

Deficits as an Origin for Bullying

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A great deal of attention has been given to bullying in the past few decades and, at the same time, it appears the problem has not diminished but instead may be growing. Some estimates put the prevalence of bullying so common that it is a 'normative' life experience with estimates running as high as 70% to 80% of individuals experiencing bullying at some time in their lives. So perhaps it is time to pause and reflect upon whether all the work going into this problem is targeting the right issue.

This brief article will attempt to take a new look at the problem of bullying for parents--why it happens and what might be an effective deterrence to this persistent and damaging dynamic. The one aspect of bullying that will not be covered is how hurtful it can be. Most information on bullying covers this area very well, explaining the serious impacts it can have. However, not enough attention has been given to the cause of the problem, and if we misunderstand the nature of the problem then we will not know how to arrive at solutions that work.

Bullying is variously defined with terms such as: intimidation, aggression, force, threat, domination, coercion, and other types of abuse to gain the upper hand on another person or group of persons. While all of these issues are undesirable negative interactions, the real question is do we fully understand the problem--why it takes place, what is the goal and why it is so prevalent. With the answers to these important questions we are better prepared to know how it can be prevented. While the above definition of bullying has some validity, it may actually miss a key psychological issue. The abusive interactions and the damage they cause are easy to spot, but the 'why' is more complex and harder to immediately recognize.

A new definition of bullying will be proposed here - bullying is an array of negative and abusive interactions based upon a power deficit with both sender and receiver. Consider what this definition implies, the persona/ child who uses bullying actually is not superior in personal power but actually deficient in psychological intrapersonal power. And the bullied individual is also part of the dynamic and also has deficient personal power. But wait, isn't this blaming the victim? No, because it takes both sides of the interaction for harm to occur.

Using negative interactions against others is certainly not new. From the dawn of the human race this dynamic has been prevalent among individuals, among groups, among races and among nations. This dynamic is often observed in nature as well and the term "pecking order" comes from a similar interaction among chickens. However, humans are capable of a level of personal power that is unavailable to animals, and this can make all the difference when it comes to bullying. This is because for humans physical size or authority are not a higher level of supremacy than internal psychological

power. For example, the most influential humans throughout history have not been the kings, emperors or presidents as much as the individuals with amazing internal strength such as Gandhi, Mother Teresa, Martin Luther King, Jr., Joan of Arc and Jesus, to name just a few. These individuals did not have titles or power bestowed on them from others; their power came from an internal source.

Although there are somewhat different definitions of bullying, everyone can agree that it can cause significant harm and we want to take steps to prevent it. There are two important perspectives to understand bullying – the first is the person who bullies and the second is the person who is bullied. It is interesting to note that in some cases both sides of this problem can be found within the same individual at different times. For example, a child bullied by abusive parents may bully a younger sibling or a classmate in school. A teen bullied by upper classmen may bully younger children. Using negative force or intimidation over others is a learned behavior, and children learn by the modeling they experience. Often missing in the discussion of bullying is the fact that it is found throughout our society in areas that include: social, ethnic, religious, political, business, academia, neighborhoods, prisons, among genders, and much more. Bullying behavior can include face-to-face or cyber abuse, but the belief that bullying is a problem only in schools is incorrect. If we want to prevent bullying from being such a serious societal problem, then we must focus not only on schools but also on our societal institutions all the way from the school house on up to the White House. But preventing bullying can be done without fixing all aspects of society from the top down. It may actually need to be done from the ground up and one individual at a time.

THE PERSON WHO BULLIES

With the definition of bullying centering on a power deficit, we can better understand what is behind the person who uses bullying as a tactic. A person who bullies another person or group is more often than not: emotionally reactive, insecure, motivated by weakness and feels inadequate in having more appropriate ways to influence others. In a real sense, the individual coming from internal weakness believes the only way to level the playing field is to use force or intimidation to achieve success. People with strong internal personal power have no need to bully others, and they have the moral character to know it is unacceptable behavior.

THE PERSON WHO IS BULLIED

When a person experiences being bullied and feels victimized, this also constitutes a deficit of personal power. Other than physical abuse, threats and intimidation only work if such actions impact the other person and their sense of safety and adequacy. When a person experiences bullying behavior, it is possible to reframe the situation by seeing such behavior as statements of inadequacy on the part of the bully. A person who uses bullying invites the recipient to feel inadequate and powerless and thereby attempts to bring the other person down to their level of deficit personal

power. If the person does not feel diminished by the behavior, in a real way the harm in the negative interaction is prevented.

PREVENTING BULLYING

A variety of strategies have been used to prevent bullying. Anti-bullying approaches have included: 1) Just say no to bullying; 2) Awareness of the problem; 3) Promoting kindness rather than aggression; 4) Wearing anti-bullying wristbands; and 5) Anti-bullying training, among other approaches. While each of these have some merit as positive individual steps, unless the approach adequately addresses the problem of a power deficit on either end of the interaction it will not have optimal impact.

The best way for parents to prevent bullying is to build personal power on both the giving and receiving sides. It may sound counterintuitive to teach someone who misuses power how to be more powerful, but this actually goes right to the heart of the problem. A parent or child may not be able to stop someone from being a bully, but if it is unsuccessful and does not diminish the targeted person then harm is prevented.

Therefore, if the best intervention for bullying (and for success in life in general) is to build a person's personal psychological power, what is the best way to do this? There are many paths for parents that lead to personal power in their children and it does not require a specific 'anti-bullying personal power course.' Personal power may be learned through sports, success in school, martial arts, volunteer work, scouting, getting support and approval from others, wilderness training, expressive arts, social clubs, self-help guides and hundreds of other activities. Whatever builds personal power helps to prevent someone from using bullying as a strategy to get the power they lack, or prevent someone from being harmed by a bully. True personal power is not about size or aggression, it is about inner strength, compassion, empathy, connection with others and helping rather than hurting others, particularly those who are vulnerable. Teaching character development to children may be the very best anti-bullying strategy.

Most of this article has focused on a new way for parents to look at bullying rather than discussing a comprehensive list of prevention approaches. The reason for this is we must understand the real problem if we have any hope to come up with effective solutions. Bullying is not just an issue for children, it can impact an individual at any age. Building personal power in individuals helps prevent bullying on both ends of the problem and this can have a ripple effect on how much bullying children observe in others as they mature. There is far too much bullying being modeled to children at present and we need to give young people better models of power. If we do not, bullying will continue to be a method to gain power by individuals lacking true internal strength. It may be that the best method for parents to help their children and, at the same time, change our society in regard to bullying is to build personal power within individuals -- one child/teen/adult at a time.