

## **The ABCs of Bullying Prevention**

### **By Dr. Kenneth Shore**

### **Understanding the Bully**

Bullies typically are bigger and stronger than their classmates. They generally are of average intelligence, although their school performance frequently is below average. They often have a history of aggressive behavior dating back to early elementary school. Their quickness to anger might be fueled by their social misperceptions: they view the world as a threatening place and perceive hostility where none is present.

Bullies can be very reactive to social slights and lash out at classmates with little provocation, perhaps because they see no alternative to aggression. They often feel no remorse at hurting other children, and show them little sympathy.

Children bully for a variety of reasons. Some torment their classmates to gain a sense of power and control. Some bully in an effort to gain recognition and status from peers that they might not be able to get in other ways. Others bully to compensate for feelings of inadequacy. Still others target their classmates as a way of venting frustration with problems at home or problems in school (learning problems or peer rejection, for example). And some bully because they've been bullied themselves.

Bullies usually choose as targets peers who are weak, unpopular, and unlikely to resist. They zero in on children who stand out in some way, such as the teacher's pet, a child with a speech defect, a slow learner, a child with big ears, a child who wears the "wrong" clothes. or the child for whom English is a second language.

Children are not born bullies. Bullies are made -- which means they can be unmade. They often are taught from an early age that the way to get what they want is through force. They learn to respond to challenges through confrontation, and to express themselves with their fists rather than with words. As they get older, bullies are at risk for further acts of violence, including frequent fighting and carrying weapons.

A bully's education in aggression usually begins at home. Often, bullies come from households where there is little parental supervision and a lack of warmth and attention. Their parents might model aggressive behavior as a way of solving problems, and/or discipline through a combination of angry outbursts and corporal punishment. The message the children receive is that "might makes right." Those kind of parents might support their child's bullying behavior by their failure to disapprove of it, or their outright endorsement of it. In addition, they often fail to model non-violent ways of dealing with social problems, so that their children don't learn the social skills needed to resolve conflicts through cooperation.

Children also learn aggressive behavior from the media, notably from television. The amount of televised violence children today are exposed to is simply astounding. By the age of 14, a child will have seen as many as 11,000 murders on television. The average cartoon depicts 26 violent incidents. Children see television characters get their way,

settle disputes, and acquire things by using force without suffering any consequences. The lesson they learn is that aggression pays off. Research indicates that children who see violence frequently on television can become less sensitive to the pain and suffering of others and come to view aggression as an acceptable way of solving problems.

School bullies often face problems as adults. They are more likely than their peers to drop out of school, have difficulty holding jobs, have problems sustaining relationships, be abusive of their spouses, and have aggressive children. And they are more prone to criminal behavior. One study that followed individuals over a 22-year period found that children who were aggressive to their peers at age eight were five times more likely than their non-aggressive peers to have a criminal record (usually antisocial offenses) by the age of 30.

A particularly alarming pattern is that aggressive children often grow up to be harsh, punitive parents who raise children who become bullies themselves. In short, children of bullies often become bullies. The challenge for those working with aggressive children and their families is to try to disrupt that cycle of violence.