

# Too Cruel for School: The Rise of Bullying

Intimidation, harassment, threats, abuse. Bullying among students has reached epidemic proportions, and it's taking a heavy toll on our kids. Learn what's behind the surge and why parents must be part of the solution.

By Peg Tyre



When Jill Jones sent her 10-year-old, Kacey, off to school in Lewisboro, New York, she knew it was a big day for her little girl. A reserved, self-conscious child, Kacey was wearing new white capri pants she'd insisted her mother buy. All went well until lunchtime, when the fifth-grader sat at a table with some popular girls. "Kacey knew them and liked them but didn't feel like she was in their inner circle," says Jill, 51. Things didn't go as Kacey had hoped. The girls were openly hostile; then, suddenly, one of them dumped ketchup on her lap. When Kacey, already thoroughly humiliated, jumped up and tried to wipe it off, the girls laughed and mocked her for "getting her period."

As soon as Kacey came home, recalls Jill, "I knew something was wrong, but she didn't want to talk about it." After a few probing questions, the whole story spilled out. "When I realized Kacey had been bullied, I was furious," says Jill, "Then I wondered if I was overreacting. But when I saw how traumatized Kacey was, I knew the incident had crossed the line." Jill realized she needed to take action. "I had to find the best way to intervene so it wouldn't happen again," she says.

School bullying has many parents worried, and not just those whose kids have been on the receiving end. A series of shocking incidents has garnered headlines and provoked outrage and soul-searching in communities across the country. In Columbus, Indiana, a 13-year-old was charged with felony intimidation after he held a knife against a fellow student's throat in a classroom while the teacher's back was turned. In Yorktown, Virginia, 16-year-old Christian Taylor took his own life shortly after his mother, Alise Williams, complained to high school officials that her son had suffered months of relentless bullying by classmates, including one student who she says told Christian to "just go ahead and commit suicide and get it over with." And in South Hadley, Massachusetts, 15-year-old Phoebe Prince hanged herself early this year after reportedly being tormented by classmates who called her "Irish whore" and "stupid slut" and sent cruel texts and messages—even after her death. Six teens are now facing charges in that case, ranging from harassment and stalking to violation of civil rights with bodily injury.

## A Frightful Epidemic

Those cases have prompted parents and school officials to ask whether we're just seeing the tip of the iceberg, since bullying often takes place off the radar screen of grown-ups. While overall incidents of school violence, such as assault and theft, have declined in the last decade, bullying is on the rise. Just ask our kids. According to a 2009 federal survey of school crime and safety, 32 percent of middle and high school students said they'd been victimized during the academic year, compared with 14 percent in 2001. Among that group, 21 percent had been made fun of; 11 percent were pushed, tripped, or spit on; and 6 percent were threatened.

But is any of that really worse than the verbal jabs, social slights, and hard shoves today's parents endured while they were growing up? Most kids tease others and are teased from time to time; it's part of the harmless rough-and-tumble environment at all schools. Bullies, on the other hand, tend to target victims and subject them to repeated abuse. There is frequently a striking power imbalance between perpetrator and prey, whether it's a matter of age, size, academic achievement, popularity, or economic status. This more virulent type of harassment has become all too common, according to experts. "The amount of bullying in schools is unprecedented," says Marlene Snyder, PhD, director of development at the Olweus Bullying Prevention



Program at Clemson University in South Carolina. "The public is becoming aware of how serious it can be."

Indeed, researchers have found that kids are particularly sensitive to intimidation and emotional cruelty. It makes them feel more fearful and anxious than if they were the victims of theft or a physical attack. And the suffering goes far beyond momentary humiliation. They are more likely to be distracted from learning, get poorer grades, and become victims of violent crime. "They feel powerless," says Snyder, "and lose faith in the ability of adults to help them."

Legislators are recognizing that schools and communities need help to deal more effectively with the problem. Last spring Massachusetts Governor Deval Patrick signed a bill that requires teachers to report incidents of bullying, and principals to investigate them. Forty-three other states now have laws against bullying and student-to-student intimidation, whether it takes place in the classroom or hallway, or on the playing field. The Department of Education recently unveiled the Safe and Supportive Schools grants, a \$27 million discretionary fund for states to use to create in-school programs to prevent harassment and violence. Parents also need to be part of the solution. Learn what the experts have to say about who's hurting whom, the reasons why, and the steps you can take to keep your kids safe from harm.

### The New Bully on Campus

Peer abuse has always existed at school, but the kinds of kids who are harassing others have changed. The stereotype of yesteryear—a physically intimidating, low-achieving, socially maladjusted loner—no longer applies. Instead, bullies these days are, often as not, popular kids and academic achievers. "They are alpha girls and quarterbacks and not necessarily kids struggling to gain a social foothold," says Elizabeth Englander, director of the Massachusetts Aggression Reduction Center at Bridgewater State College, which runs anti-bullying programs in K-12 schools. Girls are slightly more likely than boys to act out against others—not physically, but by using tactics like alienation, ostracism, and deliberate rumors calculated to inflict maximum psychological damage.



So what causes a student who is doing well to go out of his or her way to hurt another? For one, there's the momentary rush kids get from being perceived as dominant in a group situation. But research suggests that the growing frequency and intensity of bullying may be the result of a troubling decline in social skills among adolescents. In a 2009 study, researchers asked teachers whether they thought children's ability to get along with one another and resolve disputes had improved over the last decade, stayed about the same, declined slightly, or declined significantly. Their response was overwhelmingly negative: 75 percent of educators perceived a significant drop and 25 percent said they saw a slight decline.

Psychologists say that these changes may be connected to the way we're raising our kids. In the last 20 years opportunities for preschoolers and elementary school kids to engage in free play with other children have pretty much evaporated. Instead, parents relentlessly cram their kids' schedules with an array of adult-led academic and sports enrichment activities. While those certainly have their upside, unsupervised interaction teaches young kids impulse control and enhances emotional stability, which in turn helps them manage friendships and other relationships. "In our enthusiasm to make our children smarter and stronger, we've forgotten that they need time and opportunities to learn how to be competent social beings, which is every bit as important as knowing algebra and grammar," says Kathy Hirsh-Pasek, a professor of psychology at Philadelphia's Temple University who has researched and written extensively on the social, cognitive, and emotional growth that accompanies play. While there is no direct evidence to suggest that enrolling your kid in pee-wee soccer or conversational Mandarin will increase the likelihood that he'll turn out to be a bully, research indicates that free play—and plenty of it—does indeed enhance skills needed to avoid the aggressor/victim dynamic.

Technology is short-changing our kids as well. According to a 2010 study by the Kaiser Family Foundation, children between the ages of 8 and 18 now spend about 7.5 hours a day tethered to smart phones, laptops, or other devices, up from about 6 hours in 2005. And that doesn't include the 1 1/2 hours they spend texting or talking. It adds up to 63 hours of media every week—and it comes at a price, says Gary Small, a neuroscientist at the University of California, Los Angeles, and author of *iBrain: Surviving the Technological Alteration of the Modern Mind* (Harper). "The time young people spend engaged with technology is time not spent playing on the playground, or learning verbal cues and face-to-

-face skills, like maintaining eye contact," he says. "Those are all things that could help reduce the surge in school bullying."

### Turning the Tide

Like Jill Jones, parents across the nation are uncertain about how to deal with bullying. Experts say the worst thing adults can do is to ignore it. "There's a common—and very mistaken—belief that it's okay," says Julie Hertzog, director of the Bullying Prevention Project at Pacer, a Minneapolis-based organization for children with disabilities. "Adults say things like, 'It's a normal part of childhood' or 'Boys will be boys,' but that's just plain wrong. And it's not only the targets who suffer. Kids who witness bullying are uncomfortable as well. They often want to help but don't know how to—and fear they could be next."

But as teachers and administrators can tell you, creating a safe environment for students isn't easy. One of the oldest and most respected bullying prevention programs used by K-12 schools across the country is Olweus, which focuses on improving peer relations by identifying and dismantling the group interaction that gives rise to abuse. Research has found that when onlookers provide an audience for bullying by standing around, watching, or laughing, they unwittingly encourage and prolong the behavior. The Olweus program, which includes teacher training and community outreach, tries to curb bullying by discouraging "hangers on" from participating. "We help kids recognize that when there is an incident everyone who is involved—or even aware of it—plays a role," says Marlene Snyder of Olweus, who conducts training sessions for teachers to help kids stop bullying as it happens. "Some kids are disengaged onlookers, others know better but enjoy watching, and some egg the bully on. We teach them that the best way to defend others is not to give your power to someone who wants to harm others." Olweus, which costs about \$1,500, is paid for by school districts, parent groups, federal grants, or private foundations. Many consider it a worthy investment, including schools in California and Virginia, which saw an average 15 percent decrease in bullying after one year.

But even the best of such programs are no silver bullet. In a study published this year, longtime bullying researchers Susan Swearer and Dorothy Espelage found that the most effective interventions are "whole school" approaches that include establishing rules and consequences for bullying, teacher involvement, conflict resolution strategies, classroom curriculum, and individual social skills training. "All parts of the school should be brought into the conversation," says Swearer. "What's more, special attention and training must be given to some perpetrators to help them come up with socially acceptable ways of dealing with peers." But none of the programs she and Espelage studied really snuffed out abuse; while one-third of them improved kids' level of knowledge, attitude, and perceptions about bullying, they did not reduce the number of incidents. Even more disheartening, some remedies—like the assembly-type program that encourages children to write down the names of aggressors and hand slips of papers to the teacher—can actually contribute to a climate of shaming and blaming that fosters bullying.

Some experts believe it takes even more of a village to curb cruelty and that students should participate in setting limits. Sam Chaltain, author of *American Schools: The Art of Creating a Democratic Learning Community* (Rowman & Littlefield Education), believes that bullying is a sign that young people—even high-achieving ones—feel invisible, unconnected, and unsure about how to act appropriately. "Like any democratic environment, a school community should have civic ground rules that govern personal behavior. That will help kids understand what is acceptable to say and do so they can become their own anti-bullying program."

Fortunately for Jill Jones, Kacey's elementary school made the right moves. "Her grade had already been organized into teams, so I called the teacher who was her team leader and related what had happened in the cafeteria," Jill says. "This man was not only an excellent instructor but also a supersensitive dad of four kids. He was outraged." The teacher called an emergency meeting of the team leaders, who met with each of the girls involved and laid down the law. They would be suspended if they picked on Kacey again, conspired against her in any way, or were even caught talking about the incident. "Believe it or not, the bullies were duly chastened and never seemed to hold it against my daughter," says Jill. Kacey is now a thriving student with plenty of friends. "She's lucky because the teachers at her school embodied the social lessons that they were teaching," says Jill. In other words, they walked the talk. And that made all the difference.

Want to hear from other moms about school bullying? Go to [momster.com/fc/bullying](http://momster.com/fc/bullying) >>

### When Push Comes to Shove

- Bullying starts in elementary school, peaks in middle school, then tapers off in high school.

- 79% of incidents take place in hallways, cafeterias, and classrooms, 23% outdoors, 8% on school buses, and 4% someplace else.
- Emotional abuse is the most prevalent type of harassment, followed by pushing, shoving, tripping, and spitting.
- Sixth-graders are the students most likely to sustain an injury from bullying. After that, the odds steadily decrease through 12th grade.

*Source: National Center for Education Statistics*

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