

Names *Can* Hurt You: De-Myth-tifying the Classroom Bully

Bullies are raised in the home, but their victims are too frequently created in the classroom. Learn how what you believe about bullies can hurt your students! Included: Ten myths about bullies, and the research that helped identify those myths!

Although no single causative factor has been identified, experts point to a number of factors common among children who exhibit violent behavior.

In "Why Kids Kill: Exploring the Causes and Possible Solutions," Sylvia Rimm points to unhealthy relationships within the family, discord and/or distrust between families and school personnel, and exposure to violent television, films, and games as some of the elements that seem to contribute to violent in-school behavior. Rimm, a clinical professor of psychiatry and pediatrics at Case Western Reserve University School of Medicine, also notes, however that although not every element of every problem is found in all violent children, one constant does stand out among the children she's worked with: "There was *always* a history of problems in peer relationships," Rimm said. "All of them [children who expressed anger violently] had been teased by others more than what is typical." All the violent children, in other words, had been the victims of bullies.

According to Dan Olweus, a psychology professor at Norway's University of Bergen and one of the world's leading experts on bullies and their victims, bullying is an accumulation of negative actions -- occurring repeatedly and over time -- directed toward one student by another student or students. Those negative actions, which can include threats, physical attacks, words, gestures, or social exclusion, occur in a context always characterized by an imbalance in strength between the bully and the victim.

Of course, the repercussions of bullying -- even when it doesn't escalate into deadly violence -- are rarely limited to the victims alone, Olweus says. Students in schools or classrooms with serious bullying problems report feeling less safe and less satisfied with school. Students in schools or classrooms in which bullying problems are ignored and aggressive behavior is not addressed are likely to become more aggressive and less tolerant as well. Bullying, Olweus points out, affects the social climate -- and learning environment -- of the entire classroom.

TEN MYTHS ABOUT BULLYING

If teachers are to successfully prevent or eliminate bullying in their classrooms, they need to understand the characteristics of bullies and their victims. According to Olweus, who has been studying those characteristics for 30 years, much of what we have always believed about bullying is wrong -- consequently many of our techniques for dealing with bullies and their victims have simply made the problem worse. Bullies are not, the research indicates, cowardly misfits with low self-esteem. Their victims are rarely chosen because of the color of their hair or skin or the shape of their glasses. And, perhaps most importantly, bullying is not a problem that will go away without adult intervention.

Following are ten myths about bullying that Olweus has identified through his research:

- 1. THE MYTH: Bullies suffer from insecurity and low self-esteem. They pick on others to make themselves feel more important.**
THE RESEARCH: Most bullies have average or above-average self-esteem. They "suffer" from aggressive temperaments, a lack of empathy, and poor parenting.
- 2. THE MYTH: Bullies are looking for attention. Ignore them and the bullying will stop.**
THE RESEARCH: Bullies are looking for control, and they rarely stop if their behavior is ignored. The level of bullying usually increases if the bullying is not addressed by adults.
- 3. THE MYTH: Boys will be boys.**
THE RESEARCH: Bullying is seldom outgrown; it's simply redirected. About 60 percent of boys identified as bullies in middle school commit at least one crime by the time they are 24.
- 4. THE MYTH: Kids can be cruel about differences.**
THE RESEARCH: Physical differences play only a very small role in bullying situations. Most victims are chosen because they are sensitive, anxious, and unable to retaliate.
- 5. THE MYTH: Victims of bullies need to learn to stand up for themselves and deal with the situation.**
THE RESEARCH: Victims of bullies are usually younger or physically weaker than their attackers. They also lack the social skills to develop supportive friendships. They cannot deal with the situation themselves.
- 6. THE MYTH: Large schools or classes are conducive to bullying.**
THE RESEARCH: No correlation has been established between class or school size and bullying. In fact, there is some evidence that bullying may be less prevalent in larger schools where potential victims have increased opportunities for finding supportive friends.
- 7. THE MYTH: Most bullying occurs off school grounds.**
THE RESEARCH: Although some bullying occurs outside of school or on the way to and from school, most occurs on school grounds: in classrooms, in hallways, and on playgrounds.
- 8. THE MYTH: Bullying affects only a small number of students.**
THE RESEARCH: At any given time, about 25 percent of U.S. students are the victims of bullies and about 20 percent are engaged in bullying behavior. The [National Association of School Psychologists](#) estimates that 160,000 children stay home from school every day because they are afraid of being bullied.
- 9. THE MYTH: Teachers know if bullying is a problem in their classes.**
THE RESEARCH: Bullying behavior usually takes place out of sight of teachers. Most victims are reluctant to report the bullying for fear of embarrassment or retaliation, and most bullies deny or justify their behavior.
- 10. THE MYTH: Victims of bullying need to follow the adage "Sticks and stones will break your bones, but names can never hurt you."**
THE RESEARCH: Victims of bullying often suffer lifelong problems with low self-esteem. They are prone to depression, suicide, and other mental health problems throughout their lives.

TEACHERS ARE A DECIDING FACTOR

Bullies, Olweus notes, are produced in the home, shaped by a combination of factors, including lack of parental warmth and attention, poor supervision, parental modeling of aggressive behavior, and an active and impulsive temperament on the part of the child. The *victims* of bullies, however, are most often created at school. "Teachers' attitudes, behaviors, and routines," Olweus said, "play a large role in the prevalence of bullying behavior." Bullying is a problem that schools can -- and must -- control.