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SUSANNE WEDLICH

LITTLE PESTS

Bullies are school kids who make life hell for other kids using physical or psychological aggression. Developmental psychologist Dr. Mechthild Schäfer has conducted several studies that explain important characteristics and mechanisms of mobbing at schools and demonstrate what is typical for perpetrators and victims. She also tackles the question as to whether or not they remain in these roles throughout their schooldays.

“This is where life gets serious,” is what many primary schoolchildren feel on their first day of school. For some, however, it is the beginning of a martyrdom that has nothing to do with pressure to perform or bad grades. It is because their classmates make life hell for them. This covers a gamut of verbal attacks and humiliation, as well as social out-casting and even physical attacks on the victim. Such mobbing frequently falls under the blanket name of bullying, an easy word for “tyrannizing” or “harassment” – but, in fact, it goes far beyond that. In Germany, as in other countries, mobbing among schoolchildren is an important issue for society and educational policy, because it can have catastrophic consequences for the psychological health and for the personal and educational development of those concerned. Not infrequently, the victims grow lonely and drop behind in their grades.

Scientifically, this phenomenon is defined as targeted, systematic and repeated harassment by physically and psychologically stronger pupils against physically and psychologically weaker pupils. Children who come across as defenseless and as an “easy target” are isolated from the rest of the class and attacked. This does not include one-off fights or altercations between two pupils of equal strength; rather it is a systematic attack on “easy prey”. This often pays off for the little bullies, for most pupils side with the perpetrator, or keep out of it. In most cases, the outsiders are in fact the biggest group. Yet, as in so many other situations, silence is assent. Bullying can only take root where the behavior of the perpetrator is accepted as justified, tolerated, or at least not opposed.

Bullying is always a group phenomenon and, in schools, the whole class is usually involved. "Nine out of ten pupils in a class where bullying takes place are involved in the process," says Dr. Mechthild Schäfer of the Institute of Pedagogical Psychology and Developmental Psychology of LMU Munich. "And not only as perpetrators and victims, but also as their supporters." This latter category can be further divided into several roles. The "assistant", for example, urges the perpetrator on or becomes aggressive as well, while the so-called amplifier "merely" looks on in amusement or laughs along. Only the "defender" stands up for the victim. Contrary to long-standing assumption, however, new victims seldom recruit themselves into this last group, Schäfer has shown.

Yet, defenders definitely belong – at least from the beginning of secondary school – to a certain "camp": this is because friendships tend most often to form only between children with aggressive tendencies or between those without. In class, this separates out two populations, one of which flocks around the bully. This child typically enjoys great influence in class. This makes it very difficult for the community of schoolchildren to go against the bully without the assistance of adults. Yet adults frequently misjudge the problem, or react too slowly. What this calls for is determined resistance. "On the one hand, children and adolescents have to be protected against aggression," Mechthild Schäfer asserts. "On the other hand, they should not become accustomed to an environment in which only the aggressive prevail – where they are tolerated."

PERSONAL STATUS SHAPES BEHAVIOR

The psychologist has performed cross-sectional studies of school classes over many years, and has uncovered important characteristics and mechanisms of the phenomenon. In one study, for example, she analyzed the behavior of more than a hundred pupils from four sixth-grade classes at two secondary schools (German Hauptschule). The children were asked to assess their own behavior and the roles of their classmates. One thing that emerged is that personal status is an important indicator for the behavior of the children. In short: someone who is not so well accepted in class tends not to side with an attacked pupil. After all, children of poor social status are predestined for the role of victim themselves.

"It was striking that the majority of defenders and outsiders were girls," reports Mechthild Schäfer. "In fact, not one schoolgirl was nominated for an aggressive role by classmates. Yet this could be put down to younger children, in particular, not always recognizing more 'feminine' tactics such as indirect or psychological forms of aggression." Of the 30 pupils whose classmates identified them as perpetrators, assistants or amplifiers, only six saw themselves in a pro-bullying role. Most identified themselves as outsiders – or even as defenders or victims.

Victims, in stark contrast, were identified unanimously: about every tenth child was identified as a victim by his or her classmates and also saw himself or herself in that role. As



Source: Haak & Nakat

much as the self-perception of supposed victims and perpetrators may differ, bullies and their targets have one thing in common: both types are very unpopular in class. What is unique to perpetrators, however, is that they are influential – and that their rejection lessens with increasing age. “That is another reason why the class can hardly solve the problem on its own,” Mechthild Schäfer states. “Perpetrators do not readily give up their influence. In most cases, their strong position even gives them the power to define the social norms in class. Only adults can counteract that.”

In light of the extraordinary position of power that bullies assume, the only strategies that make sense are those that weaken the social status of the perpetrator. In other words, only if bullies lose influence will the assistants and amplifiers be less inclined to associate with them – and the main perpetrators will be left without supporters. “Conversely, the behavior of defenders will be reinforced,” says Mechthild Schäfer. “It is just as important for the major group of outsiders to learn that getting involved in critical situations helps everyone at large.” If the social norms in the class are successfully improved, then, while the victim will become no more popular, his or her life at school will become considerably easier and more secure.

Such measures naturally take hold best when introduced as early on as possible. It can never be too early, since bullying already occurs at primary schools. While dyadic friendships still largely make up the social microstructure of these young pupils, the children look strongly for symmetry in them, and quickly end such contact again if the friendship develops unfavorably for them. Mechthild Schäfer and her team have also shown that even primary schoolchildren are capable of those complex interactions that mobbing requires, and thus are also capable of assuming the typical roles. Except, bullies at this tender age rarely concentrate on a single or a few victims. “The strong social pressure from classmates generally also prevents individual children from being attacked over prolonged periods,” the pedagogue explains.

BULLIES ACT STRATEGICALLY

It is noteworthy that bullies in this age group are still rather unpopular; even significantly less popular than their victims. Accordingly, one sees an entirely different type of perpetrator in the first two grades: Bullies among abecedarians are characterized by physical aggression, and are rather underdeveloped in their social skills. A look at the higher

grades then reveals a dramatic change in this respect: Bullies in the third and fourth grades increasingly apply psychological forms of aggression and show above-average social skills – which translates to a new quality and vitality of bullying. Only then are the perpetrators able to manipulate their environment, and even the social norms, for their purposes. After all, the systematic attacks against the victim have to remain hidden from teachers and minders. The actual audience is the class, which the bully expects at least to allow the behavior, if not accept it as justified. This demands a strategic approach from the bullies. They must not only act cleverly, they must also choose suitable times and places for their attacks on the victim. The method must be subtle and effective, while the group of followers needs organizing.

New findings show that these skills are not gained from out of the blue. When one observes the position aggressive children assume in the network of their class in the first two grades of primary school, one can make predictions as to their aggressive behavior two years later. Thus, they practice early what they shall perfect later on. “It is an almost Machiavellian approach,” Mechthild Schäfer explains. “The perpetrators must be capable of both aggressive attacks and social empathy.” Some of the little bullies can already exhibit perfect social skills – and at the same time come down on their victims with considerable brutality. This combination has proven to be a particularly advantageous method of gaining dominance and status in groups. As age increases, the raw violence is replaced by social manipulation. The perpetrators then act subtly, and employ means of verbal aggression such as degradation, spreading of rumors or social out-casting of the victim.

Adults must therefore pay close attention if they are to catch mobbing among schoolchildren in time. They must also avoid becoming an instrument of the perpetrator’s intentions. All the more so for teachers of the first few grades, who are placed in an important role, as a study directed by Mechthild Schäfer has shown. The researchers discovered significant differences between classes in the first and second years of school, for example. “This suggests that good class management at the beginning of the school period increases the chances of a harmonious class environment. Once again, this finding punctuates the fact that the entire class community must invoke sensible prevention.”

Yet it is not always possible to prevent bullying at primary schools. Mechthild Schäfer explored the question of whether the behavior and the roles of young children could predict whether they would later become bullies or victims. To do this, she surveyed children in a primary school, and again years later after they had moved on to a higher school. It turned out that the victims of bullies at primary school are not necessarily forced into this role again later on. “Overall, it can be said that being a victim in one of the first grades is no risk factor for assuming a victim role later,” Mechthild Schäfer reports. “We found only very few stable victims.”

Bullies, on the other hand, often remain true to their role. One can say, for example: here a perpetrator, everywhere a perpetrator. Bullies at school frequently also behave aggressively at after-school care clubs, for example – and thus in a different social context. Starting from third grade, however, there is a stronger tendency towards: once a perpetrator, always a perpetrator. This probably comes from aggressive behavior being part of the socialization and personality of the perpetrator. Furthermore, mobbing becomes more attractive to bullies over time: while they were still downright unpopular in the first few grades, they gain ever more acceptance as they progress to higher schools. Victims, on the other hand, become ever more unpopular. This is despite the fact that the pupils in higher grades are clearly aware of how hurtful even mean words or rumors can be for those concerned.

HIERARCHICAL GROUP STRUCTURES START TO FORM

By this time, the other roles will have also emerged and become set. This is because children only develop the ability to form more complex social networks towards the end of primary school, in place of the symmetric dyadic friendships that had prevailed up until then. The first hierarchical group structures that are typical for higher school grades then start to form. This makes things easier for bullies: suitable victims are “there for the picking”, among the unpopular pupils at the bottom of the pecking order. These children cannot expect much support, are easily isolated and are thus quickly pushed into a stable victim role. Victims of low status in the class hierarchy create an additional psychological advantage for perpetrators: classmates do not consider the bully’s behavior so very unusual. As a result, they often find it easier to accept even the bully’s worst attacks than the victim’s helpless attempts at retaliation. This situation is typical not only for school classes, but is also seen in other stable social groups with a clear hierarchy and relatively little supervision. This is especially so in closed systems in which the victims cannot escape their tormentors. Mobbing occurs frequently in military units and prisons, for example, as a systematic abuse of power.

Generally, an aggressive individual can exercise dominance in a hierarchical structure more easily because people with low status are visible and easily isolatable. For the victims, this often means they have to suffer the consequences of mobbing for the rest of their lives. Former victims report, for example, long-term effects such as haunting memories and even suicidal thoughts. “Former victims frequently have a lower self esteem, and feel emotionally abandoned,” reports Mechthild Schäfer, who carried out the survey. “The general rule is: the longer the mobbing continues, the more severe the consequences for the former victim.” Even decades after the actual experiences, many former victims report of difficulty associating with others – especially those of their own age: and even the nature of partnerships is apparently affected: many former mobbing victims are in relationships where they

hold a lower opinion of themselves and their partners than do adults who did not suffer mobbing at school. These subjects of the study found it difficult to approach others. Even though they desired emotionally close relationships, their lack of trust in others and fear of injury stood in their way. For the researchers, this comes as no surprise. "After all, children at school age develop self esteem through their social interactions," says Mechthild Schäfer. "A lack of acceptance and constant rejection from classmates naturally has a detrimental effect on that." A particular problem is that, the longer the mobbing continues, the more victims regard themselves as responsible. "There is something wrong with me," they think. They do not get the chance to understand that they have become, above all, a part of a group process in which they were the easiest prey, and which got completely out of control. Many class members who join in with mobbing have nothing at all against the victim. They are only playing along with something that everyone else does, and so feel only little personal responsibility.

Bullying at school is therefore a problem with enormous social relevance and long-term effects, and must be combated from as early on as possible. "Aggressive behavior must be countered with pedagogical judgment," stresses Mechthild Schäfer. "Adults must consistently oppose the children's attempts to gain social dominance through systematic aggression. On the other hand, positive social behavior should be just as consistently reinforced by appraisal. Ultimately, everything depends on the environment: Bullies and other children alike receive a decisive signaling effect from the reactions of classmates, teachers, minders and parents."

PD Dr. Mechthild Schäfer has been Privatdozentin at the Department of Psychology of LMU Munich since 2002. She has dealt intensively with the issue of bullying in many studies over the past few years.

www.psy.lmu.de/mobbing/mechthild_schaefer
schaefer@edupsy.uni-muenchen.de

