher could place this child in a group with some cooperative, empathetic students who would work together and include him/her in the group. Groups can receive reinforcement for cooperative behaviors and point out how well the child performed. Try to make this child attractive to be with either by his/her competence or by reinforcement of his/her group. Over time, there is a higher probability that kids will involve this child in their group.

Victims of bullying are not terribly competent in athletic endeavors, so they are usually the last selected for teams. This does not need to happen in the controlled environment of a school. Teachers should not allow students to select their partners, groups or teams because, invariably, children who are passive victims will not get selected. Random selections of partners or teacher placing a victim with a popular child can eliminate this humiliating experience. And clear and consistent consequences for negative behavior of other students must be provided.

Some children eat lunch every day by themselves. They then go out to the playground for recess by themselves. Someone has to notice this, but what is done about it? Teachers can provide some supervision in the lunchroom, assign seats and/or reinforce those children who eat in a cooperative manner. They can also find some caring youngster who would include the isolated child in his or her group.

Teachers need to send the clear message that all children in the class are valued, and that respect for each other is not only expected, but reinforced.

# How to Deal with a Bully

The single biggest deterrent to victimization is adult authority. Children should not have to deal with bullies by themselves. To simply tell them to ignore the problem is ineffective. To encourage them to "stand up for themselves" is equally as ineffective and may be dangerous. The bully-victim relationship is based on power. Bullies are stronger than their victims are. Telling your child to fight back will almost inevitably lead to your child losing the battle. In addition to physical injury, your child could be further victimized because he will become more of a target.

There are a number of very effective strategies for dealing with bullies. One of the most effective ways is to avoid the confrontation. If a child is walking down a school corridor and notices a number of bullies who have picked on him before, the best thing is to walk the other way. There is no honor in walking into a confrontation. It's foolish. If

most adults were walking down the street and noticed an unsafe situation, they wouldn't think, "I'll just walk right by and show them I'm not afraid." They'd most likely think of options and avoid the potential danger. This is not a sign of weakness. Rather, this is just good common sense. Obviously, not every bullying situation is similar and walking away may not be an option. There are other things you can teach your child to do. And teach you must. Students diagnosed with AD/HD will not learn these strategies incidentally.

### **Getting Help**

Victims need to be able to get help from adults, and parents should encourage their children to seek adult assistance if they are being bullied. The message should be clear and unambiguous - "If you need help come to me" or "If you need help go to your teacher" - so that children do not have to deal with bullying on their own.

### **Using Humor**

Some experts have suggested using humor to defuse the situation. This takes a great deal of skill to be used effectively. Children who are victims may not have adequate social and/or language skills to be able to use humor effectively. On the other hand, if the child can use humor, it can deflect the tactics of the bully.

### Standing Up to a Bully

Confronting the bully is more effective if your child is alone. If there are other children around, the bully may feel compelled to fight. Teach your child to be direct and practice a statement such as, "I'm not going to let you pick on me" or "You can't bully me." Sometimes the bully is shocked by the response and gives up. This may be used along with getting adult assistance if your child feels the incident will escalate.

# **Talking It Out**

In some cases, a victim who has good verbal skills can talk his or her way out of a bullying situation. Parents should practice this strategy with their child. Obviously, not every bully will respond to reasoning, but for some children this can be an effective strategy.

# Agreeing with the Bully

If you agree with the bully, it often defuses the situation. If a bully makes fun of your child's hat, a good response would be, "I don't like it either, but my dad made me wear it," or in response to a negative comment about your child's haircut, she can respond, "I know, I'm having a bad hair day." When your child agrees with the bully, the bully may not know how to respond and will stop.

## **Talking to Yourself**

Some victims can use self-talk to help reduce stress and get them through a bad situation. They can make positive statements about themselves or about the resolution to the problem. For example, in response to a potentially bad experience in the cafeteria your child may say, "I'll just wait in the cafeteria line and if he bumps into me I'll call the cafeteria aide. Every time I've done this it worked out okay." Many adults use this strategy to deal with stressful, negative experiences. Practice this strategy with your child so he can use it in a variety of bullying situations.

No one option is better than another. Some children may prefer one to the others or be more proficient at a particular one. The key is to have options available to them when they are confronted with the bully. (See Figure 2 - Resources for Children for books written for children that provide them with ways to deal with bullies.

Our students should be able to come to and from school, walk in the halls, eat in the cafeteria, play on the playground and learn in the classroom without fear. Providing such a safe environment seems to be one of the most basic things we can do for all students, not just those diagnosed with AD/HD, yet it does not appear to be a priority. All school personnel must be aware of the seriousness of the problem of bullying and developing school-wide program to ensure that all students can attend school in a safe environment, conducive to learning.

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(1991), Bullying at School. Cambridge, MA: Blackwell Publishing, Inc. Salend, S. (1998), Mainstreaming in Inclusive Environments. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Merrill. Bully-Proofing Your School: A Comprehensive Approach for Elementary Schools, written by Carla Garrity, Ph.D., Kathryn Jens, Ph.D., William Porter, Ph.D., Nancy Sager and Cam Short-Camilli, C.S.W., is superb. It is thorough, provides a wealth of practical information and contains resources for school personnel, parents and children. It is published by Sopris West, 1140 Boston Avenue, Longmont, Colorado, 80501. Bullying At School, by Dr. Daniel Olweus (Blackwell Publishers, Inc., 238 Main Street,

Cambridge, Massachusetts, 02142), is perhaps the definitive work on bullying. School districts developing a program to deal with bullying should consider this excellent, thoroughly researched book. The Wellesley College Center for Research on Women in conjunction with the National Education Association developed a guide to dealing with bullies in schools. It provides educators with specific instructional activities and also includes an excellent section on resources. It is available from Wellesley College's Publications Department, 106 Central Street, Wellesley, MA 02181-8259. Two resources that are particularly useful for schools in their efforts to evaluate the effectiveness of a school-wide program are: Olweus, D. (1991) Bully/Victim Problems among School Children. "Basic facts and effects of a school based intervention program." In D. Peppler and K. Rubin (eds.), The Development and Treatment of Childhood Aggression. Hillsdale, N.J.: Erlbaum. Olweus, D. (1991) "Bullying among School Children, Intervention and Prevention." In R.D. Peters, R.J. McMahan, and V.L. Quincy (eds)., Aggression and Violence Through the Life Span. Figure 2 - Resources for Children One of the major resources for children is books that portray bullying incidents and effective ways to resolve the conflict. Despite the number of good books on the topic it is surprising to find that quite a few employ ineffective techniques. Some continue to advocate physical aggression. Others have unrealistic expectations for change and others provide no help whatsoever. A word of caution: Review the book before reading it with your child (a good idea for any book) and make sure that they follow the basic guidelines for dealing with this issue. Below is a sampling of books appropriate for children. Amos, (1993), Bully. NY: Benchmark. Bosh, C.W. (1988), Bully on the Bus. Seattle, WA: Parenting Press. Brown, M. (1990), Arthur's April Fool. Boston: Little Brown & Co. Carlson, N. (1983), Loudmouth George and the Sixth Grader Bully. NY: Puffin Books. Carrick, C. (1983), What a Wimp. NY: Clarion Books. Craring, E. (1983), My Name Is Not Dummy. Seattle, WA: Parenting Press. Duffey, B. (1993), How to Be Cool in the Third Grade. NY: Viking. Griffe, T. (1991), Bully for You. NY: Child Play. Howe, J. (1996), Pinky and Rex the Bully. NY: Aladdin Paperbacks. Lowenstein, C. (1994), Fair Play. NY: W.H. Freeman. Petty, K. and Firmin, C. (1991), Being Bullied. NY: Barrons. Rainer, T. (1997), Bullies Are a Pain in the Brain. Minnesota, MN: Free Spirit Publications. Shyston, J. (1995), No Biting, Horrible Crocodile! NY: Golden Books. Stein, M. (1992), How to Survive Fifth Grade. Mahway, NJ: Troll Assoc. Susanne, J. (1996), Don't Talk to Brian. NY: Bantam Books. Webster-Doyle, T. (1991), Why Is Everyone Always Picking on Me? A Guide to Handling Bullies for Young People. Middlebury, VT: Atrium Society.