

The Many Faces of Bullies

Cross, Tracy L. (2001). The many faces of Bullies. *Gifted Child Today*, September 22, 2001. (This article was reprinted from LookSmart's FindArticles where you can search and read 3.5 million articles from over 700 publications. An abbreviated version of this article can be retrieved from http://www.accessmylibrary.com/coms2/summary_0286-27207177_ITM with instructions on how to access the full article.)

Gifted students today experience many disruptions in their lives. Some of these disruptions are relatively unique to them, for example, needing to hide how well one does in school as a means to fit into an anti-intellectual school environment (Coleman & Cross, 2001). Others are believed to be common to many students, such as facing bullies.

We have all seen bullies on television shows and can even name names of bullies from our childhood days. We tend to think of bullies (for the most part) as larger than average, dull, mean-spirited males who taunt and physically push around weaker boys. Within this stereotype, one experiences an ongoing, long-term tormented relationship with another. Ironically, a romantic notion is often maintained as well—"if he just knew me, he would treat me better" or "all he needs is for one person to stand up to him and he will back down."

While examples of this stereotypical bully do exist in real life, maintaining this 1950s Hollywood depiction provides a disservice to our gifted students. According to Webster's Dictionary (1979), a bully is "a person who hurts, frightens, threatens, or tyrannizes over those who are smaller or weaker" (p. 240). This is a convenient definition that supports the stereotypes propagated in films and television programs. If one focuses more on the outcome of the efforts of the bullies rather than the intentions, a much broader array of people qualify as bullies of gifted students.

Let me provide a slightly different definition of a bully. A bully is a person who uses any approach at his or her disposal including, but not limited to, intimidation (physical, emotional, verbal), positional authority, relational authority, or societal authority to create limiting effects on another's behaviors, thoughts, or feelings. With this definition, one can easily see how many different people can disrupt their lives. For example, bullies can now be recognized as coming in all sizes, shapes, and from various backgrounds. They are male and female, struggling and successful students, and representing all age groups. They are accomplished at being bullies and are unaware that they are bullies. The faces of bullies are as many as are the behaviors in which they engage to disrupt the lives of others.

My observation is that the operative list of bullies with whom gifted students actually deal includes parents and other relatives, teachers, coaches, administrators, counselors, librarians, strangers, and even other gifted students. A few common examples include school administrators' claims that all kids are gifted or that no kids are gifted, and then their denial of reasonable requests to accommodate the student's learning need; a physical education teacher's criticisms of a gifted student's lack of

interest in passion for, or success in athletic endeavors; a classroom teacher's discouragement of questions by gifted students or their desire to pursue their academic passions. This group of bullies' common bond is the effect of their behavior on the lives of gifted students. More specifically, the bullies disrupt the normal development of gifted students by creating a perceived threat in the mind of the gifted student. In its purest form, to bully is to control.

How does this play out in the lives of gifted students? Before I address this, let us remember that our children are growing up during a time when they perceive threats all around them. My generation was raised to fear nuclear war and the Red Menace. Occasional drills were held to "protect students from nuclear attack." While the drills provided an occasional reminder that some adults were worried, the machinery to create and support a high level of chronic worry in children did not exist then as it does today. Today, there are 200 television channels, multiple competing news outlets, the Internet, and newspapers that constantly bombard children with images of threats to their survival.

As I grew older, the threat of nuclear war faded. Today's youth receive messages 24 hours a day telling them that their schools are not safe, their homes are not safe, their communities are not safe, and, on the horizon, there are numerous countries led by crazed anti-American dictators determined to end life as we know it. Added to this mix are additional messages that gifted students receive that they are aberrant (Coleman & Cross, 1988). It is within this context that our gifted students understand bullies. Local circumstances that may reveal actual physical threats to their wellbeing must also be considered. For example, youth in certain settings may live among gun wielding gangs, while many do not. In essence, this phenomenon combines real and merely perceived threats to both one's physical and social safety at a time in history when media outlets suggest that no one is safe.

I would like to point out one more factor in this mixture: the effectiveness of variable reinforcement schedules on human behavior. Against the gray backdrop of violence, all it takes for people to affirm their fears are occasional acts of violence. The violence can even be half a world away and still reinforce perceptions. Given this historical context in which gifted students live, how can we help guide their social and emotional development as it pertains to dealing with bullies?

- Learn a broader definition of bullying behavior.
- Realize that bullying behavior can be both intentional and unintentional.
- Learn to recognize the different ways in which one can be bullied.
- Learn strategies for dealing with the bullying behaviors.
- Test perceptions—gifted students need to learn how to approach the perceived bully about the person's actual intentions. This is especially true when dealing with teachers and other school personnel.
- Use sounding boards—gifted students need to use others as sounding boards to help them test their perceptions.
- Self talk—gifted students need to engage in self talk about what the actual intention of the bullying behavior is.

- Counseling—gifted students need to create a fluid counseling relationship that can provide support and problem-solving opportunities for the student. It can also help by enlisting an adult as an advocate.

Armed with these skills, gifted students can reduce the impediments to their positive development. As the primary caretakers of students with gifts and talents, let us join forces to help these students reach their potential as people. *Gifted Child Today*

References:

© 2001 Prufrock Press in association with The Gale Group and LookSmart.

© 2001 Gale Group development, guidance and teaching. Waco, TX: Prufrock Press.

Coleman, L. J., & Cross. T. L. (1988). Is being gifted a social handicap? *Journal for the Education of the Gifted*, 11, 41–56.