

LittleAbout

Playground harassment is serious abuse, say experts

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It's more than just child's play when kids get teased, called names, and pushed around by other children. A recent [University of Illinois](#) study says bullying can leave children anxious and depressed, sometimes to the point of suicidal thoughts.

Adult intervention at the first sign of bullying is a must, say child psychologists. But some of the clues aren't obvious.

BULLYING'S MULTIPLE GUISES

The start of [the new school](#) year is supposed to be exciting—unless you're a kid terrorized by a bully.

Eighth-grader Peter Devine understands the fear and isolation of being bullied. Last year, seven boys attacked him as he was leaving school. "If you're not in a group, you're kind of in trouble," says Peter. "For a month afterward, I was scared to ride my bike to school or back from school."

Bullying isn't just about physical violence. A recent University of Illinois study suggests name-calling, offensive gestures, and even exclusion from group play or friendship circles, can cause lasting damage, anxiety, social withdrawal, and depression.

Peter felt the emotional effects most acutely just after the attack. "I was kind of dazed for a while after, and I couldn't concentrate on my homework," he says.

Child psychologist Dori Winchell, PhD says some victims of [bullying](#) might even consider the ultimate escape—suicide. "They suffer psychological difficulties probably for the rest of their lives, at some level, if they don't get help," says Winchell. "Their self-esteem suffers, their confidence, how they view themselves. The victim can then turn into a bully."

Depression is a common reaction to bullying. "Within depression you have suicide, massive anxiety, sleeping problems, eating problems, relationship problems," Winchell explains.

ABUSED ABUSER

It's generally believed that [children](#) who bully are acting out because they're suffering too, trapped by a much larger bully. "Bullies aren't born, they're made," Winchell says. "I think 9 out of 10 times, when you have a bullying child, you have a bullying parent."

She says bullying exists because bullying adults and kids have learned no other way to solve problems than intimidation and abuse, as documented in a [University of Southern California](#) study that finds violence witnessed by children is linked to aggressive behavior. "That child has been victimized by a teacher, older siblings, or someone else from whom that child has learned that behavior," says Winchell.

While bullying is most frequent among boys, it occurs between girls, too. "Females do bullying in the sense of exclusionary bullying; they don't invite, they're not nice," she says. "Females are as aggressive as males, and they can be just as dysfunctional."

INTERVENTION AND HEALING

School authorities have the power to reverse bullying behavior, say experts. When students at seven elementary Arizona schools, in a program called [PeaceBuilders](#), were taught to praise others and to seek responsible, mature contacts as friends, the students became more sensitive and cooperative.

Winchell says adults must emphasize cooperation more among young people, rather than competition.

Short children, parents should note, are more likely to be bullied, a British hospital found.

Bullying peaks in sixth grade (US system), violence experts find, when bullies score high popularity, in part from their victimization, according to an Illinois middle school survey.

Parents should be on the watch for any signs of a child's victimization, says Winchell, who is based in San Diego: "Are there any bruises? Is the child not having lunch? Is the child missing things like money or trinkets they take to school, or starting to have psychosomatic illnesses like a stomach ache or a headache before they get to school, indicating they don't want to go to school?"

"Zero tolerance" should be the policy toward bullying, Winchell believes.

A parent should direct a child to a mental [health](#) professional experienced in such matters. Says Winchell, "The parent has to get involved and school has to get involved—something in the system is allowing this to keep happening."

Bullies need help too. "[Those] who pick on someone weaker are the most insecure. They have the most fragile egos."

But a Finnish study found that it is difficult to stifle patterns of abuse—on both sides. Victimization at age 8 was associated with victimization 8 years later, the study found, and bullying at age 8 was associated with bullying at age 16.

Peter's bruises have healed since the attack, but his emotional injuries, like those of so many bully victims, are easing but persist. But he's determined to take back his power. "Some things just happen and sometimes you have to overcome those," he says.