

Youth Violence Prevention

Bullying

Yesterday's bullies were intimidating but rarely actually dangerous. Almost exclusively male, they called names and made threats, sometimes stole another student's lunch money or damaged property, but only infrequently resorted to physical violence.

Today's bullies are different. The more subtle ones—especially females—humiliate and manipulate, isolate and ostracize. The most worrisome bullies—primarily males—punch, strangle, bite, stab, poison, burn, and shoot their victims.

Yesterday's victims dealt with bullies largely by avoiding them. The strategy was that over time, bullies would get bored and find another target. Today's victims, like today's bullies, are different. In the most extreme cases, cornered victims fight back with firepower, killing their tormentors or committing suicide. In more than two-thirds of all school shootings since 1974, the attackers felt persecuted, bullied, or threatened. In over half the cases, revenge was the motivation.

To prevent bullying, schools must send a clear message that it's not accepted. They must take the threat of bullying seriously, discuss it everywhere—in class, in sports, in band, in school clubs—and use strong disciplinary action when warranted. They must ensure that there are easy ways to report bullying, encourage kids not to keep secrets, and be sensitive to the trauma of victims. Perhaps most importantly, teachers, school administrators, and parents must pay special attention to students who exhibit warning signs. Early warning signs include social withdrawal, excessive feelings of isolation and rejection, expression of violence in writings and drawings, drug and alcohol use, and affiliation with gangs. Other and more pronounced warning signs include continual aggressive behavior, setting fires, torturing animals, and constant, mean-spirited teasing of siblings.

For victims, the effects of bullying can be diminished interest in school, declining health, depression, and suicide. For bullies, the effects can be relationship problems throughout their lives and future criminal activity. It's in everybody's best interests—bullies as well as victims—that bullying end.



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