

What is bullying?

Defining bullying: a new look at an old concept

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<http://www.education.unisa.edu.au/bullying/>

Over the last few years there has been a lot of interest in the problem of bullying, more especially in schools. This is clearly evident in a recent survey of bullying and responses to bullying by Peter Smith and others (1999) in over 21 countries in America, Europe, Africa, Asia and Australasia. In the country in which I live, Australia, two of the state governments, Queensland and Victoria, have recently required schools to have anti-bullying policies and to take appropriate action to stop it. Others will probably follow suit. In Australia, as elsewhere, bullying is being recognised as a major problem. Packages, strategies, programs, procedures are already in demand. This is fine. But unfortunately there has been little thoughtful discussion on what exactly constitutes bullying. It is assumed that we all know what it is and the only question is what actions we should take. The question of what constitutes bullying is not merely a philosophic question suitable for after-dinner conversation. It is a question of pressing practical importance. This paper directly tackles the issue.

Appealing to the widespread, deeply-seated dislike of bullies, Tattum and Tattum (1992) proposed the following definition. "Bullying is the wilful, conscious desire to hurt another and put him/her under stress" Thus bullying was conceived as a desire. Anybody who wants to hurt somebody - and knows it - is then, by definition, a bully. The inadequacy of this formulation becomes evident when you ask people whether they ever feel like hurting somebody. In fact, at some time or other, almost everybody admits that they do. And of course many of those harbouring ill-will do not express their desires in action. They commonly think better of it. They do not bully. Yet this definition is a popular one, endorsed for example, by the Scottish Council for Educational Research which recommended that teachers should see bullying in this way. It appeals to those who wish to take the moral high ground at the coming Armageddon.

As long as we are thinking about malign bullying, which is, for the most part, what concerns us as educators, we can reasonably think of "a wilful conscious desire to hurt another and put him/her under stress" as a necessary but not sufficient condition underlying bullying. Most recent writers have conceived bullying as a kind of behaviour characterised by intentionality and hurtfulness. The leading figure in the war against bullying, Dan Olweus (1993), defined bullying as "negative behaviour" by which he meant behaviour intended to inflict "injury or discomfort." Typically, we may add, such behaviour is repeated during successive encounters.

The means by which people bully have been frequently described and categorised. They include both physical and psychological means. The "injury or discomfort" may be delivered or induced directly by a blow, an insult or offensive gesture or indirectly through spreading rumours, social manipulation or exclusion.

In the listing of actions by which bullying may be carried out, there is a danger that the behaviour itself be seen as bullying, regardless of its motivation or the social context in which it occurs. This is not so. For example, a blow may be struck in self-defence; an infant may be excluded from an activity because it is dangerous for someone so young. We must remind ourselves that bullying is behaviour intended to hurt and is typically repeated over time.

For some this is where the story ends. We have defined bullying. Then someone asks an awkward question: "Is it bullying when two people of equal strength have the occasional fight or quarrel?" Maybe not. We may think that fighting and quarrelling are undesirable, especially in a school where we would like order to prevail. We may well think that the antagonists do sincerely want to hurt each other, but is this bullying? To accommodate this difficulty, Olweus suggested that bullying occurs only when there is an "imbalance of power." The aggressor or group of aggressors are more powerful in some way than the person they are targeting. This suggestion has been adopted by most (not all) subsequent writers. But it does raise the difficult question of how to assess differences in power that are relevant to bullying.

In fact, little attention has been given to this question. An imbalance is obvious enough when a bully towers over a cowering victim or a group of bullies abuse a solitary individual. But what we are inclined to call bullying often seems to occur between people for whom the nature or basis for the power differential is really obscure. If we listen carefully we may discover that one of them has the sharper tongue with a better command of language, argument or invective; that one of them can call upon his supporters (and the other knows it); and that one (maybe a Principal) has status and can "pull rank." We may discover hidden vulnerabilities in the victim: a phobia that can be exploited; hopelessness at games; a stammer under pressure; a father who is in prison; a precocious interest in poetry that can be laughed to scorn. We would like to recognise bullying at a glance. Sometimes we can't.

Somebody asks another question: What if the so-called victim deserves what he or she is getting? Perish the thought. But the questioner persists. What if it's a teacher and he's putting the kid through it because he's been playing up in class; or it's a prefect who has been giving a junior a blasting for spoiling somebody's games; or a big kid who has stood enough cheek from his little brother? Clearly here we have behaviour intended to put somebody less powerful under stress. Are there times when being forceful is not bullying?

The question deserves to be asked; the answer hard to give. What is seen as justified at one time and in one place may not be seen that way at another. For much of human history, slavery - perhaps the most unjustified of human bullying - prevailed unquestioned; in Victorian England senior boys in Boarding Schools were allocated fags to do with much as they pleased, and remnants of this antiquated system still persist in our "better" private schools. Teachers who caned were once simply doing their job; now he or she is a bully. We need to recognise that the criteria that determine how power and authority should be exercised are constantly changing. So too must be our conception of what is bullying.

There are two further considerations that may help us to identify bullying. One of these focuses on the feelings of the target of aggression. This is the sense of oppression that the victim of bullying invariably feels. In fact, one influential writer in this field, the English criminologist, David Farrington (1993) saw "oppression" as central to what bullying is. His definition: Bullying is "repeated oppression, psychological or physical, of a less powerful person by a more powerful person". What is happening is invariably seen by the victim as hard to bear as well as being unjust. It does not follow, of course, that the victim's judgement is sound. An unsympathetic critic may see some justification for the "oppression." The practical point is that one should always listen first to what the victim has to say. A sense of being oppressed is a necessary but not sufficient indicator of whether bullying is taking place.

The second consideration requires that we focus on the bully. Normally one would expect a sense of triumph or pleasure at achieving the desired effect of causing, in Olweus's terms, injury or discomfort. In the case of the malign bully, one would be surprised if the perpetrator is not pleased when he or she has reduced a victim to tears. But even here one has to be careful. The immediate gratification felt by a bully may give way, in time, to a sense of remorse.

We are now in a position to offer a tentative description of what constitutes bullying, more especially of the kind we might call malign.

Bullying involves a desire to hurt + hurtful action + a power imbalance + (typically) repetition + an unjust use of power + evident enjoyment by the aggressor and a sense of being oppressed on the part of the victim.

How can this formulation help? In the first place, it warns us against a too simplistic a view of what bullying is. We will be less inclined to think that to counter bullying we must believe in the perfectibility of the human race. In the light of the conspicuous failure of organised religion over thousands of years to root out the desire to hurt, this target may be rather ambitious. Secondly, it helps us to focus upon a sub-category of aggressive behaviour which almost everyone abhors: the unjust use of force by more powerful persons or groups. We should remind ourselves that what appears "justified" is constantly shifting. If we are to understand and help we need to be cautious in appraising just where differences in power lie. The imbalances may be subtle. Finally, it suggests that we should monitor the emotional reactions of the perpetrator and remember that they can change; and also tune in to the feelings of being oppressed that victims invariably feel, often, but not always, with strong justification.

References

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