

HOT SHEET

The Good, The Bad and The Bully

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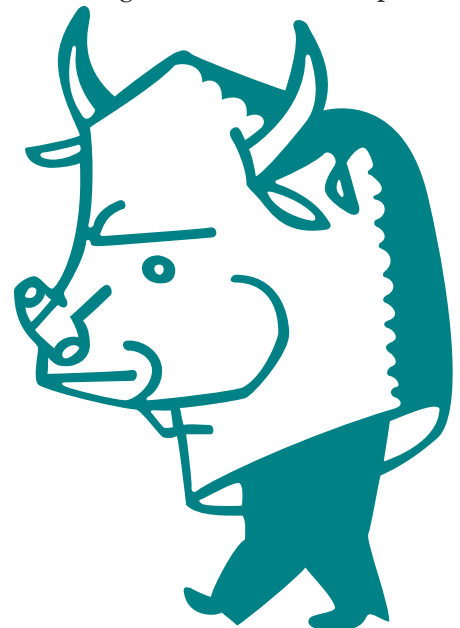
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ASSAULT. ROBBERY. EXTORTION. These acts are crimes when the victims are adults. But when children are the victims and perpetrators of these “crimes” they often are dismissed as everyday schoolyard experiences; just cases of bullying.

Bullying has evolved into something that today should not be taken lightly. One in seven students in grades one through nine is either a bully or the victim of a bully. A 1995 survey of California sixth through twelfth graders, conducted by school psychologists, found that although getting good grades was the number one worry of students, violence in the schools ranked third, just behind being accepted by peers. A national survey found that 4.4 percent of students nationwide stayed home one day in the previous month because of personal safety reasons. This fear coupled with getting good grades, in some schools, is the main reason for dropping out.

Being a bully is not necessarily something the bully — or the victim — will simply outgrow. More than likely, a bully will bully his way through life. He has a one in four chance of having a criminal record by his 30th birthday, as compared to other boys’ odds of one in 20. His poor school habits are reflected in his poor job performance, or inability to hold onto a job. He could be raising a bully of his own.

Because children expect schools to be safe and nurturing places, the effects of bullying, can be damaging to a child’s sense of security and trust. Children have little recourse to try to stop a bully from harassing them. They may find themselves shunned by other children and too ashamed to admit their fears to adults. Some victims feel compelled to fight off bullies, while others avoid unsafe turf at school and in their communities. Others have more dramatic responses, such as becoming run-aways, attempting suicide or in some cases, killing their tormentors. Still others have taken the legal route; filing multi-million-dollar lawsuits against school districts and administrators, charging they were denied the right to attend safe campuses.



The effects of consistent bullying in childhood can stay with victims into adulthood.

Yet many school administrators, teachers and parents tend to dismiss bullying as a rite of passage, a case of “kids being kids.” Despite the need for anti-bullying efforts, many American schools have not found constructive ways of dealing with bullies.

A prominent panel of renowned authorities from the fields of psychology, education, law enforcement and public relations gathered at Harvard University for a forum sponsored by the National School Safety Center and agreed that for the nation’s bully problem to be successfully addressed, the public must acknowledge the following issues:

- School bullying is a significant problem.
- Fear and suffering are becoming part of the lives of bullying victims.
- Young bullies whose behavior goes unchecked are more likely than other children to grow up and suffer from personal, professional and legal problems.
- The attitude that bullying is no more than normal youthful aggressive behavior must be discarded.
- Schools throughout the nation should promote intervention and prevention.

These experts also outlined their primary prevention and intervention strategies:

- Assessing the scope of the problem through anonymous student surveys.
- Communicating and strongly enforcing clear rules of behavior.
- Monitoring playground activity with a supervising adult visible at all times.

- Teaching proper conflict resolution and watching for victim symptoms, such as withdrawal, decline in study habits or grades, unexplained anxiety, and cuts, bruises or torn clothing.
- Creating a norm in the school that discourages bullying.

Safety plans could include:

- Establishing a parent center that encourages proactive parent participation;
- Ensuring active student input and participation,
- Enhancing extracurricular student programs,
- Integrating school safety plans into the school curricula,
- Supporting staff training,
- Making behavior guidelines for students clear,
- Establishing a crisis response plan,
- Paying special attention to the needs of victims,
- And creating partnerships among youth service professionals to coordinate violence prevention efforts.

Combating our nation’s bullying problem takes the support of the entire school supervision team, other staff members and community volunteers who are willing to work with the bullies and their victims. The success of these programs, and the success of our children in schools, rests with adults who ultimately have the resolve to attack schoolyard bullying head on.