

Bullying: A Core Contemporary Childhood Concern

You can get bullied because you are weak or annoying or because you are different. Kids with big ears get bullied. Dorks get bullied. . . . Teacher's pet gets bullied. If you say the right answer in class too many times, you can get bullied.

(quoted in Guerra and others, 2011, p. 306)

bullying A situation in which one or more children (or adults) harass or target a specific child for systematic abuse.

bully-victims Exceptionally aggressive children (with externalizing disorders) who repeatedly bully and get victimized.

Children who are different can excel in the proving ground of life. This is not the case on the proving ground of the playground. As you just read, being different, weak, socially awkward, or even “too good” is a recipe for **bullying**—being teased, made fun of, and verbally or physically abused by one's peers.

As I implied earlier, bullying is “normal” as children jockey for power and status in the group. But the roughly 10 to 20 percent of children subject to chronic harassment fall into two categories. The first—the less common type—are **bully-victims**. These children are highly aggressive boys and girls who bully, get harassed, then bully again in an escalating cycle of pain (Deater-Deckard and others, 2010; Waasdorp and others, 2011). The classic victim, however, has internalizing issues (Crawford & Manassis, 2011). These children are anxious, shy, low on the social hierarchy, and unlikely to fight back (Cook and others, 2010; Degnan and others, 2010; Scholte and others, 2010; also, see my personal confession in the Experiencing the Lifespan box).

Home used to be a refuge for children harassed at school. No more! Facebook, cell phones, and the Internet have made bullying a 24/7 concern.

Experiencing the Lifespan: Middle-Aged Reflections on My Middle-Childhood Victimization

It was a hot August afternoon when the birthday present arrived. As usual, I was playing alone that day, maybe reading or engaging in a favorite pastime, fantasizing that I was a princess while sitting in a backyard tree. The gift, addressed to Janet Kaplan, was beautifully wrapped—huge but surprisingly light. This is amazing! I must be special! Someone had gone to such trouble for me! When I opened the first box, I saw another carefully wrapped box, and then another, smaller box, and yet another, smaller one inside. Finally, surrounded by ribbons and wrapping paper, I eagerly got to the last box and saw a tiny matchbox—which contained a small burnt match.

Around that time, the doorbell rang, and Cathy, then Ruth, then Carol, bounded up. “Your mother called to tell us she was giving you a surprise birthday party. We had to come over right away and be sure to wear our best dresses!” But their excitement turned to disgust when they learned that no party had been arranged. My ninth birthday was really in mid-September—more than a month away. It turned out that Nancy and Marion—the two most popular girls in class—had masterminded this relational aggression plot directed at me.

Why was I selected as the victim among the other third-grade girls? I had never hurt Nancy or Marion. In fact, in confessing their role, they admitted to some puzzlement: “We really don't dislike Janet at all.” Researching this

chapter has offered me insights into the reasons for this 60-year-old wound.

Although I did have friends, I was fairly low in the classroom hierarchy. Not only was I shy, but I was that unusual girl—a child who genuinely preferred to play alone. But most important, I was the perfect victim. I dislike competitive status situations. When taunted or teased, I don't fight back.

As an older woman, I still dislike status hierarchies and social snobberies. I'm not a group (or party) person. I prefer talking one-to-one. I am happy to spend hours alone. Today, I consider these attributes a plus (after all, having no problem sitting by myself for many thousands of hours was a prime skill that allowed me to write this text!), but they caused me anguish in middle childhood. In fact, when I'm in status-oriented peer situations even today—as a widowed older woman—I still find myself occasionally getting teased by the group!

(P.S. I can honestly tell you that what happened to me in third grade is irrelevant to my life. I can't help wondering, though. Suppose, as would be likely today, my classmates had been invited to my so-called birthday via Facebook: “Janet is having a party, and she is inviting X, Y, and Z.” Could being targeted through this humiliating, public venue have caused more enduring emotional scars?)