Sticks and Stones

DEFEATING THE CULTURE OF BULLYING AND REDISCOVERING THE POWER OF CHARACTER AND EMPATHY

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A CONVERSATION WITH EMILY BAZELON

It seems like every week, there is a bullying story in the news. Is this because bullying has become more prevalent, or because we are more aware of it?

Bullying isn't really on the rise, according to the studies that have tracked it over the past 25 years. But recent stories about bullying have gotten a ton of national attention and raised our antennae. So have laws that increasingly require schools to address bullying. Also, bullying does feel more pervasive for a lot of kids when it happens, because it often extends to the Web, which they can access 24/7. Going home from school used to be a respite for kids who were being targeted. That's often no longer true. And now that bullying happens on social networking sites and in text messages, it is more lasting, more visible, more viral. That's how the problem has morphed over the last decade.

Is there a crisis of bullying in the nation's schools?

Bullying is definitely not an epidemic, as you sometimes hear. And increasingly, schools are trying to address it. But they're not having uniform success, of course, and some of their efforts tend to be ineffectual, like one-time assemblies, or straitjacketed, like zero-tolerance policies.

What is bullying, exactly? Is there an official definition?

Dan Olweus, a Scandinavian psychologist who launched the field of studying bullying, came up with a good definition in 1969. He limits bullying to verbal or physical aggression that occurs repeatedly and involves a power differential—one or more children lording their status over another. That definition is still standard among academics.

How did you get interested in the topic?

When I was in 8th grade, I had my own experience with bullying. First, my group of friends fired me, which I can say drily now, but at the time was immensely painful. Then I made a new friend, and when she was being bullied, I had the chance to help her by standing up to her tormenters, and I didn't do anything. I've thought a lot about my own cowardice in that moment and it makes me want to figure out how to help other kids do better.

So what's the answer—what can young people do to deal with bullying when they see it happen?

If you see other kids being cruel, think about the steps you could realistically, and safely, take to stop it. You don't have to jump into the middle of a fight (though if you're up for that, don't let me stop you!), and you don't have to commit to befriending the person you're helping, either. Sometimes just sending a sympathetic text or asking someone in the hallway if they're okay is enough. If you can show empathy to someone who is vulnerable, in the moment or afterward, that can mean a lot. Most people who are having trouble socially appreciate just knowing that someone cares—even if it's



someone they don't know very well.

What are the most common perceptions parents and educators have about bullying?

I hear parents complain about schools that aren't doing enough and I hear principals complain about regulations that bury them in paperwork. There are some good programs for addressing bullying, which I write about in my book, but they take real work. Across the country, dealing with bullying is very much a work in progress.

What do you say to educators and adults who say bullying is just "kids being kids"?

It's not! The vast majority of kids do not bully. And the ongoing cruelty that bullying involves can do serious damage. This is not a problem to be shrugged off—that's just nuts.

OK, but at the same time, is much of what gets talked about as bullying in the media in fact better described as general meanness? Do you see an important distinction there?

Yes. The Olweus definition is helpful precisely because it's limiting—it makes clear that two-way, mutual conflict is not bullying. At the same time, when bullying is going on, it's a form of mistreatment that kids often find very upsetting and that links up with serious problems like mental health problems and low academic performance. That's true for both bullies and targets. So, the bullying label is one we should use sparingly, because when it applies, it has real significance.

In fact, it seems the conversation about bullying gets twisted and reduced in a lot of important and damaging ways. What do you see as the biggest shortcomings in the way we talk about bullying, and the way it gets portrayed in the media?

One problem is the hype about cyberbullying—stories that make us feel like the Internet has created a scary new breed of bad kids. That can make parents feel panicky and anxious, without offering them a clear and smart path to helping kids navigate the new world of technology. Another issue is that sometimes people use the word bully when they really mean rival or adversary, and then news outlets run with a black and white narrative about a victim and a pack of bullies that turns out to be misleading.

What are your thoughts on the media portrayal of cases where young people are "bullied to death"—the "bullycide" phenomenon?

It makes me nervous. It's true that in some cases bullying precedes suicide, no question. But the idea that a teeanger's decision to take his own life can be blamed entirely on the meanness of another teenager—that is often a big oversimplification, with damaging repercussions. Often, there are more layers to unpack, and a history of mental health troubles to address. But the facts get drowned out in an initial burst of finger pointing, and then we wind up with solutions that fit the real problems at hand.

What about the move to criminalize bullying, which we saw in the Phoebe Prince and Tyler Clementi cases—do you feel this is a proper way to deal with behavior?

Usually it's not, though every case should be evaluated on its facts. In the Phoebe Prince case, six teenagers were directly blamed for her death and faced 10-year prison sentences. I think that was a mistake. Some of these kids behaved very badly and I think they deserved some punishment, but I think the proposed sentence—and the enormous notoriety that came with the criminal charges—was disproportionate. I worry about scapegoating in these cases.

The Tyler Clementi case is somewhat different. Dharun Ravi, the roommate who spied on Tyler with a webcam, was convicted of invasion of privacy, and I think he was in fact guilty of that crime. I was glad, though, that the judge gave him a light sentence. Two years after Tyler's death, his mother said she is not sure what led him to make the tragic choice to take his own life, and I think laying all the blame at Ravi's doorstep is unfair. I also think we sometimes forget that we are talking about teenagers who should deserve a second chance.

Let's say you have a child who is being bullied at school, and the administration is not responding in a way you feel it appropriate. What should you do, as a parent?

First, make sure you have all the facts. Sometimes an accusation of bullying can seem simple and turn out to be more multidimensional once you understand the full context. Your job, of course, is to support your child. And sometimes it will be very clear that he or she is in the role of victim and needs your protection. Sometimes, however, you will learn that she is caught up in drama and has played an active role, rather than being simply at the mercy of bullying. The first step toward offering the most useful help is to make sure that you have a thorough understanding of what's going on. It's important to protect your child but it's also important not to cry wolf about bullying. And if what's happening really is bullying, the more specific examples you can cite, the better for making your case.

Once you feel confident you have the whole picture, you should think about whether it makes sense to reach out to the parents of other kids who are involved. If you have reason to think they're part of the problem, or you don't know them at all, this may not be a wise course of action. But don't decide against it just because broaching the subject would be awkward. If you have reason to think the other parents involved are reasonable and trustworthy people, you may be able to work together for everyone's benefit. It's great to be able to model to your children how to resolve conflict in a healthy way. Sometimes, however, if you're dealing with a difficult family, it makes sense to urge your child to extricate herself from a bad friendship. If she is close to someone who is making her feel rotten, maybe she needs to walk away.



Remember that even legitimate complaints can boomerang if they're not carefully framed. If school officials aren't responding the way you think they should, you may have to keep pushing by going up the chain of command. But remember they are people, too, with a heaping plate of responsibilities and duties, and the more you respect the role they play, the more likely they may be to sympathize. At least give them the benefit of the doubt for starters and save the frontal attack until you really feel you have no other choice.

Let's say you have a child who is being bullied online or via texting, and the school administration says they can't police that. What should you do, as a parent?

First off, if this is happening on a social network site, you can ask the site to take down any content that violates its rules, as many harassing posts do. If the site happens to be Facebook, when the target of an abusive post reports it himself or herself, they will generally take his or her word for it, they told me. So your child should report the abuse to them. You should also print out mean content, or take a screen shot, so you have a record of it—even if you feel like you'd rather make it go away by deleting it. It's almost never a good idea to reply to a harassing post. If you're child is having continuing trouble on a social networking site, you might counsel him or her to take a break for a while (though that can be a hard sell!) They can always go back when things have calmed down.

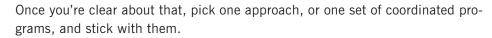
Police have the authority to address cyberbullying under the harassment laws of most states. If you think the situation warrants the involvement of law enforcement and that they'll be helpful, you can involve them. But this should be a thought-through decision rather than a knee-jerk reaction because it can also trigger a response that's more heavy-handed than the misconduct calls for.

Are companies like Facebook doing their share to combat bullying and harassment on social media sites?

These companies could and should do more. A sign of progress: Facebook in particular has tools that encourage kids to get in touch with people they know for help, which they've recently turned to researchers from Yale and Berkeley to help improve, by easing the way for kids to get a handle on their own emotions and communicate them. That's a good idea, but I worry that not enough people know about these tools or use them, and other social media sites have yet to follow suit. Also, most of these sites are hard to penetrate: You can report abuse, but you may have no idea what the result is. And the companies tend not to work directly with schools—they don't help them head off trouble when it starts, and they don't do enough to ask principals and guidance counselors what they could do to help across the board.

What do you wish every principal or educator would start doing immediately to make things better?

The first step to addressing bullying is to get a handle on it. Do a survey. Talk to your staff and to students and parents. Figure out your overall priorities for improving behavior and how bullying prevention fits in. Most schools have the money and the bandwidth for one good intervention that addresses behavior and character building, so it's crucial to figure out what would most benefit the students.



What are your thoughts on dealing with groups who are most likely to be targeted for bullying, like the disabled and LGBT youth, or religious minorities like Muslims?

These kids often need dedicated and concerted help gaining acceptance. Sometimes, that means challenging people's assumptions and prejudices. For example, one of the best things a school can do to prevent anti-gay harassment—which remains disturbingly common—is to start a Gay-Straight Alliance. Studies show that LGBT students at schools with these groups tend to experience less victimization, skip school less often, and feel a greater sense of belonging. More than 4,000 schools across the country have opened GSA chapters, which is a great start, but we need more—in middle schools as well as high schools. We also need more groups that promote respect for religious minorities or for disabled students.

Sum up the smartest things parents, teachers, and principals are doing about bullying.

This isn't an exhaustive list! But to answer the question: I like the anti-bullying approach that's part of Positive Behavioral and Interventions Supports (bad name, I know, PBIS for short). PBIS is a framework for improving school discipline, and research has shown it can reduce the rate of office referrals, suspensions and expulsions, and bullying.

CASEL: Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning is an umbrella group for social and emotional learning programs, which are designed to help children learn to recognize and manger their emotions so they can make responsible decisions, handle challenging situations, and calm themselves when they're angry. Many of the programs have been evaluated and shown positive effects. One example is RULER, a research-based approach developed at Yale for teaching five key emotional literacy skills.

The Olweus Bullying Prevention Program, founded in Norway, works with schools on three levels—the campus, the classroom, and the individual student. In the United States, the federally funded Blueprints for Violence Prevention assessed more than 900 programs for juveniles and chose Olweus as one of only a dozen proved to be effective, and the only program specifically directed at bullying.

Second Step and Steps to Respect, two programs from the Committee for Children in Seattle, aim to prevent bullying by strengthening the bonds between adults and children in schools. Research has shown that Steps to Respect can reduce the acceptance of bullying and aggression among participating students.

Bullyproofing Your School, a program run in conjunction with the National Center for School Engagement, is designed to battle bullying through the creation of the "caring majority"—a group of students who ensure that their school is a safe place.

Roots of Empathy is a Canadian program that brings babies into classrooms, with their parents, to teach kids about infant development and caring for others.



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Students who have participated have shown less aggressive behavior, more acts of kindness, and better understanding of babies and their emotions.

What have the courts had to say when schools suspend students for online bullying?

So far, the rulings have been mixed. A few courts have upheld suspensions for kids who bully or cause other school-related trouble online. And a few courts have struck down the same kind of suspensions, for going too far in restricting the free speech of students. Since misconduct online generally takes place out of school—kids write from home on their computers or from anywhere on their phones—it's an open question how much authority schools have to discipline for it. But what is very clear is that schools always have the power to bring in students and parents to talk about online harassment and misbehavior. That is a crucial starting point.

Do girls bully more than boys?

While it may seem like that, because we hear so much about mean girls, most victims report that they've mainly been bullied by boys. Boys tend to bully other boys and girls, whereas girls usually bully other girls.

Do girls bully in a different way than boys?

Boys are more likely to bully physically, which some of them due to show their masculinity, but they do their share of gossiping and manipulating friendships, too. Most researchers would in fact say girls can be just as aggressive as boys—they just express their hostility differently. Girls tend to use their highly attuned social antennae, instead of their fists, to wage war against other girls."

Is it true that many victims of bullying have also been bullies themselves? Any insight into why this might be true?

Yes, there is a subset of bullies who are also victims. These kids often have fairly serious problems: They tend to see themselves and others negatively, perform poorly in school, and feel isolated and rejected. They're more likely to report physical or sexual abuse and conflict with their parents at home. Sometimes they have a disability, such as attention deficit disorder, that makes them a classroom irritant, alienating the kids around them and often the adults, too. Often the bullying they do is a red flag—a sign that they need intensive support.

Can empathy be taught? If true bullies lack it, what can be done to instill it?

Yes, thank goodness, empathy and character building can be taught! This is a key insight at the heart of every good bullying prevention or character education effort. For a small number of kids who bully, it's true, the inability to feel empathy goes deep and is the terrifying hallmark of a psychopath—someone who can inflict pain without feeling an ounce of compassion or remorse. But true inability to feel empathy, luckily, is exceedingly rare. Most kids do feel or can learn to feel empathy and remorse. It's our job to help them find that capacity within themselves, and build on it.