FIVE THINGS | to Know about Kids who Bully

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"Bullying is, at its core, a human rights violation. [...] We must instill in our youth the ideals of civility and respect." - Kerry Kennedy, Robert F. Kennedy Center for Justice and Human Rights

We needn't look far for stories of a child being bullied on the bus or harassed on Facebook. These stories, and what they mean for kids who are bullied, are widely reported and, for many adults, stir painful memories of childhood and concern for their own children.

But who are the young people who engage in or endorse bullying? What motivates their involvement? Without an understanding of why children bully others, we won't be able to curtail their negative behaviors, and the stories won't stop.

Bullying is a form of unprovoked, aggressive behavior that involves a real or perceived power imbalance. The behavior is either repeated, or has the potential to be repeated, over time. It can be physical, verbal, or social; cyberbullying is becoming more common. Nearly three in 10 middle and high school students are involved in bullying, either as perpetrators, bystanders, or victims of bullying, or some combination of those. Around **15 percent of youth** between 10 and 17 **bully others** with some frequency, according to parental reports. Here are five things you should understand about youth who bully:

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They don't fit into any one profile

You can't tell which child will bully another by looks, but here are some factors that might be at play. Males report that they are more likely involved in physical and verbal bullying, while girls are more likely involved in social or psychological bullying. Most bullying behavior has been found to peak in early adolescence, but social bullying (e.g., purposeful exclusion, spreading rumors) tends to occur across a longer developmental period. Bullying behaviors of all forms begin showing up as early as preschool. Kids who tend to blame others for their actions or who tend to make negative assumptions about others are more likely to engage in bullying, as are kids who have difficulty following rules or like to have things their own way, or who have friends who bully others. Some children who bully have a high social status and will manipulate or dominate others to protect or raise that status, while others are easily pressured, are less involved in school, or are isolated or depressed.

Some are being bullied themselves

Between six and seven percent of youth have both been bullied *and* have bullied others. While it may seem counterintuitive for someone to fit both these roles, several factors contribute. These youth are more likely than other youth to react poorly to strong emotions, pay more attention to negative actions or events when processing social cues, assign hostile intent to benign social interactions, display impulsivity, and endorse retaliation as a tactic for handling conflict. These traits make them more likely to experience conflicts with peers and be less liked by peers, which can create a cycle of isolation and frustration when it comes to forming and maintaining relationships. These children tend to have been subjected to more punitive, abusive treatment in their families than other groups. Even though kids who bully *and* are being bullied are the smallest proportion of youth involved in bullying, they are often the most vulnerable, in that they are more likely than non-victimized bullies (who tend to be more proactive and socially accepted) to have some negative outcomes (see #4 below).

Kids play a wide range of roles in bullying

Involvement in bullying is more complex than stereotypes suggest; surveys of students and teachers are just now beginning to capture the nuances related to bullying involvement. Some children assist those who are bullying, by encouraging the behavior or even joining in. Others reinforce bullying by laughing or providing support for the children who are bullying. Still more might watch but not indicate being on anyone's side; even acting as a passive audience or bystander can implicitly encourage bullying behavior to continue. Most kids are involved in multiple roles over time. Because of this, it's important to include *all* children in prevention efforts, not just those who are involved at the moment.

Kids who bully need help too

Early intervention can help children stop engaging in bullying behavior; they can stop hurting others and can even diminish the likelihood of negative outcomes for themselves. We don't know very much about social bullies yet, but we do know that children who engage in more-explicit forms of bullying (such as physical and verbal intimidation) tend, on average, to attain less education, to have more employment problems, to be more likely to drink heavily and use illicit drugs, and to have more police contact as adults. Children who were bullied themselves *and* bullied others are over six times more likely than non-involved children to smoke, have a mental illness, or be diagnosed with a serious illness as adults. They might also be more at risk for depression and suicidal ideation.

Parents, peers, and schools can reinforce or discourage bullying

Children who have less-involved parents are more likely to bully others, as are those who have siblings or parents who model or endorse aggressive behavior. Parenting styles linked to social bullying include those lacking nurturing or that rely on psychological control of children; children with parents who manipulate relationships to assert power or gain attention are also more likely to engage in social bullying. Having peers or classmates who act out or tolerate aggressive

behaviors increases children's risk of engaging in all forms of bullying behavior. Schools that ignore incidents of bullying or lack a clear anti-bullying policy are likely to have higher rates of bullying.

Early childhood offers an opportunity for us to start teaching children the skills that will enable them to regulate their emotions and empathize with others. As children age, parents should set consistent limits and show kids how to get what they want without hurting others. Schools and districts can create a climate that discourages bullying by training teachers to identify, intervene in, and follow up with bullying situations, and by targeting interventions to subgroups of students as well as to the student body as a whole. Those programs targeting bullying that involve parents have generally been found to work, as have those that implement a whole-school approach--one that trains teachers and staff to model and reinforce positive behavior and that delivers anti-bullying messages year-round. Bullying is so pervasive in U.S. culture and media that it can be hard to detect; adults should pay attention to children's relationships and be aware of children who are at risk of becoming involved in bullying, as a perpetrator, victim, or bystander.