

School Safety



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About the cover:

This statue in front of the Philadelphia Police Administration Building exemplifies the positive relationship needed between law enforcers and youth. Photograph by Greg Lanier.

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ACQUISITIONS

Victimization by "bullies" is a significant problem facing many schoolchildren. Such terrorism should be totally unacceptable in schools.

Terrorism in the schools

How long will educators and parents tolerate the equivalent of terrorism in their schools? Under the name of "bullies," boys acting individually and in gangs daily commit criminal acts against children and teen-agers in halls, stairwells, locker rooms and school yards.

Felonious aggressive behavior is a widespread contemporary scourge in schools from Oregon to Florida, and not just inner-city schools either. Reports of shakedowns, robberies, vandalism, threats of force and physical violence are commonplace in suburban Westchester County outside New York City as well as the San Francisco peninsula and Marin County.

But few teen-age victims come forward to lodge complaints with police officials for fear of retaliation. Nor do parents seem to be inclined to initiate complaints with law enforcement agencies. It is habitual for youth-serving professionals, parents and many adults to say, "Oh, they're just being kids," when they witness vicious name-calling, intimidation or fighting among young people. These permissive attitudes

towards aggressive male youth have allowed the contagion of anti-social behavior to turn schools into places of fear and disorder.

Research by psychologists indicates bullying is not "just a phase" teen-agers go through. Aggression is a chronic form of self-expression that starts early in life and persists well into adulthood.

According to many studies, bullies most likely come from families where parents prefer physical means of discipline. Sometimes the use of physical punishment is coupled with rejecting, hostile parents; sometimes the parents are described as both hostile and permissive. However, the consensus of research opinion is that aggression is a learned response that is readily acquired by children who are exposed to an aggressive model (Bandura, 1973). In other words, a bully at school is a victim at home.

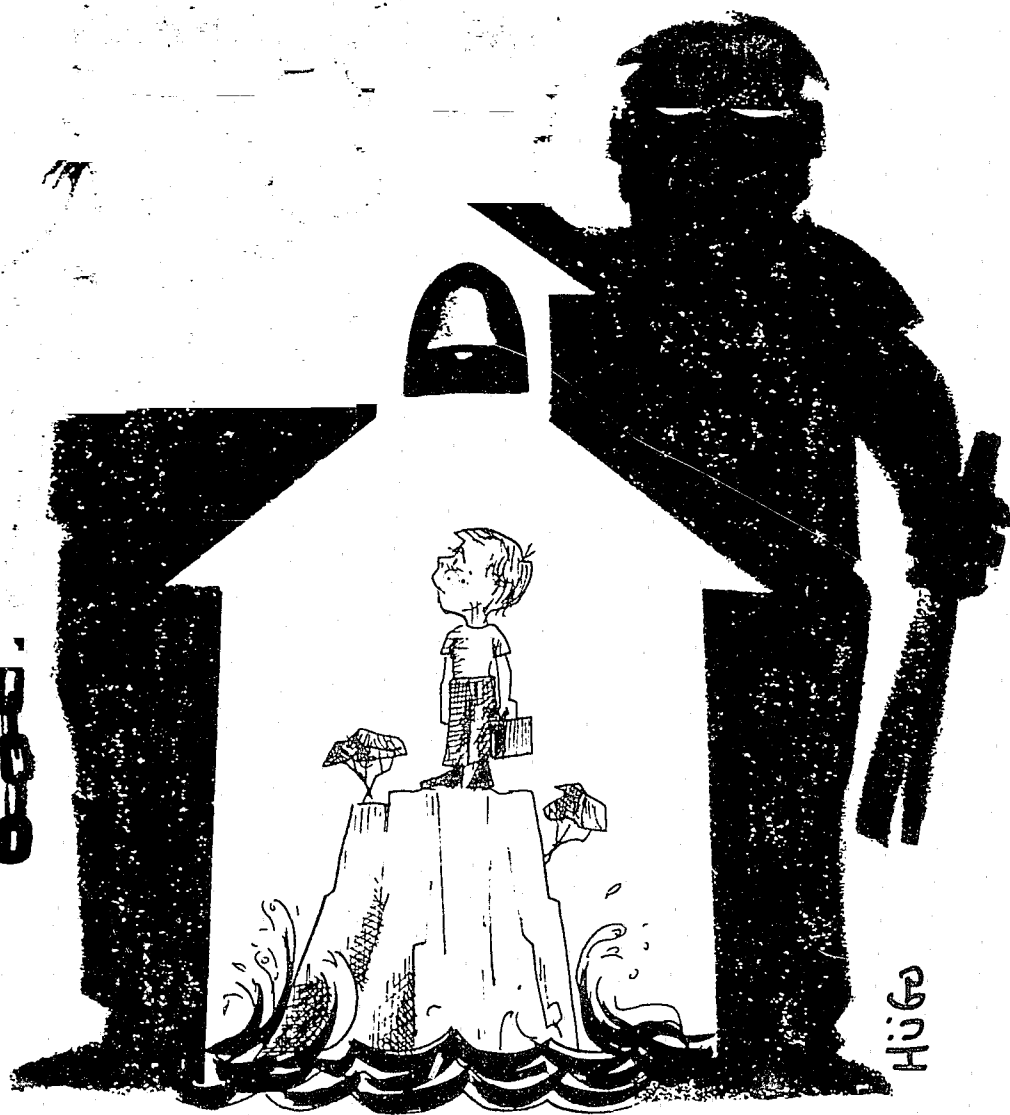
Victims: Psychological profiles

In the broad sense, violence of any kind affects everyone. The wounded, maimed and bandaged are only the most conspicuous victims. More enduring lacerations happen in the minds of the survivors. With children subjected to bullies, these lacerations can be particularly painful. Victim effects are experienced not only in those directly

targeted for harassment but also those who witness acts of victimization and fear the spread of the attack to themselves. These persons can be referred to as *surrogate victims*, children and teen-agers who say to themselves, "That could happen to me!" Vicarious victims include bystanders, witnesses and others who perceive their own vulnerability, fear the same fear as the victim, dread the victim's dread, but who frequently silence the impulse to speak out in support. These surrogate victims may sympathize with the actual victims but at the same time remain wary of a contagion effect and ward off a desire to go to the victim's aid. Thus, not only is the victim scorned, humiliated or attacked by the bully, but is often rejected by others as a sort of pariah, one damaged, tainted, infected.

The stigma of being victimized casts a long shadow and leaves a dark pall. Children may fear the victim just as certain children frequently seem to be afraid of cripples or those with physical disabilities. But episodes of victimization among children may offend certain capable, mature students who are prepared to take some sort of action. The sight of a so-called "innocent" victim may inspire these boys to show solidarity with the one attacked, denounce the bully, take risks, and offer resistance to a tangible evil, usually on principle: "That's wrong. Why don't you leave

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him alone? He hasn't done anything to you!" These principled young people are usually self-confident, physically well-developed persons whose fear of the bully is not great and who are capable of taking up unpopular causes or taking a stand against known wrongs. To this group, the bully is wrong – in the same way that destroying school property, writing graffiti, breaking rules, cutting school or in-

sulting teachers is wrong. Such boys may find themselves involved in the role of bodyguard, an idealized role recently made the subject of a movie entitled "My Bodyguard."

Another kind of student likes to run with the pack, openly admires the bully, and frequently joins the ranks of the intimidators. These "pack-rats" can be identified by the role they play as sycophants. They enjoy being part of

the bully's tyranny but lack the confidence to inflict or sustain acts of marauding on their own. By their chorus of jeering and applause for the bully, it is clear they support him in spirit and deed, and seek his approval.

From time to time, these co-conspirators may even get the heel, take a licking or get a razzing from the group leader. In the same way, initiation rites of motorcycle gangs or hazing in other groups play an important part in group solidarity. Bullies who can exert influence on others with like dispositions may lead to the growth of gang culture in schools and neighborhoods.

The problem of bullying is not limited to children, but one virtually endemic to Western society. When it comes to school bullies, however, vulnerability is apparently a precondition for victimization. The aggressor in schools, like other predators in muggings, push-ins, and serial murders, seeks out the weak one, in fact requires the weak one to trigger the aggressive motive. "Pick on somebody your own size!" also reveals a hidden assumption, namely, "it's O.K. to pick on someone who is the same size." Many victims of aggression in schools suffer their fate in silence and in desolation. The following should articulate their particular burden and the burden they share with others.

Self-deprecation: "I must be a nerd!" Victims of crime – as well as victims of natural disasters – frequently tend to overpersonalize the incident: "Why is this happening to me?" or "What did I do to deserve this?" Psychologists report that victims of many different kinds of misfortune show a similar post-traumatic response: self-blame.

It is well accepted that all persons, including children, engage in reasoning and behavior that will allow them to maintain the experience of self-control, predictability and justice. Fairness and just rewards are common preoccupations of most children. This concept of justice, referred to by Melvin Lerner as "just-world reasoning," is a universal

belief that "you get what you deserve and deserve what you get." (Lerner, 1980). Hence, the experience of misfortune or victimization often ushers in the feeling of being unworthy, inadequate or undeserving.

Child victimization often is attended by self-deprecating statements and behavioral expressions of self-reproach. Following a humiliating encounter with the class bully, a 13-year-old boy was recently heard to say: "If I let him do that to me, I must be a nerd!" Another victim confided the same sentiment in a counseling session after being the target of vicious extortion: "They don't like me, so I'm no good."

Self-deprecation may result from being wounded, yet breaks no bones and needs no medical attention in the nurse's office. But serious damage is inflicted on self-confidence, the willingness to take intellectual risks, openness to inquiry, curiosity and exuberance of imagination. The loss of self-esteem may result in social fears and inhibitions in making overtures to others at a time when friends are badly needed.

Learned helplessness and depression

People who make self-deprecating statements usually view the world as harmful to their self-esteem, prestige and competence. They may also feel unable to control events that affect them, a response one researcher has labeled as "learned helplessness." Chief among the consequences of learned helplessness is interruption with learning. When students are not actively engaged with their academics, they also are heir to a host of other symptoms, which may include withdrawal from intellectual challenges, failure to respond to stimuli, fatalism and other escapist reactions. Prominent among the rash of escapist and avoidant reactions are non-attendance, school phobia, drug use, teen pregnancy and adolescent suicide. It goes without saying that these symptoms may be due to causes other than victimization in school.

Anger and revenge

Victims can be expected to mobilize powerful defensive reactions. The eruption of strong feelings of anger accompanied by fantasies of revenge is common in many children. Such anger, whether acted out socially or kept to oneself, may be corrosive and debilitating. Few children are prepared emotionally to handle such powerfully charged feelings. Defensive and afraid, victims frequently show fixated thinking, obsessional ideas and rigid compulsive behavior that are incompatible with learning, concentration, problem-solving or creativity.

In this context, a recent case of victimization is instructive. Last year in Concord, New Hampshire, a high school teen-ager was subjected to vicious and chronic harassment and verbal abuse. Some said he never fit in.

Educators should use group lessons to help control these problems and dispel the mystery or fear students may have about the class bully.

Unable to stand it any longer, he came to school armed with a shotgun and took two students hostage. Reportedly, he also pointed the gun at several teachers and the football coach. He was shot dead by police in the school where he never felt accepted.

Cynicism towards authority

Victimization in schools also leads to changes in the relationship between students and adults in charge. No matter how rebellious teen-agers behave, they frequently demonstrate a craving for credible leaders – teachers, administrators and other adults in whom they can believe and trust.

Chronic disruptions in school, including episodes of victimization, can produce cynicism towards those in authority who are perceived as unable or unwilling to exercise control over the students. As adults, we do not have to – and probably can't – live up to the exaggerated expectations of teen-agers.

However, children entrusted to our care are at the very least entitled to schools led and instructed by legitimate authorities who can ensure order and security.

A legacy of blame

Much of the verbal violence among adolescents takes the form of oaths, swearing, name-calling and blaming. The assignment of blame can characterize everyday speech in myriad ways. Blaming frequently can be exposed as irrational, illogical and distorting to commonly held principles of analysis. Still it enjoys a strong grip on our habits of responding to others and attributing causality.

Children apparently have learned their lessons well. At the head of this class are the bullies who can be heard justifying their aggression with statements of blame and oaths uttered in the

savage tradition. Blaming is the dark legacy from a more primitive time when an enemy's death was cleansing and sacrifice exculpatory. "He deserved what he got!" or "He was asking for it," are frequent evidence of the blaming habit run amok. No understanding, little reasoning and few opportunities for conflict resolution issue from a mind bent on blaming. Yet blaming follows its own logic, makes its own justification and creates its own constituency of like-minded blamers.

Updating the 3 Rs: Rules, rights and responsibilities

Educators should use group lessons to help control these problems and dispel the mystery or fear students may have about the class bully. Students often feel that they cannot tell a teacher they are afraid of a classmate. Or, they are afraid that a tattletale will be punished by the bully. By talking openly about intimidation, the adult can chase

children's fears out into the light of education.

Second, such a lesson puts students on notice that adults are responsible for safety and security in the school and that the existence of threats or violence in the school is known to school authorities. It also implies that the names of the perpetrators may be known as well. Fighting as a way of settling a score in school should be categorically condemned; it is incompatible with the educational mission of schools. The school forbids it, the teacher will not condone it, and the police will be called in the event of fights. School personnel must take this position openly and firmly, and not merely to protect potential victims. They must also clearly enunciate these rules to help potential bullies control their aggression. Bullies need to believe that teachers are in control and that adults believe in the rules they make.

Third, students need to be reminded that they cannot be vigilantes or public avengers. They do not have to enforce rules, punish offenders, or keep order. That is the job of adults; their job is to learn. In special classes, group lessons on the subject of victimization are a good vehicle for updating the three Rs: rules, rights and responsibilities.

Finally, the content of such a lesson should focus on attitudes, goals or behaviors that are inconsistent with victimization. An excellent example is the subject of teams and teamwork. Design a lesson plan to discuss the importance of teamwork and team play. Components of this lesson might include the following questions to the students:

- 1) What are your favorite teams?
- 2) What makes for a good or great team? (Let the discussion revolve around their superstars and sports heroes, but pull them back to the idea that on good teams everyone has an important role to play.)
- 3) Encourage students to identify the components of a team: captain, coach, players.

- 4) Can this class be a team? What would it take to make this class a winning team?

Principles of "law and order"

Many teachers are uncomfortable when asked to convey to students what they consider to be the message of "law and order." This message may seem incompatible with the principles of free inquiry, liberal education, unmolested learning, and especially the least restrictive approach to the learning environment. Nevertheless, it should be stated unequivocally: children need rules! And children in special education desperately need rules, precepts and values. Perhaps none is more important than their need to understand that actions have consequences.

At a time when the divorce rate makes the family look as though it is coming apart at the seams, special educators are on the front lines and in the trenches trying to bring the "rules of civilization" to the emotionally disturbed. Keep in mind that to be authoritative is not to be authoritarian! More than ever, children need adults to embody the legitimate claims of society and the school for security and stability.

Parents in action: More blaming and getting even

Clearly the time is right to draw parents into the discussion and consult with the community on an acceptable intervention program. Anything less than a partnership among educators, parents and community resources will probably be ineffective.

Such a partnership, however salutary, may be some time in the future. And until school officials take the initiative with this problem, aggrieved parents will continue to retain attorneys to circumvent school authorities and take action in court – with school officials in the role of defendants.

Recently, a 16-year-old basketball player from Baldwin, Long Island, emerged from the visiting team dressing room after a closely fought game. He

was immediately blindsided by a baseball bat in the face, suffering multiple facial injuries and fractures. No medical treatment was sought by school personnel in charge, and the boy was simply dropped off by the bus as usual. No one was at home at the time and the boy's parents were outraged. They are not alone.

In Westchester County, New York, a 15-year-old boy was sitting on the steps in his high school when another student kicked him, karate style, in the face. His injuries included a broken nose.

In both these episodes, school officials were viewed as not responding adequately to protect children in their care.

Parental concern may have the effect of empowering school administrators with a mandate to enforce school rules, supervise and monitor public areas and strengthen disciplinary procedures. However, little good can be expected from parents who express their rage or fear by bullying school personnel. Many contemporary forces in Western culture weaken the traditional restraints on the expression of aggression – forces often beyond the control of educators and parents. The critical issue is for parents and educators to reassert their legitimate authority.

In William Golding's book *Lord of the Flies*, we witness the course of primitivization on an island administered by adolescents in the absence of adults. No moral could be more prophetic or show more clearly the consequences for youth when deprived of adult leadership and authority. Simply put, the most vicious bullies threaten and kill the weaker children and seize power based on violence. Such is the picture we can contemplate if we allow aggression to spread terror on our nation's campuses. □

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