

## Essay : Bullies and Bullying

Let me make the following assertion clear: I am identifying groups, not individuals. I have known considerate kids in every one of the categories below who treat everyone in ways that we can all appreciate and hope to emulate. Fortunately, they are not rare. But for every one of the best there are three or four that fall well short of the ideal. But it is not just one group that has issues.

Bullying in school is universal (at least if I can trust both individual stories and the stories shown in the media). Adults seem unable to do anything, even when they demand zero tolerance programs. I believe in part because too many of them seem to accept and indirectly encourage it. But it is our peers that cause so much damage.

What follows was part of an essay for school kids and was not specifically about gender incongruity. I saw the divisions in my school years, the years of my siblings, and even 30 years later in my daughter's schools. It is partly a popularity ranking but also an academic one. It is a discussion for school kids to understand their part in bullying and in some ways, to help prevent it. And for parents to recognize they seldom get the whole picture.

### **The Popular Kids:**

The most popular kids are usually the 'best looking', at least as determined by the students in the top half of those thought to be good looking. Those in the bottom half seldom have a voice in the matter. It is not just appearances that determine this group, but participation in school activities such as sports and school sanctioned groups. Occasionally it will include the smartest kids but rarely the top academic performers. The popular kids WILL usually be in the top 5% academically for a host of reasons but I consider family demands on academic performance to be the most important.

These are not usually thought of as being bullies, they do not need to bully to assert themselves higher on the social ladder. But often enough their attitudes can set the tone and opinions of those around them that do bully.

Kids in this group also face enormous social pressures: from families looking to show off their top-level children; families that derive some social standing from their children's accomplishments; teachers that derive social standing from having the popular kids in their classes; and from other kids in the group.

There is also the problem of these kids trying to live up to the expectations of their parents that are often unrealistic, and it leaves the kids, despite their success, believing they have failed. None of this excuse the bullying of others. Their bullying is seldom actual physical contact or specific words. Kids that sneer or look down upon others is a form of bullying. It intimidates, it denigrates, it demeans others. Someone that does not have the most current fashions, or the best social behavior are often targeted – opportunistically – with derision.

Kids in this group occasionally are ignorant of their own behavior, caught in their own situations, they reflect their parent's attitudes without thought or consideration. If you think others lack the appropriate social graces, or wear clothing that is "no better than Walmart", then you are part of the problem. Not everyone can afford the best clothes, not everyone has had the same opportunities in social situations, not everyone has a safe, stable, successful home front.

Rarely but not as infrequently as we might hope, there are popular kids that abuse their position actively, personally and with malicious intent.

Right now, most of the student body know who the bullies are amongst the popular kids. They will not tell adults who could do something because the top kids' popularity protects them from the predation of others and from actions from teachers. Teachers are not immune from social stratification in the school. If the popular kids like a teacher, that teacher derives social standing from their status. Those teachers often excuse and ignore when popular kids engage in the same behavior that they often quickly and strongly punish those lower on the ladder for engaging in. Administrators are likewise loath to take any action against the popular kids, often noting it is not just the kids, but their parent's social status that can make them endangered. For while teachers and administrators are often 'at the top' in a school, they are seldom in such a position outside the school.

*Recent large-scale UK research identified that 55% of lesbian, gay and bisexual (LGB) young people experience homophobic bullying in secondary schools and colleges, and that three in five pupils who experience this bullying say that teachers who witness it do not intervene (Guasp, 2012)<sup>1</sup>*

If we could have a perfectly anonymous poll about who the popular kids are and which are bullies, outsiders would probably be aghast. But it would surprise NO ONE within the school.

### **What can you do?**

Popular kids have enormous social capital within the school. They can stop a bully in their tracks. They can go to teachers and administrators and support anti-bullying efforts. They can ostracize those that bully from their social circles. Some do so. Most don't for many of the reasons noted above. It should not be left up to the students to do the job of the teachers and administrators (or parents), yet it should not be a responsibility abdicated to them. If you know your friends bully – tell them, it is unacceptable and add consequences to the assertion.

## **Tier 2**

These are the kids that are friends or group associates of the popular kids. Often, they consider themselves part of the popular kids because of their association with them, but they are the 'enforcers' of the popular kid's attitudes rather than being the source of those attitudes. These kids take the sneers and snobby looks and translate them into actual physical confrontations. They will come up to others and actively call out "lower caste" kid's appearances or characteristics as inappropriate. Participation in school activities with the popular kids is often sufficient for them to consider themselves at the top of the heap.

They are usually as untouchable as the popular kids because of their associations. I hate to note that it is these kids that corrupt the system in such a way that no one trusts it to protect them. Everyone sees their bullying behavior and the inaction of teachers and administrators to stop it. Further, even the popular kids will not stop them because they derive social status from the 'adoring tier' and to see their own behaviors enforced encourages more of it.

This is also the group where we find the best kids, those that are near the top in popularity, academics and who watch out for, or are friends with the targets of active bullies. They are often immune from attacks, but they can also be ignorant of them. Believing that others are like them, kind and compassionate, they often fail to see the marginal bullying behavior in others. They have social standing to mitigate bullying, but they cannot be everywhere all the time. They have their own social pressures from their

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<sup>1</sup> Sheffield Hallam University: [https://shura.shu.ac.uk/10145/1/Formby\\_-\\_Rotherham\\_final\\_report\\_2015.pdf](https://shura.shu.ac.uk/10145/1/Formby_-_Rotherham_final_report_2015.pdf)

peers and their parents. Parents and teachers that often engage in their own form of bullying against this group by noting they 'just don't quite measure up but if they could just put A LITTLE MORE EFFORT, they could be more....popular...smarter...'

Bullies will avoid active antagonism of others while in the presence of the tier two kid because the tier two kid is PERSONALLY popular. They do not derive their popularity from social status but because of their good personalities.

In the top half of the school, you will find the greatest divide between bully and non-bully in this group. Often the differences will be so stark as to stun.

Again, if we could have a perfectly anonymous poll, there would be overwhelming numbers for each side and few surprises on the bullying side.

### **What can you do?**

You have the greatest influence in the school, even greater in many regards than the popular kids or teachers because most of the student body looks up to you. Of course, that influence can be used well or poorly so it is up to you to choose. Do not be afraid to use your influence and social capital against bullies. And if you are one of those enforcers of the status ladder, stop. It does not improve your standing and it will only hurt you in the long run.

## **Middle Ground**

These are the kids that usually do not bully, nor are directly bullied. They lack the social standing to derive benefit from the top and are not so far out of alignment with the social standings as to face derision from others.

Their academic level keeps them from being the focus of teachers and administrators and parents are 'just happy they are succeeding'. They don't doom the academic curves, don't cause problems for teachers, and keep to themselves and often small social circles of like students.

Their social status likewise doesn't disrupt the upper tiers and doesn't offend the sensibilities sufficiently to cause others to denigrate them. Their small social circles tend to provide some insulation from the effects of any bullying.

You won't find many advocates for others in this group except for those within their own social groups. They don't attend the same classes, don't engage in school activities, and are all but invisible to the teachers and administrators. No one encourages them to be more or do better. Not even their parents. They simply get along and do what is required and don't disturb the peace, anyone's peace.

### **What can you do?**

There is little this group can do to change any dynamics except to be open to including others from lower groups to join in with their social circles. It will protect a few from overt bullying. But there will be too many, too diverse, to fit into those circles.

## **The Bottom Rungs**

The bottom of the social hierarchy, and often the bottom of the academic one also. Although, the truly academic bottom is full of the kids that have given up, who have been given up on – by teachers,

administrators, and parents – and those that have a difficult time in traditional academic settings. The bullies here are often the opportunistic bullies that harm others whenever they get a chance. Some, including myself, believe they are being harmed themselves and too often it is true. Others are just lashing out at available targets.

But the majority are the ‘othered’. Those that do not fit into the established societal roles that school settings seem to create. Up until recently, the gender incongruent often found themselves here often in spite of their academic ability or because it was compromised by their dysphoria and social status.

Where possible, many find a friend or couple that can provide some buffer from the worst of the harassment. But no one can avoid bullies ALL the time and they are caught alone by singular bullies or often the bully and friends. Picking on the smallest, the lone kid, is a stereotypical hallmark of the bully for a reason. It happens. A lot.

Teachers and administrators all but ignore this group’s picked on situations because they are ‘out of sight and out of mind’. They are not social kids, they are not the academic performers, they are the quiet, unassuming with their head down trying to just get through the day, kids and it is easy to miss them, and what is happening to them. But intervention here often backfires as bullies always blame their target for adult intervention against them.

### **What can you do?**

Keep parents and other adults informed about what is going on. Try and build a social circle. Both of which would already exist if they could easily. Both are difficult for those in this group, unless you want to give up and join those that have already done so. Resist giving up because things do change.

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Bullying from our peers prevents us from establishing the type of social interactions necessary for our teen years and adult relationships. Bullying from adults, implicitly or explicitly, causes us to fear adults and too often reject any adult authority. We have learned not to trust them. And finally, the words and deeds of parents, rejecting us (by rejecting ‘othered’), leaves us without help or support.

Bullying is near universal. It happens in every school, across geo and demographics. More so in some than in others. Where education has broken down, it happens to teachers almost as often as it does to students.

I dealt with it from five until fourteen in varying degrees and regularity. My secret was never a factor; I was ‘othered’ despite the lack of knowledge by others. It ended for me when I finally fought back at 15. I was scared stiff when I did that they would attack harder, but they backed off. Thankfully. It doesn’t always happen that way.