

Bullying runs counter to a mainstay of ethical behaviour

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Ethical awareness requires that we view other people as possessing equal worth and dignity. This ethic is a mainstay of constructive behaviour in both religious and non-religious ethical and moral systems. The act of bullying others runs counter to this principle. Whether in schools, in the work place, or within families, bullying has become an unfortunate and all too common trend which runs counter to treating others with respect and civility.

In its milder forms, bullying may be expressed as aggressive teasing, sarcasm, joking at someone's expense, gossiping about fellow students, comments designed to "put-down" or humiliate, and simple pranks causing embarrassment. While the perpetrators feel they are having good fun, victims may see little humour in bullying although they may feign a smile or pretend they are not adversely affected. These milder forms of bullying may appear harmless to observers and to the person doing the bullying, but it is the victims who are often hurt and sometimes psychologically damaged. In the most harmful situations even the victims may not fully comprehend the negative effects that can remain for many years. Bullying is sometimes expressed in more severe forms, such as hazing, physical violence, harassment, gang attacks, damage to the victim's property, and threats to the victim's family. In these cases, bullying occasionally ends, tragically, in suicide.

Unfortunately, bullying is on the rise. In Canadian high schools, depending upon the location, about thirty per cent of male students report being bullied and a similar number admit bullying others. While figures for female students are slightly lower and suggest less violence, they are nonetheless, as emotionally damaging. A number of researchers suggest that part of the reason for lower figures for females may be that bullying of females is usually less physical and harder to confirm and therefore less frequently reported.

The increase in student bullying may be accounted for in a number of ways: it is easier for the perpetrators to do their work secretly through "on-line" bullying than had been the case years ago. Often, the unfortunate targets of bullying are high school students who in some way stand out as different from their peers. Sadly, bullying is not confined to secondary schools. To a lesser extent, perhaps, students in elementary schools and universities are similarly affected. Furthermore, bullying

also occurs among adults in the workplace, both males and females, often by those in positions of authority. While there are usually rules controlling workplace bullying, sexual harassment of females by males occurs when codes of conduct are not properly enforced. This is especially true if victims suffer abuse for long periods before reporting cases to those in authority. Frequently, those who complain may be putting their own positions, rather than those of the perpetrator, in jeopardy.

Teachers have influence and opportunity to treat all students with equal worth and dignity. As a former teacher, I can say that teachers busy with other tasks may sometimes fail to use their important role to combat bullying. Many parents wish they had the same opportunity as teachers to work for several hours each day with their children seated in front of them, so they could offer help, encouragement, and good ethical advice about getting along with each other.

Like many other moral and ethical situations, bullying is a socially oriented problem. It requires serious attention from many sources to persuade the public that bullying is not just a matter of a few people having harmless, good-natured fun. While teachers and parents may assume much of the responsibility towards solving this problem, it is essential that additional community organizations get involved. For example, legal agencies, including lawyers, police and the courts need to become aware of the harmful effects of bullying and take action to end it. The media, too, can help to raise public awareness. Institutions of higher learning could offer courses in sociology and psychology informing the general public about hidden techniques and harmful effects of bullying. Certainly, other social agencies can play a positive and helpful role. Let us all work together to combat this problem, and through example and teaching generate a more accepting and tolerant attitude within our society.