

Bully-Proofing Won't Work Until We Give Kids More Freedom

Imagine if, at your workplace, you were constantly harassed, humiliated, and even physically attacked. You would probably dread going to work and call in sick often to avoid it. You may talk to your boss or someone in HR to see if the problem could be fixed. If it couldn't, you would quit. You may even file charges if you were physically harmed, or take out a restraining order against your perpetrators. You have recourse. You have options. You have choice.

Not like School Kids

Children who are bullied in school have very few choices and very little recourse. Required by law to attend an assigned public school, many children and their parents have minimal agency to withdraw from a bullying scenario. Some parents will look for alternative schooling options for their bullied children, like private schools, charter schools, online schools, or homeschooling. But for many families, these choices are not available or accessible.

In those cases, bullied children must endure daily battering that would be criminal if inflicted on adults. Is it any wonder that we have a rising suicide rate among children? In fact, according to the CDC, the suicide rate among 10- to 14-year-olds has doubled since 2007.

Wounded By School author Kirsten Olson refers to bullying as “an expression of the shadow side of schooling.” She writes:

If we create school systems in which compulsion, coercion, hierarchy, and fear of failure are central features of the academic experience, and essential to motivating and controlling students, then the energy from those negative experiences will seek expression.”

In other words, if people are placed in environments where they have little freedom and control, this can trigger bullying behaviors; and if those who are being bullied can't freely leave, then hostility may continue indefinitely.

As Boston College psychology professor Dr. Peter Gray writes:

Bullying occurs regularly when people who have no political power

and are ruled in top-down fashion by others are required by law or economic necessity to remain in that setting. It occurs regularly, for example, in prisons. Those who are bullied can't escape, and they have no legislative or judicial power to confront the bullies."

Bully-Proofing

As another school year approaches, bookstore and library shelves are filling with titles aimed at "bully-proofing" children. Articles and blog posts share strategies on how to help students who are victims of bullying. School administrators and teachers develop policies, plans, and professional development programs for dealing with bullying.

While well-intentioned, all of these efforts ignore the central problem: bullying exists due to a compulsory schooling environment that mandates attendance, eliminates freedom, and limits the ability to opt-out. Until that issue is addressed, no amount of reading, policymaking, teacher training, and "bully-proofing" is going to stop bullying from occurring.

The best way to avoid bullying in schools is to question compulsory attendance laws, expand education choice, and create learning environments that nurture childhood freedom and autonomy. After all, if we wouldn't tolerate bullies in our lives, why should we ever expect our children to?