

Bullying: A Slow Fuse to Childhood Rage

By Richard Lieberman

Another school shooting, another missed opportunity, and another community left to ponder what could have been done to prevent an adolescent boy from creating havoc and destruction in Santee, CA. The scenario has become all too familiar. A “normal” teen explodes into our consciousness by bringing a loaded pistol to school and opening fire on students and staff, leaving 2 dead and 13 wounded.

What leads a child to such rage that killing seems the only solution? How can we fail to see this rage building? In this case, as in so many others, we don't understand the depth or exact cause of this student's pain. Neither do we know for certain what combination of factors—family problems, peer pressure, loneliness, depression—will cause some children to explode and others not. We do know that in almost every instance cruelty served as the fuse.

Bullying is a serious problem in our schools. The behavior encompasses physical aggression, threats, teasing, and harassment. Although not new to childhood, it has grown in scope and severity in recent years. Today, bullying affects approximately 5 million elementary and junior high students a year. Nearly 300,000 high school students are physically attacked and 125,000 high school teachers are threatened each month.

As a school psychologist, I work with both bullies and victims. Some bullies have predatory instincts while other children bully in order to fit into the group. They pick on the most vulnerable kids whom they think either can't or won't retaliate. Children that are most resilient to bullying typically know how to walk away from a situation and when and where to get help. Both bullying and victim behaviors are learned through influences in the environment, e.g., home, school, peer groups, even the media. As such, they also can be unlearned or, better yet, prevented.

Schools have a primary responsibility in this regard. The U.S. Surgeon General's recent report on youth violence cites school environment as a leading contributor to determining possible violent behavior. Yes, parents are their children's predominant role model and teacher. Schools must also create a culture in which no form of bullying is acceptable and students are taught alternatives to aggressive, anti-social behavior and skills to cope with difficult situations. Equally important is to teach kids to seek help from a caring adult, no matter what the problem. Building this level of trust can be difficult, as recent events remind us. It is critical, though, not just to prevent a school shooting, but also youth suicide, delinquency, and the quiet misery of children who feel outcast or afraid.

Effective bullying prevention programs engage everyone: from parents to school bus drivers. These programs balance security measures and discipline with positive support, including resources for students who are at-risk of becoming a bully, a victim, or a victim-turned-aggressor. Creating this kind of support system takes a vigilant staff, with school psychologists and counselors who are trained to assess a student having trouble and then provide the necessary counseling and interventions.

As part of a team of specially trained school psychologists who assist in the aftermath of a large-scale tragedy, I think schools have become pretty adept at crisis response. Local school and community personnel did an excellent job handling the situation at Santana High, and within hours state and federal teams like ours were on the ground to provide back up.

Clearly, our focus on emergency response training, technical resources, and interagency coordination has paid off. We need this same level of commitment to make prevention and intervention—and compassion and caring—a regular part of school life. Not only should school “lockdowns” be obsolete; all kids should be able to go to school free of fear and believing in their value as member of that community. Congress can start by funding support services as part of current education reform. Our children deserve nothing less.

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