Boys Don't Tell on Sugar-and-Spice-but-Not-So-Nice Girl Bullies

by Sabrina Brinson

Extensive attention has been put on same-gender bullying. Yet very little emphasis has been placed on an issue of growing concern: Girls who bully boys. This article reviews characteristics of bullying, highlights the issue of female bullies who target males, and discusses anti-bullying strategies and practices for home, school, and community settings. Also included were anecdotes from males who were targets of female bullies. In addition, to prevent bullying and other destructive behavior, a new intervention entitled “Moratherapy” is introduced.

Something has been bothering Collier for a while. Finally, you drag it out of him. A bully has been harassing him at school, big time! Calling him names and taking his lunch was bad enough, but now it is getting physical. Head down, hands in his pockets, barely muttering while he tells you about it. She is shoving him into walls, pushing him down, and throwing fast, hard one-two punches left and right. Okay, at least now you know what the problem is. Hey, wait a minute, did Collier say she? Thinking about it you breathe a sigh of relief. He said it was a girl, so how bad can it really be?

In this article, we will define bullying and review the various characteristics of it. Furthermore, the issue of girls who bully boys will be spotlighted. There will also be a discussion about anti-bullying strategies and practices that can be implemented in home, school, and community settings.

Bullying

What is bullying? Bullying is a multifaceted form of abuse. Dan Olweus (1993a), a leading expert about bullying, defined it as negative behavior meant to cause pain or discomfort. Tatum and Tatum (1992) classified bullying as a deliberate, conscious desire to hurt someone else or put him/her under stress. Limber and Nation (1998) state that bullying among children is understood as repeated, negative acts committed by one or more children against another.

Direct physical and verbal acts of bullying may include hitting, kicking, teasing, or taunting. Bullying is also demonstrated through indirect actions like manipulating friendships or purposely excluding other children from activities. According to the National Resource Center for Safe Schools, 30% of American children are regularly involved in bullying as bullies and/or targets and approximately 15% are severely traumatized or distressed as a result of encounters with bullies (1999). Not only does bullying harm both its intended targets and the perpetrators, it also may affect the climate of schools and, indirectly, the ability of all students to learn to the best of their abilities. Furthermore, the connection between bullying and later delinquent and criminal behavior cannot be ignored (Limber & Nation, 1998).

Girls Bullying Boys

Bullying, commonly thought to be a problem for boys, is just as prevalent among girls. When girl bullies are discussed, it is in reference to girls bullying other girls. Hence, there is information about the aversive impact girl bullies have on their girl targets. Trees are falling for a new spate of books about mean girls who are middle-school aged and who instigate whole systems to make other girls feel horrible (Riley, 2002).

Despite the growing attention given to girl bullies, one of the primary concerns has been overlooked. To be exact, it is the issue of girls who bully boys. As a result, discussions about girls bullying boys are practically nonexistent, which makes it a triple threat. First, boys have to endure the torture of girl bullies. Second, the lack of discussion about it gives female bullies the green light to bully boys even more. Third, the lack of discussion sends boys a clear message: girls hurting boys is acceptable, and not important enough to obliterate. As a result, boys tend to endure the torture of girl bullies in silence, which can lead to tragedy.

Girls can be as physically nasty as any male, sometimes even more so, said a classmate of a boy who committed suicide apparently because he was being bullied. Police said a teenage girl was being investigated for harassing a 14-year-old who shot himself after leaving a suicide note that said he was being picked on (Tutton, n.d.).

When does the message begin that boys are expected to tolerate pain? In general, it starts when an X and a Y chromosome unite and a boy is born. Think about this: How many times have you said the names, “Crybaby, Wimp, Punk” or something similar when you saw two boys eight or older fighting and one of them was crying? Innocent? Fair enough. How many times have you at least thought those names, even if it was a fleeting thought? Sadly, more people would have to plead guilty this time. Even though they knew better, there were still times when those very same labels popped into their minds. Are you still innocent? Applause, applause. What came to mouth or mind when you saw two kids eight or older fighting and the one winning was a girl and the one wailing loudly was a boy? The truly innocent just dwindled, considerably. Why? Because males, also known as the “stronger sex,” are supposed to
tolerate pain, no matter how damaging or crippling it is to their development. Plus, the "stronger sex" is not supposed to hurt females. Unfortunately, these declarations do not go unnoticed by girl bullies who use them to their advantage. But strong does not mean invincible or impenetrable.

**What Actually Happens When Girls Bully Boys?**

Informal interviews were conducted with adults in Atlanta, Georgia, reflecting on bullying experiences involving girl-on-boy bullying:

Jay, a 22-year-old construction worker still remembers his painful encounter with a girl named "Lucille," who was part of a group of girl bullies. He was a nine-year-old fourth grader in an after-school program when "Lucille" and the other girl bullies ganged up on the boys and kicked them in their groins. Jay remembers feeling humiliated and embarrassed, but he did not tell because he thought he would get in trouble. Later, his brother told the staff members what happened.

Brandon, a 43-year-old postal employee recalls his worst experience with a girl bully. He was five years old and had just entered the first grade. He said "Susan" spit on her own desk and ordered him to clean it off. He did not tell because she told him that she would say he did it and pointed out that no one in his right mind would believe that she had spit on her own desk. Brandon said he was shocked because he had led a pretty sheltered life before going to school.

Davis, a 43-year-old electrical utility supervisor has not forgotten his long-term negative interactions with "Andrea," the worst bully in the eleventh grade. He was 17 years old when she forced him to carry her books all the time and clean out her school locker upon command. She also verbally abused him constantly by calling him names like "stupid." Davis recalls being scared and feeling incompetent. But, he said he was afraid to tell on her because she was well known in the community. She was the daughter of a minister, and the minister happened to be the best friend of their school’s principal.

Terrence, a 53-year-old service employer of the Department of Defense thinks back to his dealings with a girl bully. He was a nine-year-old fifth grader when he came face to face with "The Notorious Betty Lou," but not for long, because she promptly knocked him down and snatched his Converse All Stars tennis shoes off his feet. To add insult to injury, she threw them on top of the school’s office building. Terrence did tell. He told his friends, his teacher, and the school’s custodian, whom his teacher asked to retrieve the shoes for him. Later, Terrence told another friend "Abigail," who then beat up "The Notorious Betty Lou" for abusing him. Even still, Terrence said he felt like a “punk” and remembers feeling vulnerable.

It is important to point out that the men who provided these real-life accounts have lasting memories of female bullies. They are all adults now, but each of them still remembers the names of the girls who bullied them and vivid details of the aversive encounters. Therefore, the notion that cross-gender bullying is harmless when males are the targets seems to be false. Also, female bullying should be contained to prevent boy targets from adopting the philosophy of “bully or be bullied.” That is, aggressive behavior will be more widespread if boys choose to retaliate either personally or indirectly through someone else, like “Terrence” did when his female friend beat up the bully who targeted him. Furthermore, girl bullies who are unaccountable for their actions may go on to be involved in more violence.

**Anti-Bullying Practices**

Foremost, there has to be a paradigm shift away from thinking that female bullying of males is irrelevant, and the following messages should be conveyed: Girls do bully boys. Girls hurting boys should never be taken lightly. The impact of girls bullying boys can be very damaging to boys physically, emotionally, and socially. Therefore, a gender-neutral, zero-tolerance philosophy about bullying should be established, especially in schools. Hess (1998) made the following recommendation: To keep children from being victimized at school, we need to promote the idea that any form of aggression by any student—regardless of gender or social status—is unacceptable.

**Anti-Bullying Programs**

Readily available are effective anti-bullying programs that can be adopted by schools. The first and most widely known program to decrease bullying among school children was launched by Dan Olweus in Norway and Sweden in the early 1980’s. His Intervention Model incorporated involvement at three levels. First, school-wide interventions included surveys of bullying at schools, increased supervision, school wide assemblies, and teacher training to heighten awareness about bullying. Second, classroom-level interventions included classroom rules against bullying, regular class meetings to discuss bullying at school, and meetings with all parents. Third, individual-level interventions involved discussions with students identified as bullies and targets of bullies. The program was very effective in reducing bullying and other antisocial behavior among students in primary and middle schools. Within two years of
implementation, both boys and girls reported that bullying had decreased by half. Also, the results got better the longer the program was implemented (Olweus, 1993b).

Bibliotherapy
Bibliotherapy is a creative tool that can be used to help children resolve issues related to bullying. Pardeck and Pardeck (1990) defined bibliotherapy as a vehicle for helping children "...cognitively restructure a developmental problem" (p. 229). Ouzts (1991) stated it simply as "therapy through books" (p. 206). Also known as bibliocounseling or developmental bibliotherapy, bibliotherapy has been explained as a technique by which individuals undergoing anxiety, stress, or maladjustment identify with characters in books who have similar problems, thereby helping them to gain insight about solutions (Afolayan, 1992).

Bibliotherapy can help children with bullying issues, conflict resolution, and personal development of positive self-attributes. "Using developmentally appropriate books helps children identify and express their fears and feelings" (Catron & Allen, 2003, p. 287). Books also expose children to identifiable characters and proactive problem-solving models. Brinson reported that children all over the world are introduced to appealing tales they treasure all through adulthood. They usually model primary attractions such as main characters or significant themes (1997). Moreover, this specific use of reading gives children a number of ongoing opportunities to be active participants in the process of resolving issues in a proactive manner.

Stories about bullying can reveal how individuals feel when they are mistreated. For instance, in "Just a Bully," the target of a bully becomes frustrated, nervous, and anxious as a result of his encounters with a school bully: On school project day, the bully took my project away from me. I asked for it back, but he just laughed at me. So I tried to pull it out of his hands. He wouldn't let go and my project broke. "I'll get you later," he said. I was nervous all day. Finally the bell rang. Sure enough, he was waiting for me by the bus. I was real scared. (Mayer & Mayer, 1999, pp. 13-15)

"Just a Bully" also gives bullies hard looks at their actions, which may help them realize just how inappropriate and hurtful they are towards others:

Because that kid started to pick on me. On the school bus he would sit behind me and pull my fur or steal my hat and not give it back. He would try to trip me when I walked down the hall. In the auditorium he would shoot me with rubber bands. He would call me names and stick out his tongue at me. (Mayer & Mayer, 1999, pp. 6-8)

Books can also counter bullying by encouraging children to engage in amiable relationships and treat others well. "Acts of kindness shape compassionate spirits in young children. Heartprints by P. K. Hallinan (1999) is a beautiful story that demonstrates consideration of others" (Brinson, 2002, p. 4). Bibliotherapy can be helpful in ameliorating bullying and related conflicts. However, it should not be viewed as a panacea. Furthermore, it should never be used as a single intervention. It is also important to note that it may not be effective if children do not identify with the characters in the books used. Plus, when used by teachers, it is suggested that they inform parents, administrators, and counselors of their intent to use books to help children (Sridhar & Vaughn, 2000).

Moratherapy
Headlined in the news: Authorities investigated a videotaped hazing in which high school girls were beaten and sprayed with paint, feces, and garbage as others, some holding beer cups, cheered. The incident resulted in five girls being hospitalized for their injuries that ranged from a broken ankle to a gash requiring ten stitches (Fox News, 2003). The growing number of incidents like this makes it of the utmost importance to ensure children have the moral fiber needed for good citizenship and productive contributions to society. Therefore, all children can benefit from moratherapy.

Moratherapy is a term I define as a vehicle to facilitate an individual’s understanding of the essence of high-quality verbal and physical moral behavior. Progress in moratherapy occurs on a continuum that ascends upwards to advanced moral behavior. Also, moratherapy assimilates active participation on two levels. The institute-level requires institutes to adopt philosophies of goodwill and ethical behavior towards all individuals. Furthermore, methods should be in place to personify positive principles at this level. On the individual-level, a person has to engage in the process of developing sound morals to govern one's perceptions, feelings, choices, and actions towards self and others.

Individuals can transcend immoral, unethical, hurtful behavior towards self and others, competently cope, and ultimately engage in advanced moral behavior through four stages during which they connect, observe, process, and evaluate (COPE). First, connect with individuals who govern themselves with high-quality moral protocol. Second, observe high-quality moral conduct in action in homes, schools, and communities at large. Third, process the significance of attaining high-quality morals. Fourth, evaluate your own moral behavior on an on-going basis and conduct yourself accordingly via self-reflections and best practices of benevolence towards others.
It is essential to give children ongoing opportunities to process the importance of acquiring high-quality morals. Thus, morotherapy should be integrated with a variety of activities designed to immerse children in thought-provoking situations. For example, therapeutic games, like The Talking, Feeling, and Doing Game created by Richard A. Gardner in 1975, let children think about realistic situations, make choices, and express their emotions about the decisions made. Other helpful activities reported by Brinson (2000) include the following: Children’s Journals can be helpful in the process from beginning to end whereby, over time, the children will have a collection of work that reflects their own thoughts, feelings, and experiences. HOT SPOTS let participants explore emotions and discuss a variety of appropriate options as specific dilemmas are presented. Round Robin Discussions revolve around designated topics that give each participant a chance to verbalize his or her view.

It is important to encourage children to give generously of their time and efforts, by initiating and participating in selfless projects that help others. What better way than to expose them to the considerate deeds of other children who make a positive difference by giving their time, expertise, talents, and helpfulness. For example, when Marshall Levit was a 14-year-old Eagle Scout, he transformed a large vacant lot into an organic garden to grow produce to feed people who were homeless, hungry, and indigent. Volunteers from the community helped him create vegetable and fruit beds on the vacant lot which he dubbed the Garden of Eatin’. Marshall still tends to the garden and his work has generated thousands of servings of fresh produce for the past eight years that is given to a food pantry in Texas (Good News Samaritans, n.d.).

Children should come to know just how essential honesty is to morality. It is also helpful to stress the significance of big and small random acts of kindness (doing things for others just for the sake of doing them), which is evidence of strong moral fiber. To be precise, the ultimate goal of morotherapy is to equip children with the knowledge, the insight, and the critical thinking skills needed to make good decisions, all of the time, and think outside of themselves. And of course, good decisions and considerate thoughts of others are the greatest deterrents of bullying.

**Implications for Homes, Schools, and Communities**

- Be aware of the turmoil boys may experience if girls bully them
- Realize boys might be reluctant to notify anyone if girls bully them
- Create a variety of open, supportive ways that encourage boys to tell if they are targets of girl bullies
- Resist the urge to overlook their concerns or take them lightly when boys do talk about being bullied by girls
- Help children develop strategies to prevent being bullied without their becoming bullies
- Help children develop the sound coping skills needed to resolve their bullying experiences
- Try to ensure that all children have opportunities to internalize the moral conduct needed for good decision-making and amiable interactions with others
- Model good choices and cooperative interactions on a daily basis
- Realize that violent crimes by girls (including bullying) are on the rise and must be diminished
- Deliver clear messages of zero tolerance for bullying and act accordingly, regardless of gender

To conclude, it is vital to ameliorate the effects of bullying to cultivate children’s healthy cognitive, emotional, and social development. “Continual emotional distress can create deficits in a child’s intellectual abilities, crippling the capacity to learn” (Goleman, 1995, p. 27). We have presented an overview of girls bullying boys and noted the need to increase information in the knowledge base about girls who persecute boys. Also observed was the need for global changes in attitudes towards this issue. Therefore, when two kids are fighting, remember this: the one on the bottom wants to see you. However, if the one on the bottom happens to be a boy being pummeled by a girl, he does not want to see you laughing hysterically, glaring at him with reproach, or admonishing him to “get up and be a man.” These are some of the reasons why a lot of boys don’t tell on girl bullies.

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