

Who Gets Bullied and Who Are the Bullies?

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London Free Press June 2, 2012

Although bullying has been with us for a long time, this problem has been given more attention in the past few decades. This may be partly because the internet has made it possible for students to harass and bully defenseless victims anonymously. Books, magazines, newspapers, and current movies have also brought attention to the problem. More homosexual young people, who are frequent targets of bullying, have been persuaded to “come out” and declare their sexual orientations openly. In the western world, prosperity has brought with it stylish clothing, freedom of choice, and variations in life styles which were unknown choices in former generations. This enhanced freedom and feelings of entitlement to make new choices and follow new life styles have had the effect of more snobbishness about the clothes students wear, the friends they choose, and the gadgets and electronic devices that young people purchase. As people become more affluent they are able to be selective about the choices they make, and they select only what are regarded as the most fashionable items, the things with the greatest prestige.

On the other hand, students with more limited budgets must be conscious of the costs of their purchases. This group will need to be satisfied with the clothes they can afford or the iPods and cell phones that are not the very latest in design. Among different economic groups of students there will be the “haves” and the “have nots”.

So who are the people who are the most likely to be the victims of bullying? While economic factors have some importance in these matters, there are many other subtle aspects. If a student is overweight, unattractive, is shy socially, has a physical or emotional disability, or has a bad temper, any one of these problems can make the student a victim of bullying.

Then there are situations over which a student may lack awareness. Unfortunately for the victims of bullying, some of these triggers are ones the intended victim may have little ability to change. These include models of behavior accepted by their parents as patterns of normalcy within their families. For example, immigrant children will be expected to eat the foods their parents provide, though their classmates may find these choices foreign and strange. Patterns of dress, hair style, clothing, languages spoken with a foreign accent or other cultural or religious practices within their home may set them apart from the majority of students with whom they interact at school.

Then there are other differences over which students have little control. Skin colour, tallness or shortness, general facial features such as the shape of one's nose or the size and placement of one's ears or eyelids are features with which one is born. It is also likely that sexual orientation of children is in place at birth, although some religions would disagree with me on this point.

Who are the people responsible for the bullying? What is their profile? Some of them will be students with their own feelings of inadequacy who find some emotional release in targeting and domineering others whom they see as "different" from their own view of the norm. Some will be students who have a feeling of entitlement because it has not occurred to them that not every student has the financial means to make the choices they have made for themselves. Unfortunately, some will have parents who subtly permit and even encourage their children to dominate less fortunate students because they think this is the way that their own children will learn to succeed in later life.

Is bullying an ethical issue? Yes, it definitely is. It requires care and concern for each student in order to eliminate harsh, unfair and inhumane abuse. So who can help? Caring teachers, parents and teachers meeting together, can help as can religions that show concern for the welfare of children within their sphere of influence. In addition, stronger laws enabling school administrators to enact protection for victims are also essential. Elitist advertisements appealing to snobbish attitudes among young audiences need to be toned down. Most of all, we need more citizens caring more of the time about the victims of bullying.