

Words That Wound



The time to take bullying seriously is before taunts turn violent

By Kathleen Vail

Brian Head saw only one way out. On the final day of his life, during economics class, the 15-year-old stood up and pointed a semiautomatic handgun at himself. Before he pulled the trigger, he said his last words: "I can't take this anymore."

Brian's father, William Head, has no doubt why his only child chose to take his life in front of a classroom full of students five years ago. Brian wanted everyone to know the source of his pain, the suffering he could no longer endure. The Woodstock, Ga., teen, overweight with thick glasses, had been systematically abused by school bullies since elementary school. Death was the

only relief he could imagine. "Children can't vote or organize, leave, or run away," says Head. "They are trapped."

For many students, school is a torture chamber from which there is no escape. Every day, 160,000 children stay home from school because they are afraid of being bullied, according to the National Association of School Psychologists. In a study of junior high and high school students from small Midwestern towns, nearly 77 percent of the students reported they'd been victims of bullies at school—14 percent saying they'd experienced severe reactions to the abuse. "Bullying is a crime of violence," says June Arnette, associate director of the National School Safety Center.

"It's an imbalance of power, sustained over a period of time."

Yet even in the face of this suffering, even after Brian Head's suicide five years ago, even after it was revealed this past spring that a culture of bullying might have played a part in the Columbine High School shootings, bullying remains for the most part unacknowledged, underreported, and minimized by schools. Adults are unaware of the extent and nature of the problem, says Nancy Mullin-Rindler, associate director of the Project

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"I AM A GEEK, and very proud of it. I have been beaten, spit on, pushed, jeered at. Food is sometimes thrown at and on me while teachers pretend not to see, people trip me. Jocks knock me down in the hallway. They steal my notes, call me a geek and a fag and a freak, tear up my books, have pissed in my locker twice. They cut my shirt and rip it. They wait for me in the boys' room and beat me up. I have to wait an hour to leave school to make sure they're gone. Mostly, I honestly think, this is because I'm smarter than they are, and they hate that. The really amazing thing is, they are the most popular people in the school, while everybody thinks I'm a freak. The teachers slobber all over them. Mostly, the other kids laugh, or walk away and pretend not to see it. The whole school cheers when they play sports. Sometimes, I want very much to kill them. Sometimes, I picture how I'd do it. Wouldn't you? But unlike those guys in Littleton, I never will. I value my own life much more. When I read these messages, I would ask other geeks to try and remember that, no matter what. And get online and make contact."—*Peter in Boston, from Slashdot.org*

on Teasing and Bullying in the Elementary Grades at Wellesley College Center for Research on Women. "They underestimate the import. They feel it's a normal part of growing up, that it's character-building."

After his son's death, William Head became a crusader against bullying, founding an effort called Kids Hope to prevent others from suffering as Brian had. Unfortunately, bullying claimed another victim in the small town of Woodstock: 13-year-old Josh Belluardo. Last November, on the bus ride home from school, Josh's neighbor, 15-year-old Jonathan Miller, taunted him and threw wads of paper at him. He followed Josh off the school bus, hit the younger boy in the back of the head, and kicked him in the stomach. Josh spent the last two days of his young life in a coma before dying of his injuries. Miller, it turns out, had been suspended nearly 20 times for offenses such as pushing and taunting other students and cursing at a teacher. He's now serving a life sentence for felony murder while his case is on appeal.

The dirty little secret

Bullying doesn't have to result in death to be harmful. Bullying and harassment are major distractions from learning, according to the National School Safety Center. Victims' grades suffer, and fear can lead to chronic absenteeism, truancy, or dropping out. Bullies also affect children who aren't victimized: Bystanders feel guilty and helpless for not standing up to the bully. They feel unsafe, unable to take action. They also can be drawn into bullying behavior by peer pressure. "Any time there is a climate of fear, the learning process will be compromised," says Arnette.

A full 70 percent of children believe teachers handle episodes of bullying "poorly," according to a study by John Hoover at the University of North Dakota at Grand Forks. It's no wonder kids are reluctant to tell adults about bullying incidents. "Children feel no one will take them seriously," says Robin Kowalski, professor of psychology at Western Carolina University, Cullowhee, N.C., who's done research on teasing behavior.

Martha Rizzo, who lives in a suburb of Cincinnati, calls bullying the "dirty little secret" of her school district. Both her son and daughter were teased in school. Two boys in her son's sixth-grade class began taunting him because he wore sweatpants instead of jeans. They began to intimidate him during class. Once they knocked the pencil out of his hand during a spelling test when the teacher's back was turned. He failed the test. Rizzo made an appointment with the school counselor. The counselor told her he could do nothing about the behavior of the bullies and suggested she get counseling for her son instead. "Schools say they do something, but they don't, and it continues," says Rizzo. "We go in with the same problem over and over again."

Anna Billoit of Louisiana went to her son's middle school teachers when her son, who had asthma and was overweight, was being

bullied by his classmates. Some of the teachers made the situation worse, she says. One male teacher suggested to her that the teasing would help her son mature. "His attitude was 'Suck it up, take it like a man,'" says Billoit.

Much bullying goes on in so-called transition areas where there is little or no adult supervision: hallways, locker rooms, restrooms, cafeterias, playgrounds, buses, and bus stops. When abuse happens away from adult eyes, it's hard to prove that the abuse occurred. Often, though, bullies harass their victims in the open, in full view of teachers and other adults. Some teachers will ignore the behavior, silently condoning it. But even when adults try to deal with the problem, they sometimes make things worse for the victim by not handling the situation properly. Confronting bullies in front of their peers only enhances the bullies' prestige and power. And bullies often step up the abuse after being disciplined. "People know it happens, but there's no structured way to deal with it," says Mullin-Rindler. "There's lots of confusion about what to do and what is the best approach."

Societal expectations play a part in adult reaction to childhood bullying. Many teachers and administrators buy into a widespread belief that bullying is a normal part of childhood, and that children are better off working out such problems on their own. But this belief sends a dangerous message to children, says Head. Telling victims they must protect themselves from bullies shows children that adults can't and won't protect them. And, he points out, it's an attitude adults would never tolerate for themselves. "If you go to work and get slapped on the back of the head, you wouldn't expect your supervisor to say, 'It's your problem—you

need to learn how to deal with it yourself,” says Head. “It’s a human-rights issue.”

Ignoring bullying is only part of the problem. Some teachers go further by blaming the victims for their abuse and letting their own dislike for the victimized child show. “There’s a lot of secret admiration for the strong kids,” says Eileen Faucette of Augusta, Ga. Her daughter was teased so badly in the classroom that she was afraid to go to the blackboard or raise her hand to answer a question. The abuse happened in front of her teacher, who did nothing to stop it.

Head also encountered a blame-the-victim attitude toward his son. Brian would get into trouble for fighting at school, but when Head and his wife investigated what happened, they usually found that Brian had been attacked by other students. The school, Head said, wanted to punish Brian along with his attackers.

“The school calls it fighting,” Head says, “But it’s actually assault and battery.”

Anatomy of bullying

The bully-as-social-outcast is one of the persistent myths of bullying. In fact, bullies are almost always more popular than their victims, says Chuck Saufier, a counselor at Wiscasset Primary School in Wiscasset, Maine, and the director of Maine Project Against Bullying. “It’s easy to pick on kids that aren’t popular.” Bullying behavior starts in elementary school and peaks in middle school. However, it attracts more attention from adults in high school, where the students are physically larger, and bullying sometimes takes the form of sexual harassment. “If you look at adolescent sexual harassment behavior, it doesn’t spring up all of the sudden,” says Mullin-Rindler. “Kids are practicing the behavior at an early age.”

The stereotypical bully is a boy, but girls bully, too, in different ways—typically by ostracizing victims or gossiping behind their backs. Most bullying, by boys or girls, starts out as verbal—teasing and put-downs—and unless an adult intervenes properly, it gets progressively worse and can become physical. And if the situation erupts into a fight, teachers sometimes aren’t sure who’s at fault and discipline both of the students involved.

But Saufier says it shouldn’t be difficult to tell the bully from the victim in an altercation. Look at the two children, he says: The one who is crying or upset is the victim, while the bully will be cool and calm and in control. A common trait of bullies is that they are less likely than their peers to empathize with the victim or to understand other people’s point of view.

Experts disagree on the reasons why bullies choose certain kids to torment. Some speculate that likely victims are the kids who stand out—the ones who are too tall, or overweight, or have other unusual physical characteristics. But Saufier says victims are chosen because of their personality, not their appearance. Bullies look for victims who are emotionally vulnerable. The traditional victim is a passive child, but there also are “provocative victims,” who have poor social skills and agitate other children.

Theories also vary on why children become bullies, but most agree that bullies gain power and enjoy the control they have over others. Some research has shown that bullies tend to come from

families that use harsh and inconsistent discipline or families in which the parents verbally abuse each other. Australian-based psychologist Ken Rigby has suggested that some bullies are sexually aroused by tormenting other children. And some researchers theorize that bullies might be sadists, who enjoy seeing others suffer.

Bullies have been found to have high self-esteem, a sign that their behavior satisfies their needs, and they’re not likely to stop on their own. Schools must find ways to take away the rewards of

Resources

Anti-bullying curricula and programs for all grades are plentiful, and much information can be found online. Here are some selected resources:

- The Wellesley College Center for Research on Women offers three curricula on bullying: “Quit It,” for kindergarten through third grade; “Bully Proof,” for fourth and fifth grades; and “Flirting or Hurting?” for sixth through 12th grades. Wellesley Centers for Women, Wellesley College, 106 Central St., Wellesley, MA 02481; (781) 283-2500. Additional information can be found online at <http://www.wellesley.edu/WCW/projects/bullying.html>.

- “Bully Proofing Your School,” a curriculum for elementary and middle schoolers, is adapted from a book by the same name by Denver child psychologist Carla Garrity. The Bully Proofing Project, 5290 E. Yale Circle, Suite 207, Denver, CO 80222; (303) 649-8496.

- Kids Hope is the organization William Head founded to help increase awareness of the problem of bullying. He helped develop “...but names will never hurt me,” a video-based program for kindergarten through fifth grade. Kids Hope, 206 Bascomb Springs Court, Woodstock, GA 30189-3550; (800) 465-4758; AKidsHope@aol.com; <http://members.aol.com/AKidsHope/BNVNHM.html>

- The Maine Project Against Bullying is gathering a database of proven techniques and programs against bullying and harassment in kindergarten through fourth grade. Its web site—<http://lincoln.midcoast.com/~wps/against/bullying.html>—has information as well as links to other sites.

- “The Bullying Prevention Program” was developed by anti-bullying pioneer Dan Olweus. It is included in “Blueprints,” a series of anti-violence programs endorsed by the Center for the Study and Prevention of Violence as having research-based, proven track records of success. CSPV, University of Colorado, Boulder, Institute of Behavioral Science, Campus Box 442, Boulder, CO 80309-0442; (303) 492-8465; <http://www.colorado.edu/cspv/blueprints/index.html>.

- Kathy Noll, author of *Taking the Bully by the Horns* (Unicorn Press, 1997), has a web site that provides information about bullying and links to other anti-violence and anti-bullying sites. <http://members.aol.com/kthynoll/bully.htm>.—K.V.

bullying. “We have to eliminate the opportunities and make it uncomfortable for them,” says Sauffer.

When bullying isn’t stopped, it escalates. And it isn’t just the bully and the victims who are affected when adults don’t intervene. Bystander students become desensitized to the abuse when it appears to be condoned, says Mullin-Rindler. They are less likely to empathize with the victim and more likely to join in the bullying.

The torment students witness and experience in their schools has a more powerful effect on them than violent videogames and movies, says Head. Children cannot reconcile the contradiction between what adults say and what happens every day. When they see victims punished along with bullies, or adults tolerating violence among students, “it has a numbing effect,” says Head. He fears that more incidents like Littleton will occur until schools stop the bullying.

“This stuff starts with a climate that says it’s OK to call children names,” says Georgia mother Eileen Faucette. “We need a zero-tolerance policy for teasing.”

Dealing with bullying

Three years ago, the Clarkstown (N.Y.) Central School Board surveyed fifth-, eighth-, and 10th-graders about school climate. One of the red flags that appeared was the amount of bullying students reported. “We were all surprised,” says Clarkstown board member Lorette Adams. “It showed us a lot more was going on than we thought.”

Experts say surveying is a good way for a district to approach the problem of bullying—asking students, teachers, principals, cafeteria workers, bus drivers, janitors, and parents about instances of bullying they have experienced or observed. Unless school officials have numbers and facts in front of them, it’s easy to assume that bullying isn’t a problem. But just because you haven’t heard about problems doesn’t mean they don’t exist. “By the time a complaint reaches you, it’s a last resort,” says Massachusetts psychotherapist Linda Sones Feinberg, author of *Teasing: Innocent Fun or Sadistic Manipulation?* “Most children hate to tell the teacher.”

Efforts to deal with bullying will be ineffective unless the school board and administrators are involved. Sauffer says that any anti-bullying measure “must be sustained and supported, or it won’t work.” Sauffer’s Maine Project Against Bullying is a research group that provides training for educators and uses state and federal money to gather and evaluate anti-bullying curriculum materials for kindergarten through fourth grades. The programs that work the best, he says, are comprehensive and involve everyone in the school and the community.

Focusing only on the victim and the bully doesn’t work either, says Mullin-Rindler. “We don’t really change things when we do that,” she says. “The problem keeps coming back. We’re not doing anything to change the climate that promotes bullying behavior.” The ones to reach are the children who aren’t bullies or

victims—the “disempowered majority,” says Sauffer. These are the children who can stop bullies by letting them know that behavior isn’t acceptable and by not joining in to tease victims.

Clarkstown formed a community-wide task force to look at the problem of bullying. The district hired a New York-based consultant to assess individual schools and provide training for teach-

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“I’VE BEEN OUT OF SCHOOL for awhile (not very long) but I still physically shake, I feel adrenaline go through my system when I think about my own junior high experiences. The feeling of hopelessness, of knowing that you have no one to go to who can or will make it STOP is a very horrid feeling. It makes you consider irrational things, because the rational ones obviously don’t apply. But make no mistake, the cruelty inflicted on kids doesn’t magically go away when you graduate (or drop out and get your GED at 16 as I did). You live with it, you learn to deal with it, but it’s still there, and it does change you.”—*MishtaE, from Slashdot.org*

ers, administrators, staff, and parents. Teachers and administrators are working on a violence-reduction and safety curriculum.

“We hope our efforts will be reflected in a safer, more secure learning environment,” says Adams.

Attention must be paid

The Littleton shooting has increased interest in anti-bullying programs, says Mullin-Rindler, as has the recent U.S. Supreme Court ruling that school systems may be held liable if educators ignore student complaints of sexual harassment by classmates.

And changes are coming. This past April, five months after Josh Belluardo’s death, the Georgia State Legislature passed an anti-bullying law. The law defines bullying as “any willful attempt or threat to inflict injury on another person when accompanied by an apparent present ability to do so” or “any intentional display of force such as would give the victim reason to fear or expect immediate bodily harm.” Schools are required to send students to an alternative school if they commit a third act of bullying in a school year. The law also requires school systems to adopt anti-bullying policies and to post the policies in middle and high schools.

Head was consulted by the state representatives who sponsored the bill, but he believes the measures don’t go far enough. He urges schools to treat bullying behavior as a violation of the state criminal law against assault, stalking, and threatening, and to call the police when the law is broken.

He knows it’s too late for Brian, too late for Josh, too late for the teens who died in Littleton. But he continues to work, to educate and lobby on the devastating effects of bullying so that his son’s death will not have been in vain.

“We should come clean and say what we’ve done in the past is wrong,” says Head. “Now we will guarantee we’ll protect the rights of students.”

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