Bullying—
And the Power of Peers

Research indicates that peers play an essential role in promoting or preventing bullying.

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Editor's note: This report was commissioned for the White House Conference on Bullying Prevention, which met on March 10, 2011. The conference brought together President Barack Obama and members of his cabinet, First Lady Michelle Obama, youth, parents, researchers, school officials, and other groups to craft a national strategy for reducing and ending bullying in schools. A longer version of this report was included in the briefing book distributed at the conference.

On first thought, the words bully and peer hardly belong in the same title; for all intents and purposes, the two words are opposites. A peer is an equal, of the same social standing as oneself, whereas bullying lacks the elements of equality and free choice. What distinguishes bullying from other forms of childhood aggression, whether a hard-fought basketball game or rough-and-tumble play, is unequal coercive power (Olweus, 1993; Vaillancourt, McDougall, Hymel, & Sunderani, 2010). It's this sense of inequality, abuse, and unfairness—and of a peer culture valuing all the wrong things—that makes bullying incompatible with the democratic spirit; all youth should be free to learn in peace and safety, making the most of their talents and goals.

What kind of power does a bully really have? Children and youth (and some adults) use bullying to acquire resources and—here is where peers come into the picture—to demonstrate to an audience that they can dominate (Pellegrini et al. 2010; Salmivalli, Kärnä, & Poskiparta, 2010). The success of bullies in attaining resources and recognition depends on factors that include the characteristics of the bully, the relationship that exists between bullies and those whom they target for harassment, and the reactions of classmates who witness bullying. Do schoolmates embarrass the harassed and stroke the bully's ego? Do they ignore the bullying in front of them? Does somebody intervene to support the victim and help stop the bullying?
Socially connected bullies target children who will likely not be defended.

Of course, peer culture in elementary, middle, and high school exists not in some Lord of the Flies lawlessness, but rather under the presumably watchful eyes of responsible adults: teachers, principals, bus drivers, school staff, and parents. So how peers and adults act in response to—or, even better, in anticipation of—bullying is crucial.

The Two Social Worlds of Bullying
In a recent article, Tom Farmer and colleagues (2010) report on the “two social worlds” of bullying: marginalization on one hand, and connection on the other. Socially marginalized bullies “may be fighting against a social system that keeps them on the periphery,” whereas socially connected bullies “may use aggression to control” others (p. 386).

Farmer and colleagues report that marginalized, unpopular bullies, whether girls or boys, are often shunted into peer groups with other bullies, and sometimes even with the children they harass. Marginalized bullies, more often boys than girls, have a host of problems of which bullying behavior is but one manifestation. Their bullying might stem from an inability to control their impulsive actions or from a desire to gain status that generally eludes them.

Then there are bullies whose social worlds are networked and integrated—these children don’t lack for peer social support. Socially connected bullies are more evenly split between boys and girls. They have a variety of friends, some bullies but others not, and strengths such as social skills, athleticism, or physical attractiveness.

Socially connected bullies tend to be proactive and goal-directed in their aggression. They have lots of experience with peers, perhaps as far back as the day-care years (Rodkin & Roisman, 2010). Some bullies incorporate prosocial strategies into their behavioral repertoire, for example reconciling with their targets after conflict or becoming less aggressive once they have established a clear dominance relationship (Pellegrini et al., 2010).

Socially connected bullies are both underrecognized as seriously aggressive and popularized in the media, as in, for instance, the 2004 movie Mean Girls, which describes how female high school social cliques operate and the effect they can have on girls. Vaillancourt and colleagues (2010) go so far as to call these socially connected bullies “popular, socially skilled, and competent” (p. 218). Although this portrait of mental health may be overdrawn, there is no doubt that a substantial proportion of aggressive children and youth have surprisingly high levels of popularity among their peers.

Bullying may peak in early adolescence, but these two social worlds of bullying can exist as early as kindergarten. These worlds represent two central but seemingly inconsistent views of aggressive behavior: as dysfunctional and maladaptive or functional and adaptive. As light can be both wave and particle, aggression can be maladaptive or adaptive depending on when the aggression occurs; the time frame (that is, adaptive in the short run, but maladaptive in the long run); the consequences of the aggressive act; and one perspective (Rodkin & Wilson, 2007). Educators and parents need to ask what bullying works from the perspective of bully and what goals are being served bullying behavior, as they will differ for different children.

The Bully-Victim Relationship
Any law enforcement official would quickly want to establish the
relationship that may exist between an alleged perpetrator and a victim. However, little is known about the relationship between a bully and the child he or she targets. Instead, the focus has been on identifying children who fall into bully, victim, and bully-victim categories and determining prevalence rates and behavioral characteristics for these categories (see Cook, Williams, Guerra, Kim, & Sadek, 2010). This puts bullies and victims into separate boxes and overemphasizes their separateness. This could imply that there is no known relationship between a bully and victim—that the targeting is random.

Reality is more complicated. Bullies and victims often have a previously existing relationship that presages bullying, which, if known, would alert knowledgeable adults about possible trouble spots (Card & Hodges, 2009). One clear predictor is reciprocal dislike and animosity. Potential bullies, particularly socially connected bullies, turn angry thoughts into aggressive behavior toward low-status peers whom they already dislike and who dislike them (Hodges, Peets, & Salmivalli, 2009). Socially connected children choose same-sex bullying as part of a struggle for dominance, particularly in the beginning of the school year or between transitions from one school to another, when the social hierarchy is in flux and unpopular children can be targeted (Pellegrini et al., 2010).

In a disturbing number of cases, aggressive boys harass girls (Berger & Rodkin, 2009; Rodkin & Berger, 2008; Veenstra et al., 2007). Sixty percent of fifth to seventh grade girls whom Olweus (1993) reported as being harassed said that they were bullied by boys. Similarly, the American Association of University Women Educational Foundation (2001) reported that 36 percent of girls who experience sexual harassment "say they first experienced it in elementary school" (p. 25). Unpopular, rejected-aggressive boys are most likely to harass girls (Rodkin & Berger, 2008),

What Teachers Can Do

→ Ask students about bullying. Survey students regularly on whether they are being harassed or have witnessed harassment. Make it easier for students to come to an adult in the school to talk about harassment by building staff-student relationships, having suggestion boxes where students can provide input anonymously, or administering schoolwide surveys in which students can report confidentially on peers who bully and on the children whom they harass. Consider what bullying accomplishes for a bully. Does the bully want to gain status? Does the bully use aggression to control others?

→ Ask students about their relationships. Bullying is a destructive, asymmetric relationship. Know whom students hang out with, who their friends are, and whom they dislike. Know whom students perceive to be popular and unpopular. Connect with students who have no friends. School staff members vary widely in their knowledge of students’ relationships and tend to underestimate the level of aggression among peers.

→ Build democratic classroom and school climates. Identify student leaders who can encourage peers to stand against bullying. Assess whether student social norms are really against bullying. Train teachers to better understand and manage student social dynamics and handle aggression with clear, consistent consequences. Master teachers not only promote academic success, but also build relationships, trust, and a sense of community.

→ Be an informed consumer of antibullying curriculums. Antibullying interventions can be successful, but there are significant caveats. Some bullies would benefit from services that go beyond bullying-reduction programs. Some programs work well in Europe, but not as well in the United States. Most antibullying programs have not been rigorously evaluated, so be an informed consumer when investigating claims of success. Even with a well-developed antibullying curriculum, understanding students’ relationships at your school is crucial.

→ Remember that bullying is also a problem of values. Implement an intellectually challenging character education or socioemotional learning curriculum. Teach students how to achieve their goals by being assertive rather than aggressive. Always resolve conflicts with civility among and between staff and students. Involve families.

whereas socially connected bullies tend
to demonstrate within-sex bullying and
dominance against unpopular targets
(Pellegrini et al., 2010).

Peer Relationships That Promote
or Prevent Bullying
Peer relationships are like oxygen that
allows bullying to breathe and spread;
peers can use these relationships as a
cudgel, a weapon of shame against vic-
tims. However, even one good friend to
a victim of bullying can help assuage the
harmful consequences of harassment.

Socially marginalized bullies who are
also victims, who predominantly act
aggressively in reaction to provocation,
stand out through their segregation
and abuse; and still others who inter-
vene to support children being harassed
(see also Salmivalli et al., 2010).

As Pepler and colleagues (2010)
write, "Bullying is a social event in the
classroom and on the playground,"
with an audience of peers in almost
90 percent of observed cases (p. 470).
This silent, mocking audience grows
exponentially, in frightening anonymity,
with cyberbullying. Thus, the
problem of bullying is also a problem
of the unresponsive bystander, whether
that bystander is a classmate who finds
harassment funny, a peer who sits on
the sidelines afraid to get involved, or
an educator who sees bullying as just
another part of growing up.

One good friend can make a crucial
difference
to children who are harassed.

from most peers as loners or as mem-
ers of deviant, peripheral peer cliques.
These youth would benefit from services
that go beyond bullying-reduction
programs, such as violence-reduction
therapies and social skills training
(Cook et al., 2010). Where feasible, the
social ties of marginalized bullies should
be broadened to include a greater vari-
ety of peers.

A colleague and I have referred to
socially connected bullies as "hidden
in plain sight" (Rodkin & Karimpour,
2008) because they are more socially
prominent than marginalized bullies,
yet less likely to be recognized as bullies
or at risk. Because socially connected
bullies affiliate with a wide variety of
peers, there is an unhealthy potential
for widespread acceptance of bullying
in some classrooms and schools. This is
what Debra Pepler and colleagues call
the theater of bullying (Pepler, Craig, &
O'Connell, 2010), which encompasses
not only the bully-victim dyad, but also
children who encourage and reinforce
bullies (or become bullies themselves);
others who silently witness harassment

Socially connected bullies target
children who will likely not be defended
(Card & Hodges, 2008; Pellegrini et
al., 2010; Veenstra, Lindenberg, Mun-
nikma, & Dijkstra, 2010). Peers who
do intervene in bullying can make a
real difference. These defenders may be
successful in more than 50 percent of
such attempts, but unfortunately they
stand up in fewer than 20 percent of
bullying incidents (Pepler et al., 2010;
Salmivalli et al., 2010).

One good friend can make a cru-
cial difference to children who are
harassed. Victims who are friends with
a nonvictimized peer are less likely to
internalize problems as a result of the
victimization—for example, being sad,
depressed, or anxious (Hodges, Boivin,
Vitaro, & Bukowski, 1999). Even 1st
graders who have a friend but who are
otherwise socially isolated seem to be
protected from the adjustment prob-
lems that other isolated children may
suffer (Laursen, Bukowski, Aunola, &
Neum, 2007). Peer relationships are
crucial both for the bully who looks to
maintain or acquire social status and for
the child who looks to cope with—and
better yet, end—peer harassment.

Classroom and School Climate
With clouds of war gathering, Ger-
man émigré and child psychologist Kurt
Lewin and his colleagues created clubs
for 10-year-olds boys that were orga-
nized in an authoritarian (asciastic) or
democratic fashion (Lewin, Lippitt, &
White, 1939). Victimization and scape-
goating were highest in groups with an
authoritarian atmosphere, with a domi-
nant group leader and a strongly hier-
archical structure. Victimization was lowest in
groups with a democratic atmosphere,
where relationships with group leaders
were more egalitarian and cohesive.

It's well worth asking whether today's
schools are characterized by a democ-
ratic or autocratic social climate and
whether differences in school climate
are related to bullying. Classrooms
with more egalitarian social status
hierarchies, strong group norms in
support of academic achievement and
prosocial behavior, and positive social-
ties among children should deprive
many socially connected bullies of the
peer regard they require (Ahm, Garan-
dau, & Rodkin, 2010; Frey, Edström,
& Hirschstein, 2010; Pellegrini et
al., 2010; Rodkin & Gest, 2011). In
contrast, even children who are not
bullies themselves will form probullying
attitudes in classrooms where bullies
are popular (Dijkstra, Lindenberg, &
Veenstra, 2008).

Using Peers to Intervene
In a review of bullying-reduction
programs, Farrington and Ttofi (2009)
found that interventions that involve
peers, such as using students as peer
mediators or engaging bystanders to
disapprove of bullying and support victims of harassment, were associated
with increases in victimization! In fact,
of 20 program elements included in 44
school-based programs, work with peers
was the only program element associ-
ated with significantly more bullying
and victimization. (In contrast, there were significant and positive effects for parent training and school meetings in reducing bullying.) Still other reviews of bullying intervention programs have found generally weak effects (Merrell, Gouldner, Ross, & Isave, 2008).

These disheartening results speak to the fact that peer influences can be a constructive or destructive force on bullying and need to be handled with knowledge, skill, and care. Antisocial peer groups can undermine behavioral interventions. For peer mediation to be effective, students who are chosen to be peer mediators should probably be popular and prosocial (Pellegrini et al., 2010; Pepler et al., 2010; Vaillancourt et al., 2010).

Some of the most innovative, intensive, grassroots uses of peer relationships to reduce bullying, such as the You Have the Power! program in Montgomery County, Maryland, have not been scientifically evaluated. The final verdict awaits on some promising programs that take advantage of peer relationships to combat bullying, such as the Finnish program KiVa (Salinvali et al., 2010), which has a strong emphasis on influencing onlookers to support the victim rather than encourage the bully, and the Steps to Respect program (Frey et al., 2010), which works at the elementary school level.

Teachers can ask what kind of bully they face when dealing with a victimization problem. Is the bully a member of a group, or is he or she a group leader? How are bullies and victims situated in the peer ecology? Educators who exclusively target peripheral, antisocial cliques as the engine of school violence problems may leave intact other groups that are more responsible for mainstream peer support of bullying. A strong step educators could take would be to periodically ask students about bullying and their social relationships. (See "What Teachers Can Do" on p. 13.)

In his 2008 book So Much Reform, So Little Change: The Persistence of Failure in Urban Schools, Charles Payne makes the point that even the best, most rigorous, and most validated intervention won't be successful without taking into account the weak social infrastructure and dysfunctional organizational environments of some schools. If adult social networks can doom education reform, then surely youth social networks can as well. When popular children engage in or endorse bullying, they send a message to all students that conflicts with the basic values of respect and tolerance.

The task ahead is to better integrate bullies and the children they harass into the social fabric of the school and better inform educators of how to recognize, understand, and help guide children's relationships. With guidance from caring, engaged adults, youth can organize themselves as a force that makes bullying less effective as a means of social connection or as an outlet for alienation.
Reference


