

STICKS & Stones

While we may be aware of the impact that bullying has on children, too often we ignore the scarred adults it leaves in its wake

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Bullying is generally seen as a childhood rite of passage, something most of us will go through at some stage in our development but from which we will usually emerge unscathed, or at least, a little bit tougher and a little more humbled. But what happens when this isn't the case? While school may seem a fleeting memory to some, for others, it is the catalyst for deep psychological wounds that refuse to heal, even decades on.

Research into bullying first began in the 1970s, and while there are no official statistics on the prevalence of bullying in schools, studies have suggested that more than half of all young people will experience some kind of peer victimisation in their lifetime. The UK's Department for Education defines bullying as behaviour by an individual or group, repeated over time, that intentionally hurts another individual or group, either physically or emotionally. Although bullying can take many forms, experiences tend to differ across genders. Numerous studies have shown that boys are more inclined to be involved in physical attacks while girls are more likely to be affected by emotional forms of bullying, such as verbal abuse and social exclusion.

While anyone can be a victim of bullying, some demographics are more prone to experience it than others. Girls,

ethnic minorities, LGBTQ+ pupils, and those with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) face a higher risk of being bullied by their peers. SEND pupils are twice as likely to be bullied than their non-SEND counterparts, and those with Autistic Spectrum Conditions (ASC) are at the highest risk out of everyone to be targeted by bullies.

Why do people bully?

The most predominant factor in why someone might be bullied is simply for just being 'different'. Dr Ellen deLara, an associate professor of social work at Syracuse University and author of *Bullying Scars: The Impact on Adult Life and Relationships*, explains that "being different in any way is the main reason that a child is selected for mistreatment. Adolescents prize conformity and therefore will bully someone who looks or behaves outside the norm." She suggests that bullying is used as a mechanism to put anyone who is deemed different "outside of the herd" in order to correct this discrepancy. Trivial perceived differences in someone's height, weight, appearance, hair colour, disposition, class or intelligence, could be the very incentive for subjecting them to peer-on-peer abuse.

Dr Sheri Bauman, a leading academic in bullying prevention and a professor of counselling at the University of

Arizona, believes that social status is at the core of most bullying.

"Bullies are trying to get or maintain status," she explains. "If they have it, they want to keep it; if they don't, they want to get it."

Dr Bauman says that most bullying peaks around early adolescence, just as children are moving on to secondary education.

"Bullying goes way up then because the new school is bigger and there's more competition," she says. "It makes sense if you think of the bully as

needing admiration, power and status. Bullying is a way of getting that."

Despite zero-tolerance policies in schools and the threat of punishment, bullying can seem impossible to contain for educators.

"For the bully, it's very rewarding,"

explains Dr Bauman. "Bullies get all these rewards for behaving badly, so it becomes very difficult to encourage them to change their behaviour."

When speaking to former bullies, Dr deLara also spotted another pattern.

"Most of them said they didn't think they were bullying," she says. "They were just teasing or fooling around and didn't think the other person was upset by it. It's not even a rationale. It's exactly how they think."

Long-term effects on victims

For the victims, the aftermath of being bullied as a child can linger far beyond the schoolyard. Research carried out by the University of Warwick shows that childhood bullying can 'cast a shadow over the whole life course, leading to serious illness, poor social relationships and problems holding down a regular job'. Further studies have

also shown that being a victim of bullying is associated with increased mental and physical health problems, along with lower academic attainment and income, even after accounting for other contributing factors such as family hardship.

Repeated exposure to abuse as a child can also change the brain. Verbal bullying, particularly in early adolescence, can damage or hinder development in key structures of the brain including areas that process emotions and control behaviour. This could partially explain why individuals who were bullied as children are more prone to experiencing long-term psychological conditions such as anxiety, depression and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

Adult Post-Bullying Syndrome

While conducting research for her book, Dr deLara interviewed more than 800 people about their experiences of bullying in their formative years. She discovered a trend in symptoms exhibited amongst those who'd been severely bullied as children that she refers to as 'Adult Post-Bullying Syndrome' »

“INDIVIDUALS WHO WERE BULLIED AS CHILDREN ARE MORE PRONE TO ANXIETY, DEPRESSION AND PTSD”





(APBS). Although some symptoms share similarities with cases of complex PTSD, the term 'Adult Post-Bullying Syndrome' encapsulates the unique set of psychological, emotional and social challenges that former victims of bullying continue to grapple with well into adulthood.

Whereas not everyone who is bullied as a child will experience trauma, many victims will display some, if not all, the signs of APBS. One of these symptoms is issues with self-esteem and shame.

"Children who are victims of bullying and harassment are made to feel ashamed of who they are," writes Dr. deLara. "They feel ashamed, hurt and confused when they are shunned by their peers. They feel ashamed that they are singled out for taunting, and they feel ashamed and angry that they cannot figure out how to make it stop."

Bullying can profoundly impact one's sense of self-worth and identity, leading to negative self-perceptions and diminished confidence.

Some may try to overcompensate for feelings of shame by becoming people pleasers, another symptom of APBS. Dr deLara believes that the driving force behind this behaviour is that "if you can figure out how to be everything and

do everything right, then nothing bad will happen to you, which of course, is impossible." Approval-seeking and trying to be perfect becomes a people pleaser's best form of protection from future criticism and harassment, but it only serves to further erode their sense of self and to be a passive participant in their interpersonal relationships.

For others, the shame that resides within them is expressed through feelings of anger, rage and revenge - another sign of APBS - and they may try to channel this aggression through revenge fantasies. This could manifest in a relentless drive to surpass those who bullied them and through constant monitoring of social media as a gauge to see whether they're doing 'better' than their former bullies. In extreme cases, this thirst for revenge can result in acts of violence such as school shootings.

Suffering from emotional problems and psychiatric disorders later in life are a key characteristic of APBS, particularly depression and anxiety. Another is a propensity towards substance misuse which may come in the form of food, alcohol or drugs. This is used as a maladaptive coping mechanism to alleviate emotional pain and distress, but can further exacerbate mental health problems as well as negatively impact relationships and employment prospects. Furthermore, adults with APBS also tend to have issues with body image, particularly those who were overweight as a child; a remnant carried over into adulthood from past ridicule and disparagement about their appearance.

The heinous treatment that victims of bullying have to suffer at the hands of their peers means that it can be very hard for them to trust others, especially those who resemble their former bullies in some way.

"Many people develop a prejudice based on the type of person who bullied them," says Dr deLara. "For example, sometimes people will say to me, 'I hate athletes', while others say that being bullied made them hate people in general."

This lack of trust in others can have a knock-on effect on a victim's ability to form and maintain healthy relationships later in life. Their fear of rejection, betrayal or abandonment learned early on in childhood can impede their ability to connect with others authentically, leading to social withdrawal and isolation. Even if they can establish connections with others, the effects of bullying can spill over into their adult relationships, contributing to difficulties in communication, intimacy and setting boundaries with their romantic partners,

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SAFEGUARDING CHILDREN FROM BULLYING

It can be incredibly hard as parents to have to witness your child being bullied, but it can be even harder to know exactly what to do to get them through it. Fortunately, there are some protective factors that we can put in place to insulate children from becoming damaged adults later on in life.

First and foremost is fostering a supportive family environment where open communication is encouraged so the child feels secure enough to disclose what is happening to them. Additionally, attending therapy or a bullying support group will help children practise their social skills within a safe space. Encouraging positive friendships is also important, as peer support can be a powerful protector against the negative impacts of bullying. Enrolling children in activities that give them a sense of purpose and where they can meet like-minded children can help to counter some of the rejection and exclusion they may face at school.

friends, family members and colleagues. Problems in relationships and trusting others are two more classic signs of APBS.

Post-traumatic growth

During her research, Dr deLara discovered an additional and surprising symptom of APBS.

"I didn't expect anybody to tell me that there would be anything positive [to come out of being bullied]," she says. "When I asked adolescents, they said 'absolutely not'. But when I talked to adults, 47% of them said that being bullied had had a positive effect on them."

These positive effects can manifest in various ways from an increased sense of empathy and an enhanced moral consciousness to more self-sufficiency and less dependence on others. It could also result in a stronger push towards goal attainment and success, as a way of proving themselves. This form of 'post-traumatic growth' arises from how individuals choose to respond and cope with their trauma, which may never have come to the fore if it hadn't been for being a victim of bullying. However, Dr deLara emphasises that although there may be positive outcomes for some, the negative effects associated with peer-on-peer abuse far outweigh the positives and should never be used as an excuse to endorse bullying.

Long-term effects on bullies

Surprisingly, it's not just the victims themselves who suffer because of bullying. Research has shown that those who were bullies in school are also more likely to be affected by lifelong problems. In 2019, the Scottish Centre for Youth and Criminal Justice published a report on bullying behaviours. It states that children who were perpetrators of bullying between the ages of seven and 12 were significantly more likely to be arrested by the age of 30. Moreover, the odds of frequent bullies having committed more than five crimes by the age of 26 was almost seven times more likely than those who didn't bully. Another report commissioned for NHS Scotland on addressing school violence and bullying found that young people who displayed bullying behaviours were at increased risk of depression and suicidal thoughts, as well as being more likely to drop out of school and be involved in criminal acts.

Just get over it'

If we know that there are such dire and pervasive consequences for everyone involved in bullying, why is it an area of research so often overlooked by academics?

MOVING BEYOND THE TRAUMA

While the impact of childhood bullying can be devastating, it is not inevitable. With the right support and interventions, victims of bullying can heal from the trauma of their past and go on to build fulfilling lives. Therapy can help to rebuild self-esteem, create a positive sense of identity, develop healthy coping mechanisms and cultivate better relationships.

It does this by challenging negative beliefs that may have been internalised from being bullied, as well as helping an individual to practise forgiveness, advocate for themselves and to assert healthy boundaries. Cognitive-behavioural therapy (CBT), trauma-informed therapy and eye movement desensitization and reprocessing (EMDR) therapy are all effective methods for exploring and processing past experiences of bullying. Seeking professional support can also help to treat any additional psychiatric disorders that may have developed as a result of being bullied, while simultaneously addressing the root cause of the trauma.

"It's a very difficult kind of research to do," explains Dr Bauman. "The gold standard is to study a group of kids and then follow them into adulthood. But it's very challenging because people move or die or decide they don't want to participate anymore. It's also very expensive and hard to get funding for these types of long-term, prospective studies."

Dr deLara also believes that the lack of research is fuelled by society's ignorance of how enduring the effects of childhood bullying can be.

"As a culture, we say, 'This is childhood, that's over, now you're an adult'," she says. "The minute you leave school, people think that's the end of that and you should be over it."

It's easy to see how this thought process has infiltrated our collective mind. Old adages such as 'Sticks and stones may break my bones but words shall never hurt me' and 'What doesn't kill you, makes you stronger' are drummed into us from an early age to bolster our resilience towards interpersonal cruelty. Although these proverbs are relatively harmless, they also serve to deflect and minimise the impact that words and negative treatment by our peers can have on us. Until, as a society, we start to take the devastating effects of childhood bullying more seriously, we will continue to see them play out in traumatised adults long after the echoes of the school bell have ceased. ■



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