

parenting matters

Boys & Relational Aggression



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PART III IN A THREE-PART SERIES ON

RELATIONAL AGGRESSION AND BULLYING

By Christine Sorrenti

I am saddened by recent suicides and violence committed by young boys as a result of their experience of being bullied. I am saddened that children feel they need to change schools, hurt themselves and others, and forfeit their school experience as a result of bullying. As a counselor and therapist, I am constantly trying to transcend the dynamics of peer bullying and work towards helping kids improve their awareness and relational skills. Their ease or difficulty with social relationships is impacted by their social development from a young age. For boys, social development is formed around themes of masculinity, power, and toughness.

The experience of being bullied negatively impacts social and emotional development. It's not always clear how boys are affected by bullying because most won't talk about what they feel like when it happens. I've noticed in working with young boys that they generally are more outwardly aggressive and will pick on someone smaller than them, hit or punch something, or hold in their anger until one day they explode. Our country has seen the ongoing horrifying effects of violence due in large part to boys having been bullied and excluded.

While physical bullying does occur with boys, relational aggression persists. Boys tend to intimidate and embarrass those who are not part of their group and target those that are physically smaller. Continuous and incessant taunting and humiliation over time is emotionally abusive. Boys feel humiliated, unimportant,

and powerless to change the situation. Their self-esteem plummets and they feel as though it will never end. They become stuck in believing they are who and what the bullies claim.

So, what drives boys to bully? Masculinity and competition play a huge role in their behavior and decision making. They fear being called derogatory terms by peers if they don't act "manly" enough – and there is a good deal of pressure put on boys by peers. Boys see emotions as making them vulnerable and they choose not to speak of their experiences for fear of "acting like a girl". They feel it will only lead to more harassment, and sadly it often does. Asking for help and talking about problems isn't acceptable in the world of boys; there is an unwritten rule of silence.

Dan Kindlon and Michael Thompson support these ideas in their book *Raising Cain: Protecting the Emotional Life of Boys*. They outline a "culture of cruelty" that offers no security and keeps boys under constant pressure to either assert their power and masculinity or be labeled as weak. They contend that boys are cruel because they are afraid and need to defend against their fears. A quote from a "popular boy" in the book elucidates this: "Everybody thinks you've got it so easy when you're on top, but being on top just means that you have to worry all the time about slipping...all it takes is one mistake or a bad day and all sorts of people are waiting to take you down." (Kindlon and Thompson p.75) Part of this culture of cruelty is competi-

tion and belittling others as a way of proving oneself. Boys love to point out each other's insecurities and failures. If they don't understand how to express their feelings, especially in front of friends, they will typically respond with a negative comment to divert attention to another and save face.

It is time to begin challenging male culture in schools, at home, and in the community at large. It is important for people working and living with young people to recognize the signs of bullying and take it seriously. This is sometimes difficult, as the bullying can be masked with humor. A recent report from the Department of Education found that bullies are likely to be among the most popular kids in school, admired by peers and teachers alike, especially in middle school. With some victims, there are quiet symptoms of depression, anxiety, and low self-esteem. With others, anger, rage, and defiance of the mainstream are present. The danger is not recognizing the symptoms and allowing anger, humiliation, hostility, and emotional overload explode when it is too much for them to handle. Parental knowledge and involvement is critical too, as children take on the ideas, attitudes, and values of parents. If kids hear their parents taking bullying seriously, it can help their own attitudes and tolerance for bullying and other relationally hurtful acts.

There is currently anti-bullying legislation trying to be passed in Massachusetts. The bill calls for confronting bullying and increasing action taken by schools to protect its students. This is a good start. However, prevention cannot be overlooked. According to the Stop Bullying Now website (www.stopbullyingnow.hrsa.gov), there are only 10 states without bullying prevention laws and Massachusetts is one of them. An anti-bullying prevention program would need to be comprised of more than just protocols for schools reporting incidences to the state. Prevention would need to be district-wide and become embedded in the fabric of the school system and culture and embraced collectively by students, staff, and families. The dynamics of bullying are complex, but prevention efforts could develop awareness and understanding about the significance of positive social relationships.

It is appropriate for parents to contact the school if there's suspicion that a child is bullying or being bullied. School guidance counselors and social workers are a good place to begin. Interventions for bullying are best handled one on one, to diffuse the power of

There are many types of bullying. Bullying can be:

- Leaving someone out of group activities on purpose.
- Giving someone the "silent treatment."
- Using the Internet, IMs, text messages, and/or e-mail to hurt others (also called cyberbullying).
- Making faces and/or bad gestures with your hands at someone.
- Using a person to get something you want, such as making friends with someone who is smart just so they can do your homework for you.
- Making fun of someone for being "different."
- Name-calling, teasing, gossiping, and/or spreading rumors.

a peer group. It is best for parents not to get directly involved with suspected bullies, as it is most effective to have a neutral party guide the intervention.

Here are a few resources for parents looking to read deeper about boys and bullying:

A Parent's Guide to Understanding and Responding to Bullying: The Bullying Busters Approaches by Dr. Arthur Horne, Dr. Jennifer Whitford, and Dr. Christopher Bell (Research Press 2008)

Bully Proofing Your Child: A Parent's Guide by Carla Garrity, Mitchell Baris, and William Porter (2000).

Raising Cain: Protecting the Emotional Life of Boys, by Dan Kindlon, PhD and Michael Thompson, PhD. (Ballantine Books 1999).

Real Boys' Voices, by William Pollack and Todd Shuster (Random House 2000)

Lost Boys: Why Our Sons Turn Violent and How We Can Save Them, by James Garbarino (Free Press 1999).

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