

BEST FRIENDS, WORST ENEMIES:
Community, Friendship, Social Power and Bullying in
Childhood and Adolescence

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I. Introduction: Looking at Childhood through the Lens of Bullying

- A. We are living in a time of heightened awareness of bullying
 - 1. The death of Phoebe Prince and other suicides reported in the media.
 - 2. The new bullying reporting law in Massachusetts
 - 3. The suicides of gay kids, the young man at Rutgers, the city councilor in Fort Worth Texas, Dan Savage's "It Gets Better" campaign, the NY Times cyber-bullying articles.
- B. The challenges of cyber-bullying and the helplessness of adults (and politicians)
- C. There are some scientific questions that have not been answered. Has bullying increased? What percentage of children has been cyber-bullied?
- D. Bullying is an unfortunate lens through which to view childhood. Schools are overwhelmingly places of friendship, altruism and generosity. While they are also fertile grounds for bullying because there are so many children there, it is a mistake to think that schools are "mean" places.

II. Why Do Children Come to School in the Morning?

- A. Description of children who have friends and those who do not.

III. Children Learn Things from One Another That They Cannot Learn from Adults (At Least Not in the Same Way)

- A. Children teach each other: 1) effective communication, 2) to modulate aggression, 3) sexual socialization, 4) moral values. They also give each other 5) a sense of self-worth.
- B. Friendships start early, as soon as children can crawl.
- C. Children who are friends teach one another mutuality and reciprocity.

IV. Friendship and Popularity

- A. There are two different things going on the lives of children at every moment: friendship and popularity.
- B. Children understand friendship and can define it: loyalty, caring, trust, a bond or "love," shared interests, fun, and "someone who likes the inside of you and doesn't care about the outside." Children are capable of fully realized friendships by fifth grade.

- C. Children struggle with the nature of popularity: being cool, the most friends (but not really friends), the food chain, the status ladder, the best athlete, “nice popular” and “mean popular.”
- D. Popularity is seen as early as Kindergarten. However, the “popularity wars” rage from fourth grade through ninth. Children (and parents) are often hurt and confused by popularity because it affects children so strongly.

V. Classification of Children in Elementary and Middle School

- A. The typical elementary school classroom breaks down as follows:
 1. Very popular (15%)
 2. Accepted (45%)
 3. Average or Unclassifiable (20%)
 4. Neglected or Overlooked (5%)
 5. Controversial (5%)
 6. Rejected (10%) (rejected-aggressive and rejected submissive)
- B. Eighty percent of children are friend-eligible and will experience normal social pain, but they are not usually at risk.
- C. Twenty percent of children struggle to find friendships. They are at increased risk for being isolated and bullied.

VI. The definition of bullying

- A. Intentional, chronic, repeated or overwhelming attacks on a child’s body, psyche or sexual identity.
- B. Eighty of American school children report that they have been teased or bullied in the previous month. Does teasing qualify as bullying?
- C. Who defines bullying? The victim? The parent? Teachers?
- D. Is bullying on the increase? Cyber-bullying and media attention.
- E. The nature of bullies and victims
- F. Protecting the meaning of the word “bullying” from overuse.

VII. If you think your child is isolated, friendless or being bullied

- A. Get information. You need to talk frankly with the teacher. She has important information about your child’s social functioning. Talk to friends who have observed your child in social situations.
- B. You may need to get your child into a social skills group or an outside-of-school group, i.e. church youth group, scouts or summer camp.
- C. Consider therapy if your child is withdrawn, depressed or angry.
- D. Create a multi-generational context in which your child can socialize safely.
- E. In serious cases of bullying, contact the school and continue to advocate until school administrators have addressed the issue.

VIII. If your child has friends or is popular

- A. Support your child's friendships, get to know his or her friends' parents, create a safe neighborhood for play. Get to know teenager's friends (buy pizza).
- B. If your child is popular, hold him or her to a high standard of moral leadership.
- C. Create a place for your child to play with friends.
- D. Model friendship.
- E. Don't "interview for pain."

IX. What Schools Can Do

- A. Schools ethos must take a stand against exclusion or bullying.
- B. Schools must have a clear code of conduct based on a few memorable words: respect, responsibility, honesty, compassion.
- C. Teachers need to have relationships with children that allow kids to seek help.
- D. Teachers must feel they are trained to handle bad dynamics or bullying.
- E. Teachers can serve as coach (not a critic) of a child with difficulty.
- F. School and parents must be a team (Concentric circles of community).

X. What works to help victims and break up bad groups?

- A. Cooperative learning, cooperative games
- B. Peer initiation, peer reinforcement and peer modeling
- C. Social skills interventions
- D. Parent involvement (circles of community)
- E. Super-ordinate goals. Community service, mutual dependence (common enemy, common mission)

XI. Create Community: Habits of the Heart

- A. Get to know other parents, both at school and in your neighborhoods.
- B. Model cooperation and friendship for children.
- C. Don't gossip about the social functioning of a class. Don't gossip about players and coaches on town teams.
- D. Be inclusive. Follow rules of kindness and inclusion for birthday parties and other social occasions. (example of Jewish day schools).
- E. Stay with it. America is the most individualistic nation on earth. Community does not always come easy for Americans.

Best Friends, Worst Enemies: Understanding the Social Lives of Children
Michael Thompson, Catherine O'Neill Grace and Larry Cohen (Ballantine Books, 2002).