

Chapter 24 – Natural Born Bullies

Table of Contents

Previous – Unschooling Resources

24

Natural Born Bullies

by Robin Grille

The media attention given recently to the phenomenon of bullying in schools, is truly a cause for celebration. Finally our world has begun to take seriously the plight of children: the most powerless sector of the community. Initiatives under way in schools are designed to intervene by identifying bullies and their victims, and then providing counseling and education in more effective social skills. Programs have been developed to teach school bullies alternative behaviors, impulse control, conflict resolution and negotiation skills. The victims of bullying are offered support, protection, and trained in assertiveness wherever practicable.

Though this allopathic approach may yield some benefits, the problem with it is that it's only a partial solution. If in our attempts to eliminate violence from schools, we narrow our focus to treating the bully, we might be presuming that he or she is the "bad child", sole originator of the violence. It is all too easy and very tempting to blame bullies for their bullying behavior. We single them out, brand them as "behavioral problem child", or perhaps attention deficit child. The odds are that someone in a laboratory somewhere is trying to isolate a "bullying" gene. There's even bound to be a pharmaceutical company searching for a biochemical cause of bullying: "wait till our shareholders hear we have developed a pacifying drug for bully-children!"

When we ask a child who is hurting to bear all of the responsibility for their aggressive behavior, we have in a way retaliated by bullying the bully. This in fact adds up to ignoring that a bully is in pain, they have been hurt in some way and are acting out their hurt on others. The truth is that violence does not sprout from within individuals, it is a symptom of families that are hurting, perhaps with members that are hurting each other.

If we believe that better social interaction skills can be learned, by implication we must also believe that violent tendencies are also learned. This will be irksome to those who cherish the idea of an "evil" nature that people are just born with. A prodigious number of studies, replicated worldwide, have shown that violence in the home (both physical and verbal) produces violent children. In Australian research, a link was found between family dysfunction and violent children (Rigby K, *Journal of Family Therapy*, May 1994). Few notions are so well supported by the research literature, yet it's surprising how little attention is given to the families of bullies.

Bullying is best understood as an adaptive behavior that makes sense within certain family environments. A study by Baldry A.C. and Farrington D.P. published in the *Journal of Legal and Criminological Psychology* (September 1998) examined 11-14 year old school children who reported being bullies and/or victims. Both types of children were found to come from homes where “authoritarian” styles of parenting were employed. In other words: “you’ll do as you’re told, or else, no questions asked!”. Authoritarian parenting is characterized by punitiveness, an immutable power imbalance which favors the parents, and an absence of explanation, negotiation, or consultation.

Social Learning Theory is a mainstream school of psychological thought which states that violent behavior is brought about through learning. Supported by an enormous body of research data, Social Learning advocates explain that children learn to be violent chiefly through imitation of violent role models. This means that parents who rely on corporal punishment or verbal abuse to “control” their kids are unwittingly acting as models for bullying behavior (Bandura 1973, Baron, 1977). Secondary sources of modeled violence include older siblings, media violence, peers and even school teachers. Spatz-Widom (1989) conducted an exhaustive analysis of research addressing whether violence is trans-generational. She found substantial support for the notion that violence is begotten by violence. Few things are so well agreed upon by psychologists across the board. This relationship holds true even for verbal violence, as researchers Vissing Y.M. *et al* (journal article in *Child Abuse and Neglect*, 1991) found. Their study revealed that children who had experienced higher levels of verbal aggression at home (being sworn at or insulted) exhibited higher rates of delinquency and interpersonal aggression.

The list goes on, *ad infinitum*, with studies such as: McCord’s (1979) study of 230 boys, which found that he was able to accurately predict criminal behavior based on violent upbringing in 3/4 of cases. Sheline *et al* (1994) found that elementary school boys’ “behavior problems” were consistently traceable to lack of parental affection, and to parental use of spanking for discipline. In a study of 570 German families, Muller *et al* (1995) found a direct path between harsh punishment and anti-social behavior in children.

Recently, psychologist Elizabeth Gershoff (2002) undertook the mammoth task of collecting all studies done in over 60 years to investigate the effects of corporal punishment – 88 studies in all. She only considered studies looking at ordinary smacking or spanking, and excluded any that looked at physically injurious or legally abusive punishment. The evidence she found was consistent across all studies, and overwhelming: even ordinary smacking tends to make children more aggressive. We can no longer pretend to ourselves that ordinary smacking is not a form of violence, since it can – and often does – lead to more aggressive attitudes in children.

It is not too difficult to understand why children who are punished physically can become bullies. As far back as 1977, research psychologists Walters and Grusec concluded: “that

physical punishment... leads to an increase in aggressive behavior, and that the mechanism for this increase is imitation.” The smacking or spanking parent is unwittingly acting as a role-model for aggressive behavior. The way this works was ingeniously demonstrated by a series of experiments reported in Bandura’s 1973 book *Aggression: A Social Learning Analysis*. These experiments graphically depicted the way children would imitate adults who acted violently toward toy dummies.

For role-modeled behavior to be efficiently transmitted, three main conditions must be met. Firstly, children are more likely to imitate role models that they look up to or love. That’s why parents are such powerful role models. Secondly, the role model’s actions are more likely to be imitated if they are seen to meet with success. In other words, the attitude that “might is right” is passed on when a spanking disciplinarian succeeds in changing a child’s behavior, and remains unchallenged. The third condition is that violence must be legitimized and sanctioned in order to be imitated. In other words, children more readily adopt violent attitudes if they have been made to believe that harsh punishment is “deserved”.

It’s been shown that violent children come from violent or neglectful homes. This matter has been put to rest. But only about half of abused children grow up to be abusive. Why? Individuals who remain convinced that verbal or physical assaults against them were “deserved” are significantly more likely to act out violently. This is also true for violence witnessed against others. Bandura (1973) refers to a study that found that children displayed much more imitation of violent behaviors depicted on video, if these behaviors were approved by an adult, less so if the adult was silent, and even less if the adult expressed disapproval of the video violence. Children who grow up believing that being hit is what they well-deserved, go on to be more accepting of and de-sensitized to violence in general. They are candidates for the ranks of bullies, victims, or both.

A side-effect of harsh punishment is that it de-sensitizes people to their pain, then also to the pain of others. This de-sensitization process is what facilitates the acting out of violence. The process of de-sensitization to violence begins when a child who, branded as “bad” or “naughty”, accepts the blame and the assault that comes with it. A “tough skin” grows over the wound, which obscures the depth of the pain that throbs beneath. The pain and betrayal felt is sealed off, minimized, trivialized, or denied. Deafness to one’s own pain entails indifference to the pain of others. Those whose anger boils over become bullies, those who are paralyzed with fear, the victims. Others hover in between, harboring a predilection to retributinal and “might is right” attitudes. The landscape is dotted with the punished and the beaten; who grow up to make light of it, or to stoically profess that, “it never did me any harm!”.

How grossly adults tend to dilute or whitewash any violence they suffered as children, is grimly illustrated by studies such as that of Berger et al (1988) and Knutson and Selner

(1994). Both studies found numerous respondents who reported having been punished in their childhood so brutally as to require hospitalization, but only 43% and 60% (respectively) of these considered themselves abused! By contrast, Hunter and Kilstrom (1979) found that people who were openly angry about any abuse they had suffered as children, were statistically less likely to transmit this abuse onto others. Beaten children who are at risk of becoming bullies or offenders can be helped once somebody can make it abundantly clear to them that spankings or thrashings are not just nor deserved.

A wholistic and therefore more effective approach to “treating” school bullies would be to compassionately examine the environment in which the violent responses were learned, and then to work cooperatively with family members to alter the dynamics of this environment. If violence is an adaptive behavior learned within a family system, it makes no sense to teach a bully not to be violent, only to send him or her back to the original system that they are powerless to change. It must be understood that bullying behavior is a reaction to powerlessness. To consider bullies as offenders is superficial, when in fact, they are victims. The fundamental way in which the family operates must change, through exposure to alternative means to authoritarian, punitive or “power-over” methods of child-control.

Systems-theory based family therapy models are non-blaming, they recognize and affirm that each family member is doing their best given the resources available to them. New options for more enhancing ways to interact can be taught, without finding fault in any individual. Why not have a policy that makes it standard procedure to invite parents or carers of school bullies to the school? The purpose would be to identify any areas where parents might need support through stressful situations, to train parents in assertive and non-authoritarian parenting methods, and to empower parents by including them cooperatively in programs to assist their children.

As long as any kind of violence is sanctioned in the home, there will be bullies. Bullies in schools, bullies in business, bullies in politics. There will also be victims. This is not a fact of life, but an artifact of history. Historians and anthropologists have only recently discovered that, up until very recently, and for most of human history, child-rearing has tended to be extremely violent (de Mause 1982 and 1988, Blaffer-Hrdy 2001, Boswell 1988). It is no wonder that violence persists in so many forms, across all age groups, and that most of us are capable of slipping and treating our children violently on occasions, even if we strive against it.

The good news is that the beating, spanking and verbal abuse of children is on its way out, as an overall world trend. So far, over ten countries have legislated against corporal punishment in the home, many more are in the process of doing so, and over 120 countries have banned it from their schools. A survey by Gelles & Straus (*Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, June 1987) found that although there still is an extremely high incidence of

violence against children in the USA, it had decreased from 1975 to 1985 by a factor of 47%. By millennium's end, the approval of any kind of corporal punishment by American parents had fallen to little more than half of respondents. Trends such as these are cause for optimism that bullying will become a rarer phenomenon. This progress will accelerate if we keep remembering that every bully we meet is someone who is being or has been bullied; if we endeavor to treat the system rather than the symptom.

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* For references, see: <http://goo.gl/an58H>

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Next – Section Five – Chapter 25 – “Childhood: The Unexplored Source of Knowledge” by Alice Miller