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Three Secrets About Bullies

When you mention the word bully, most people conjure up images of a big brute terrorizing everyone in the schoolyard. Although there may be a few such individuals out there who fit this stereotypical image, most bullies are far less obvious and much more complicated. Here are some often overlooked facts about bullies:

Fact #1: Good kids bully too

Not all bullies are sociopaths and delinquents. In fact, a good portion of the bullying that occurs takes place when otherwise good kids get drawn into a feud. They are not bullies by habit, but are referred to as situational bullies: they bully when it's convenient or when it serves their interests. Or they might engage in bullying behavior when they're upset with someone over some perceived insult or out of allegiances to a friend.

Making matters worse, numerous television shows portray relational aggression as both normal and enviable; the accepted way people exert influence over one another. Therefore the line separating normal bickering from bullying isn't always clear to kids. It's important for parents to recognize that ANY child can be a bully, including yours.

Fact #2: The problem of popular bullies

While some bullies do what they do out of a struggle to fit in, many bullies are quite popular, which only makes their cruelty more damaging to victims. It's one thing to be harassed by a brute that few people like. It's quite another to be degraded by someone who is seemingly held in favor and admiration by everyone else in the school.

Not only does the bully's social status make their taunting hurt more, but popular bullies tend to elicit the cooperation of others, often without even trying. If everyone knows that popular girl Christie really dislikes Rebecca, other kids in the school will follow along (even without being asked to) merely to align themselves with what's perceived a popular at the time.

Fact #3: It's always someone else who's the bully

If you were to walk into any classroom and say, "Raise your hand if you're a bully," I very much doubt any hands would go up. Yet statistically speaking, around 4 or 5 kids in that class would be actively bullying someone else. Why the discrepancy?

This disconnect is not so much about kids lying as it is the distorted way people look at their own aggressive actions versus those that come from others. If someone acts cruelly towards you, they're being mean and unreasonable and it's clearly bullying. When you act the same way towards others, it's because *you have a good reason to*. Maybe they're weird or naturally irritating, and thus "deserve it" or are "asking for it." Perhaps they resemble the stereotype of a person adults persecute and make fun of. We grown-ups are notorious for labeling others and then devilizing them in order to justify the horrible ways we treat them. Kids do the same thing with their peers, excusing the persecution of those who are different as something both normal and just; a defense of the "natural order" of things.

This is also what makes bullying so dangerous: no act of cruelty is beyond the scope of consideration when one is cloaked with self-righteous indignation. If the person you're tormenting is "bad," then that can make even the cruelest of actions "good," or so the logic goes. We adults need to do a better job of driving home the point that cruelty is cruelty, no matter what reasons you have or how much you think they may deserve it. That starts with living by this principle ourselves.