

## It's Time for Adults to Stop Bullying Kids and Each Other

Larry Magid March 27, 2013

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We hear a lot about kids bullying\* other kids and it is indeed a problem. But what about adults bullying other adults, or adults bullying kids?

True, bullying is a problem among youth. The National Center for Education Statistics reported that in 2009, 28 percent of 12 through 18 year old kids were "bullied by traditional means at school" while six percent were "bullied by electronic means anywhere." There are of course other studies with other statistics, but just about all agree that it's a problem that affects a significant minority -- but not most -- of tweens and teens.

But it's also a problem for a significant percentage of adults and there are, sadly, cases of adults bullying children.

### Adult-on-Adult Bullying

A 2010 study commissioned by the Workplace Bullying Institute and conducted by Zogby International found that more than a third (35 percent) "have experienced bullying firsthand." Other surveys differ but it's pretty clear that millions of adults have experienced verbal abuse, offensive conduct and sabotage of their work, according to the Institute.

There is also plenty of bullying within families and couples. According to the National Domestic Violence Hotline, a 2006 Harris poll, found that "approximately 33 million or 15 percent of all U.S. adults, admit that they were a victim of domestic violence." Among all adults, 39 percent said they had experienced some type of abuse such as:

Called bad names (31 percent)

Pushing, slapping, choking or hitting (21 percent)

Public humiliation (19 percent )

Keeping away from friends or family (13 percent)

Threatening your family (10 percent)

Forcing you to have sexual intercourse without consent (9 percent)

Source: Harris Interactive: Over Thirty Million Adults Claim to be Victims of Domestic Violence

## Military bullying

Bullying is also a problem in the military. Dr. Rene Robichaux, the Army's Social Work program manager was quoted by Army News Service that "hazing often occurs in 'elite' military units, and that much of it is psychological and directed at newcomers." That article also pointed out that "Bullies can also be found higher up in the ranks. Although leaders are supposed to look out for the welfare of their Soldiers, they are sometimes the ones who do the bullying." The armed services are actively engaged in anti-bullying campaigns.

## Police Harassment

Police harassment is often a form of bullying and it can be adult-to-adult or adult-to-child. In 2010, according to the Cato Institute's National Police Misconduct Reporting Project, there were 3,814 unique reports of police misconduct involving 4,966 sworn law enforcement officers. Of these, 25 percent involved excessive force and 10.4 percent were sexual misconduct. It's important to note that fewer than one percent of police officers (992 for each 100,000 officers) were involved in this misconduct. It's anecdotal and it doesn't always constitute bullying, but I've heard many reports of teens -- including my own son -- being harassed or teased by police officers.

## Politicians & pundits too

And don't forget the bullies you see on TV, whether they be politicians making derogatory comments about their opponents, pundits making mean or caustic comments, or adults bullying each other in sitcoms and other shows. I expect politicians to conduct vigorous campaigns but why can't they agree not to lie or degrade their opponents. For good and bad, public figures are role models and some are modeling bad behavior.

## Adults bullying children

Have you ever been out in public -- say at a grocery store or restaurant -- and seen an adult being abusive to a child? I've seen parents yell at kids for no apparent reason. I've seen parents swat kids and I've seen plenty of cases where parents and other adults were just rude to kids. I experienced it myself when I was in school. I had a gym teacher who regularly harassed and belittled me and other kids who he thought were too slow, too fat or too gay. If you don't believe me, buy a copy of Warren's Words: Smart Commentary on Social Justice. It was written by my elementary, middle school and high school friend and schoolmate Warren Blumenfeld, who documented some of this from his perspective as a gay teenager who -- at the time -- hadn't yet come out.

In a paper, Teachers Who Bully Students: A Hidden Trauma, Stuart Twemlow and colleagues found that 70.4 percent of teachers asked said that they knew of "isolated cases" of teachers bullying students. 17.6 percent said it happened frequently and 40.2 percent admitted to having bullied a student at least once. In fairness, this was a very small study with only 116 responses from teachers from seven urban U.S. elementary schools. I wouldn't generalize this data to apply to all teachers, but even if the percentages turn out to be much lower, it's still a cause for concern.

### \*Definition of bullying

There are lots of ways to define bullying and not all experts agree with this definition, but the closest one that we have to an "official" definition comes from the Olweus Bullying Prevent Program that defines bullying as "aggressive behavior that is intentional and that involves an imbalance of power. Most often, it is repeated over time."

Nancy Willard, founder of EmbraceCivility.org, defines student bullying as "hurtful act or acts that have caused severe distress, and are pervasive or persistent, and have caused physical harm to the student or his or her property, or significant interference with the students' educational opportunities."