



Commissioner's Column

Bullies Driven by Power, Not Fear

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The origin of the word 'bully' most likely comes from the old Dutch word 'boele,' which, ironically in today's world, means "lover" or "intimate friend." There is little indication, as with many words, how the definition took a complete 180-degree turn to the negative. However, most instances of the word in older writing was meant more as a descriptive (as in "bully pulpit" or "bully policy"), denoting a forceful or heartfelt intent.

Its current use as a label is fairly modern, beginning sometime in the early 1950s or thereabouts, when schools were becoming more aware of the societal changes occurring in America. Individuals who torment the weak have been around for millennia, but it has only been in the past 50 to 60 years when society as a whole has sat up and paid attention to the negative impact.

As it stands now, since the bully as an individual has always existed, expecting things to change quickly because it is getting more attention is unlikely. However, this does not mean anyone should just sit back and allow a bullying personality to rule. Whatever changes may take place with regard to bullies will evolve slowly like all societal change. Unfortunately, bullies are likely to always be with us.

An all-too-common public perception of bullying that has evolved over the past decade suggests bullies act merely to cover their own fears. They may indeed be afraid, but accepting this explanation as valid reasoning makes bullies sound like victims of their own fears. And worse, it makes the rest of us think we are supposed to feel sorry for them, not holding them responsible for their abusive behavior.

The issue is not whether bullies are afraid. Bullies generally bully other people to feel powerful and exert that power without fear of retribution. When they intimidate, threaten or hurt someone else, then they feel bigger, more in control and dominate over those they are bullying. The key is the feeling of power.

Another point of view claims children today are raised to be soft, compliant and pleasant instead of assertive, courageous and strong. The theory goes on to say that parents too often try to make life smooth and painless for their children, thus preventing them from developing the abilities needed to deal with conflict, creating a smorgasbord of targets for bullies.

Regardless of which theory you subscribe to, there's an underlying issue to consider. Bullying is not always physical, although it still shoves, pushes and punches in non-subtle ways. Bullying today is quite often social, like spreading rumors and lies which can be as hurtful as a punch in the arm or a shove on the stairs.

Some research shows that 85 percent of all school-based bullying takes place in front of other kids and bystanders, who seldom intervene. Perhaps, to some that lends credence to the theory children are raised to be passive today, but that research demonstrates that most bullying would not occur if it weren't for the public display of power the bullies want others to witness.

We often see or hear examples of school bullies who are themselves bullied at home where their will, wants and desires are overridden and trampled. Those behaviors learned in the home, often influence bullies as they override and trample others. Unfortunately, we also see how they continue this pattern into adulthood.

Yes, we all know an adult bully or two; the arrogance they display once they learn how their childhood-bully behavior can be carried into the adult world where they act the same. Some even excel in their fields or at least appear to. Most that we see are rather pathetic, friendless, avoided and socially ostracized. We also see that they are rarely confronted as they should be. Occasionally, and more often than we'd like to see, the adult bully ascends to positions of formal leadership. Did someone fail to stand up to them earlier in life?

There are few easy answers to the bullying problem, but there's one thing for sure. Bullying has become a national issue with more focused attention focused. This time the problem has more widespread public and emotional tentacles touching the national consciousness. As with all societal issues, awareness of what valid steps can or might be taken is the first legitimate step for meaningful change. 🍷