

CHAPTER TWO

What Bullying and Teasing Do to Everyone—Kids, Adults, and Communities

"Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me."

This children's taunt was first listed in Folk Phrases of Four Counties (1894) by G. F. Northall and is first attested in the United States in Miss Lindsey (1936) by S. G. Gibbons. The Morris Dictionary of Word and Phrase Origins (Morris & Morris, 1977/1988) also notes that the first use of this phrase is found in Folk Phrases. According to the Random House Dictionary of Popular Proverbs and Sayings (Titelman, 1996), this proverb is found in varying forms: "Sticks and stones may break my bones, but hard words cannot hurt me"; "Sticks and stones can break my bones, but words can never hurt me"; and "Sticks and stones will break my bones, but lies will never hurt me."

From Phrase Finder Discussion Forum (2000)

In *Bullying From Both Sides*, I give a more detailed review of all of the definitions and nuances of bullying. The reader will find it helpful to refer to Chapter 2 in that book (see pp. 13–20) to obtain a deeper understanding of the problem and its full context. For the sake of avoiding duplication, we do not repeat all of that information here. However, it is useful to review here some of the basic ground rules and definitions so you are better able to explain and summarize the problem to those parents whom we want working with us in our newly created partnership mode.

Bullying and **teasing** are often considered to be the same. Dan Olweus, of Norway, known as the "grandfather" of bullying prevention programs used

10 Working With Parents of Bullies and Victims

in many European and North American schools, created the generally accepted definition of the behavior. Olweus (1993) conceptualizes bullying as the exposure to long-term, repeated negative actions on the part of one or more persons. It can be designed to intimidate psychologically, physically, or both. *Bullying* tends to be more physical than teasing or taunting and is stereotypically associated with boys. *Teasing* is generally conceptualized as being more verbal and is assumed to be more likely to occur with girls and at younger ages within both sexes. However, both behaviors are more complex than their stereotypes. Each is clearly designed to obtain some form of gain for the one who is intimidating the other. The **aggressor** of the bullying activity—let's call it what it is—may be looking to gain status among peers or something more tangible, such as items stolen from victims. There is never anything fair in the bully-victim relationship: The bully always has the upper hand, whether by strength, by numbers, or psychologically.

Bullying occurs along a **continuum** that ranges from mild to severe. Minor and sporadic instances of harassment, such as name calling, gossiping, or pushing and shoving, are examples of **mild** intimidation. When these behaviors become more frequent and harsh, they are worthy of classification as **moderate** bullying. Instances of bullying that are considered **severe** include physical assault, outrageous and clearly defamatory rumors, or ganging together to engage in aggressive activities against targets (see Figure 2.1, p. 16, in *Bullying From Both Sides* for more details). The use of electronic communication (e.g., text messages, cell phones, Web pages) to intimidate others, or **cyberbullying**, is another method by which individuals can be bullied.

Most children during their formative years have experienced some sort of bullying behavior. They may very well have engaged in it as well. The *Journal of the American Medical Association* reported that nearly 30% of children in Grades 6 through 10 had some kind of involvement in the bully-victim dyad, in either role (Nansel et al., 2001). Although the vast majority are able to navigate this tortuous physical and psychological obstacle course, others do not do it so successfully. What follows are two examples of the long-term damage that bullying can have on the human soul.

DEATH COMES TO LAKE WOBEGON

When I was working on drafts for *Bullying From Both Sides*, a 15-year-old ninth-grade student in a rural Minnesota school district shot and killed two other students inside the high school building (Meryhew, Burcum, & Schmickle, 2003). Eighteen months after that, another Minnesota child killed nine others—four adults, five classmates, and then himself—and wounded five other students in a rampage in his tribal school at the Red Lake Nation of the Chippewa (Meryhew, Haga, Padilla, & Oakes, 2005). Prior to the massacre at Virginia Tech in 2007, it was the largest loss of life in a school shooting since Columbine in 1999. Death, it seems, had come to the children and families in the state of the mythical Lake Wobegon, that place where all the children are above average.

In the first case, which occurred at Rocori High School, court documents verified every news report from eyewitnesses that the young man was motivated to seek revenge for the taunting he had received from another 14-year-old classmate. However, his initial effort at vengeance went awry. The first shot from his handgun struck a senior who was in a gym area, who died almost immediately. There was no connection between the shooter and the senior—he was simply an unintended victim.

Adolescent victims of harassment who intend to strike back at their tormentors and whose efforts backfire are often shocked into recognizing the realities of what they are doing and stop their attack, especially when they see an unintended victim of their action suffer an abuse similar to that which they have had to experience. The jolt of the act itself is often enough to stop the avenger from continuing. Such was not the case in Rocori. In the chaos that followed, the shooter continued his pursuit of the original target. He chased him to another area of the school and fired another round point-blank that would inevitably prove fatal, two weeks later. What might have happened or what the intent of the victim-attacker was after shooting the second student is unclear. Fortunately, a well-respected teacher heroically confronted the shooter and commanded him to drop his handgun. The student complied. He was found guilty and must serve a minimum of 30 years in prison before he will be eligible for parole.

Minnesotans rightfully mourned the tragedy in that school district. When school shootings dominated the news in the late 1990s, Minnesota had fortunately dodged such catastrophes. In fact, up until Rocori, the Midwest had been largely left untouched by the school shootings that had occurred across the country. But that tragedy was just a precursor to what was yet to come.

In March 2005, a deeply troubled 16-year-old high school junior embarked on a shooting spree that began at his home and eventually spread to Red Lake High School. Although many factors contributed to his personal distress, one of the issues that he spoke about before the incident was his sense of isolation from peers. He felt intimidated by his classmates for his style of dress and self-proclaimed Gothic lifestyle. Much of his distress was posted in Internet chat rooms. He even created sophisticated computer animations detailing a virtual synopsis of what he ended up doing. His pain and plans were not unknown. Later investigation revealed that 39 peers knew something about the shooter's mind-set and potential plans before he carried them out (Ragsdale, 2006). However, only one of those who possessed this information was tried and sentenced to serve jail time. He was sentenced to one year at a private treatment facility and, on release, will be on probation until the age of 21.

Because the shooter committed suicide at the scene, there are many questions left unanswered for the people of the Red Lake Nation. However, the shooter did not hide the personal anguish in his life. Here are his words verbatim (with references to others deleted), as posted on one of several Internet chat rooms in which he participated. (Sources for these postings have been moved from their original sites for privacy and legal reasons. Interested parties may contact the author directly for assistance in tracking down the archived sites.)

12 Working With Parents of Bullies and Victims

May 13, 2004 23:06

They pegged me as a possible school shooter earlier this year, or wait, that was last month.

Apparently someone was supposed to shoot up the school on 4/20, and there was alot of buzz around me, and for good reasons I guess.

I wear combat boots (with my pant legs tucked into them), wear a trench coat, and at the last basketball game my friend . . . (who happens to wear a black trench coat like mine), did a "Sieg Heil" during the national anthem (for shock value), so they had us pegged as "Trench Coat Mafia." My "friend" . . . even said that I fit the profile of a school shooter that she saw on 60 minutes . . .

I happen to be "not so popular," Gothic (in the sense that I wear nothing but black, spike my hair in "devil" horns, and listen to music like Cradle of Filth and KoRn), and happen to be an emotionally disturbed person, if you could call me that. So it's really no problem slapping a label on someone because they fit the stereotype. And no, I wasn't the one who did the threat. On "Game day" (4/20) the Feds were all around the place, watching, cop cars on nearly every corner around the school and a few large unmarked black vans sitting around, I bet they were on standby. So they WERE prepared for something to happen.

Nov. 8, 2004 13:30

[In response to an apology from another chat room subscriber who had downplayed the level of mental pain that the shooter had previously expressed.]

Would you please try to be a little bit more considerate?

I had went through alot of things in my life that had driven me to a darker path than most choose to take. I split the flesh on my wrist with a box opener, painting the floor of my bedroom with blood I shouldn't have spilt. After sitting there for what seemed like hours (which apparently was only minutes), I had the revelation that this was not the path.

It was my decision to seek medical treatment, as on the other hand I could've chose to sit there until enough blood drained from my downward lascerations on my wrists to die.

I am now on Anti-depressants, and just because you've probably never been through anything Like I have doesn't give you the write to say what you have.

I am trying to turn my life around, I'm trying really hard, the attitudes of people like you are what set me back.

On his MSN Web site in the "My Picture" section, he posted a frame from the fictional Columbine movie, *Elephant*, which showed the two protagonists with duffle bags entering the school where they would later commit their massacre. In the "A Little About Me" section, he wrote the following: *16 years of accumulated rage suppressed by nothing more than brief glimpses of hope, which have all faded to black. I can feel the urges within slipping through the cracks, the leash I can no longer hold. His "Favorite Things" were as follows: [Moments] where control becomes completely*

unattainable . . . times when maddened psycho paths briefly open the gates to hell, and let chaos flood through . . . those individuals who care enough to reclaim their place . . .

Clearly, here was a young man in deep pain. The intervention of *just one* caring adult whom he respected might well have changed the course of history.

Shortly after the Red Lake massacre, the Chippewa Nation held a ceremony on the steps of the state capitol building in St. Paul to mourn the loss of life at Red Lake. I was there, along with 500 others, mostly members of the Native American nations of Minnesota. A bitter wind marred an otherwise cloudless sky. The mood on the ground was as sobering as the wind. The faces of the elders reflected the deep grief felt by everyone in attendance. Tribal nation speakers called for an end to violence across the spectrum of humanity. Drumming and singing honored the deceased, and a traditional Native American smudging ceremony was held to cleanse all of the participants of negative influences. Everyone shed tears, their emotions still raw from the questions about how such a terrible incident could have occurred and what messages young people must have about life in general to act in such a fashion.

These two tragedies have forever changed the communities in which they occurred, yet they serve as a reminder that, for many children, nothing has changed. There is still peer-on-peer abuse that demands prevention and intervention, and there are still children who feel as if they have nowhere else to turn when experiencing their most deep-seated pains.

We cannot stop all of the pain in our children's lives, but we can reduce some specific types. Curbing intimidation within educational settings is certainly within educators' capacities.

WHEN INTERVENTION STOPS TRAGEDY

What finally came to the mythical Lake Wobegon in 2003 and 2005 could just as readily have happened years before—and almost did. One of my dear friends who is a school counselor in another part of the state and his principal prevented a school shooting in 2002.

Word came that a student in the school who was being intimidated by a group of students was afraid of being attacked during the lunch hour and that he might very well have brought a gun with him that day for protection. This information came to the school counselor's attention about five minutes before the bell was to ring for the lunch period. The school counselor notified his principal, who called the police, and together they then took immediate action. First, they determined the student's whereabouts by looking at his class schedule. Second, they made a quick search of his locker to ascertain whether or not the weapon was there. It was not. Third, they moved to the classroom where the student was scheduled to be and opened the door slowly.

The plan was to calmly surround the student and escort him from the classroom. As fate would have it, the class was watching a video—with a substitute teacher, no less—and the room was pitch dark except for the streak of light that came through the open door. But as another stroke of fate would have it, that streak

14 Working With Parents of Bullies and Victims

of light happened to fall across the row of seats where the student sat. My friend and his principal entered the room as if it was nothing out of the ordinary, just a stop-by visit; in fact, my friend even cracked a joke to the substitute about the quality of the video in progress while walking across the back of the room. The two of them then walked up to the student of concern, each gently taking one of his arms to control its movement, and walked him outside into the hallway.

Five seconds later, they found a pistol with a full clip in the student's sweatshirt. He had attended all of his classes that day with the gun. The information provided to the school counselor had, indeed, been credible, and in this instance, because there had been an accurate warning, school personnel were able to respond effectively.

THE PAIN THAT RESONATES TO THE BONE

Whatever the case and whichever examples I might have chosen to use here, nothing that I could ever write could convey more accurately the voices of affected children and adolescents than their own words. Theirs are the voices of deep hurt and anguish, the kind of agony that afflicts the heart and soul and is not forgotten easily, if ever. It is a pain that resonates to the bone.

Although high-profile incidents of school violence linked to bullying grab our attention when they occur—at least until the press goes away—the truth is that *right now* as you read these words there are young people, *perhaps several in your own school and whom you know*, who find themselves in such desperate situations that they contemplate irrational acts to end their torment—either by turning inward through self-harm or by exploding outward through a revenge fantasy in which they settle their pain through violence. **Bullicide** is the term that we use today to label acts of suicide when those who feel that they have no other solution to their torment except via “escaping” personal pain kill themselves. The frightening thing is that we are seeing an increase in such behaviors among middle-school-aged children—both boys and girls. We also know that, ironically, it is often the victims of bullying who end up hurting others as they bring weapons to schools to protect themselves from their tormentors (Carney & Merrell, 2001).

HOW EVERYONE LOSES WHEN BULLYING OCCURS

Hasn't this been a cheery chapter? It's enough to depress us all and make us want somebody else to deal with the problem. And that's just the point. Too often in the face of all the incredibly difficult issues that we educators face in the school setting, we pick and choose our battles, prioritizing those things that “must” be done and sacrificing or postponing the “less important” ones for later—and then, because the workload in our schools is so overwhelming, we just never seem to get back to those less important items until they pop back up on our radar screens as a must. Those of us in education understand the need to prioritize our job demands and that the tsunami of work never decreases—the waves only get bigger year after year.

But here's the sad truth about our taking that approach to the issue of bullying and intimidation among the children and adolescents in our schools—it's a problem for *us* as well as our students, whether we think so or not. How, you ask? Go back and reread some of those terrible incidents we covered in these first two chapters. Mercifully, the chances that a high-profile incident of school violence will erupt in our schools now are *lower* than a decade ago. The school safety and juvenile justice data all confirm this downward trend (see the National Center for Education Statistics at <http://nces.ed.gov> and the Bureau of Justice Statistics of the U.S. Department of Justice at <http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov> for the latest updates). What is more likely to happen, as we have previously seen, is that if a violent act in the school does occur, it will involve the use of more dangerous weapons and spread to more parties than just one particular individual (Newman, Fox, Harding, Mehta, & Roth, 2004). Innocent bystanders are often hurt in addition to the original target.

When victims strike back at their tormentors and when bullying goes unabated, the *whole school loses*. The overall school climate is affected negatively in the following ways:

- Students feel unsafe when they know that bullying occurs to others because they know that it can also happen to them.
- Students who feel unsafe in school do less well academically because they are distracted by the fear of intimidation from others or by making plans on how to avoid such intimidation.
- Parents lose faith in the school in which bullying is tolerated. They believe that educators cannot be trusted to safeguard their children.
- Educators within the school often bicker among themselves when some faculty address the problem and others do not. This is especially true when a perception exists that administrators ignore or deny that a problem exists while the faculty is willing to address the problem.

If this list is not enough, let's add one more item to consider, which—sadly, for all the wrong reasons—ends up being the one to which reluctant schools end up responding: faculty, school administrators, and school boards all face the potential of legal action for not preventing “foreseeable” incidences of intimidation.

When all else fails to motivate school personnel to take action, the legal beagles will be more than glad to do so. Parents have had enough of what is considered these days to be behavior that is *preventable*, and they are less afraid to push the legal option than ever before (Limber & Snyder, 2006). Why? Because education has been *reactive* and not *proactive* in addressing the problem, and that is *inexcusable* given what we know about bullying today. Parents are tired of being given the explanation, “We didn't know that it was happening,” when it comes to bullying behaviors directed toward their children, whether that explanation is true or not.

It doesn't have to be that way, and that is why you have chosen to read this book. Educators *can* intervene effectively to break the cycle of bullying and prevent

16 *Working With Parents of Bullies and Victims*

many of the tragedies that we have read about in these first two chapters from happening again. To be most effective, however, we need a **team approach** that enlists the assistance of parents in doing all that adults can humanly do to decrease bullying in Kid World. Now let's move forward and learn about some of the reasons why parents find it difficult to work with school personnel.