What Adults Can Do to Stop Hurtful Preschool Behavior Before It Becomes a Pattern of Bullying

by Betsy Evans

What does young children’s bullying behavior look like and how does it get started? What is the role of peer influence on the proliferation of bullying episodes? These are two of the questions we’ll examine in this article, as bullying among young children becomes a growing concern.

Bullying in Preschool?

Bullying behavior across all age groups is a pattern of verbal or physical intimidation towards someone with less social or physical power. Bullying can exist when a power gap between children is not recognized and resolved with adult support. A hurtful preschool behavior can become a pattern of bullying only when it is repeated, intense, and targeted. Consequently any typical, aggressive preschool behavior in this targeted form is potentially the beginning of a pattern of bullying, but only if adults allow it to continue. Keep in mind as we consider this topic that bullying is a set of actions or behaviors. It is not a permanent condition; it is not a person. Merely labeling children ‘bullies’ and responding with punishment does not foster healthy social-emotional growth in young children.

Let’s consider these two preschool scenarios:

Scenario 1:

In the Block Area two four-year-old boys are building a road while a three year old is playing with a basket of small cars. One of the older boys, Ben, pushes the three year old and turns to his friend who is watching, and they laugh. “Baby!” they say together to the three year old who begins to cry. An adult comes over: “Come on now, boys. Let’s all be friends together to the three year old who begins to cry. An adult comes over: “Come on now, boys. Let’s all be friends. The boys resume their play. When the adult moves away, the three year old is pushed again, and again the boys laugh. Could this be the beginning of a pattern of bullying?

Scenario 2:

Four girls are playing at the water table. Raven, the taller of the four, begins to splash the two girls across the table. “Stop!” they tell her. “Stupid butthead,” she responds, “we don’t want you here!” and reaches over and takes their cups. They leave. An adult is watching and makes no comment. Raven says to the remaining girl, “Ha, ha, now we can play alone. You’re my friend, right? Not them.” The girl looks worried, but stays, doing as she’s directed by Raven. Could this be the beginning of a pattern of bullying?

In the first scenario above, Ben succeeds in getting the special attention of a friend by being physical with a younger child and name-calling. In the second scenario, Raven succeeds at getting two children to leave the water table in an attempt to make the remaining girl her ‘friend.’ No adult has intervened in a way that will effectively change either of these behaviors.

Neither of these situations is bullying, yet. However, if adults do not respond adequately to these situations, by facilitating a negotiation amongst all the children — those who are bullying and those who are being bullied — the bullying will become a social strategy.

Bullying in older children can result from immature social-emotional awareness and relationship skills. If hurtful behaviors continue to succeed as a behavior pattern that fulfills a child’s needs for attention and/or control, the bullying will continue. Physical and verbal intimidations can become a repeated way of garnering ‘friends,’ however falsely, at the expense of those who are younger, weaker, or different in some way. But most importantly, intimidation of certain children becomes a pattern solely because adults do not intervene to set limits or to problem solve in a way that facilitates relationship skills. The circle of this aggressive influence widens as the peers who are either attracted to the bullying or who are intimidated by it become caught in its destructive, toxic pattern.
**Focusing the Conversation about Bullying and Young Children**

Bullying is a set of behaviors, seen in all age groups, that is currently receiving a great deal of attention in communities everywhere — and rightly so. What is the focus of the concern? There have been many well-publicized incidents of severe bullying and its negative impact on those who are bullied. Recent data show that bullying behaviors are directly linked to health problems, relationship problems, and learning difficulties (Craig, 1998). The focus of this concern is usually on children, both those who engage in bullying and those who are targeted. But the focus must also be on adults who ignore, downplay, or even model bullying behaviors.

As we consider the potential for bullying amongst our youngest children, it is necessary to focus on their developmental challenges, remembering that young children’s relationship skills are still at a very egocentric and formative stage. Adults play a critical role in supporting kindhearted friendship strategies, NOT by telling children “We’re all friends here,” but by helping each child construct his own version of what it means to be a caring friend.

Adults can positively influence this process by resisting the temptation to put labels on children, such as ‘bully’ or ‘victim,’ as such labels put the responsibility for the problem on an individual child, rather than on the social environment of that child. Even the constant use of the term ‘friends’ when referring to a classroom of young children, confuses children’s understanding of what the word means; declaring a group of children ‘friends’ does not make it so. Instead referring to a group of children as ‘classmates,’ ‘girls and boys,’ or other names the children might choose for their class, such as ‘Coconuts’ or ‘Red Birds’ would help clarify the true meaning of ‘friend’ by not misusing it. Taking stock of our thinking about child development, as well as the language that we use with them, is an important step in effectively supporting children’s social-emotional growth.

Without thoughtful adult intervention, young children’s hurtful interactions can become a pattern of intimidation and result in long-term relationship problems (Pepler & Craig, 2007). As Pepler and Clark conclude, “When we understand bullying as a relationship problem, we come to recognize that it requires relationship solutions.”

**The Role of Peer Influence on Bullying**

Bullying behaviors become learned behaviors when manipulating peers for egocentric purposes works again and again. If a child threatens others and the threat succeeds, the behavior is reinforced. Although peer influence is the key to its beginnings, bullying behaviors in young children only become a pattern when adults do not intervene or guide the growth of more constructive emotional and social skills.

Problem-solving or conflict resolution interventions play a major role in ensuring that one child’s influence does not dominate another’s. Supported negotiation balances each child’s influence as it supports his or her ability to make choices about solutions. During this negotiation, children practice expressing their feelings and needs in a clear and positive way, with adult guidance that ensures that every child has the opportunity to speak and be heard. The negotiation facilitates the balancing of power in a process that encourages healthy peer communication.

**The Role of Adult Influence in Endorsing Bullying**

It is important to understand that bullying behaviors can be directly taught by adults who bully children when they yell, threaten, shame, and punish children. To effectively eliminate bullying by children, we must eliminate bullying by adults. Negative communication patterns are reinforced when adults engage only in limit-setting interactions with children. To prevent continuous cycles of constant “No,” “Stop,” “Don’t” interactions with children, adults must follow up limit-setting statements with positive interactions (Remig, 2009). In environments where bullying exists, it is very important to look at adult behaviors, at home or school, as a possible source, noticing when negative interactions have become the norm, and noticing when adults bullying children is actually the root of the problem.

Strategies considered to be bullying by adults if used on a daily basis include: a loud, menacing voice; scary facial expressions; threats of punishment; the use of shame or ridicule, such as “You’re being such a baby,” “EXCUSE ME!”, “What were you thinking?” and “Do as I say or else!”
Strategies for Adult Intervention

A pattern of hurtful actions is a red flag that a child is experiencing difficulties or challenges in life. Behavior is a means of communication. When adults frequently observe a child engaging in hurtful actions towards others, the child must not be seen as ‘mean’ or ‘bad,’ but as experiencing emotional, physical, or social challenges that are overwhelming. A child who needs more influence or attention does not benefit from being isolated in time-out; in fact, this will likely escalate the behavior. If children are punished for their behavior, with no attention to the reason for the behavior and no support in finding other ways to express their feelings, it is likely the behavior will continue, perhaps in a more surreptitious way.

When children’s behaviors are understood in their developmental context, adults can recognize hurtful episodes as opportunities to support new, more constructive skills. Children will learn and repeat the positive social skills that will help them succeed in meeting their needs and receiving the attention and care that they require for healthy growth.

Breaking the Cycle of Negative Adult-Child Interactions

In order to halt the formation of aggressive social patterns, adults need to engage in a 1:5 ratio for limit-setting statements to positive interactions (Remig, 2009). That is, to keep limit-setting interactions from becoming dominant, each interaction needs follow-up with at least five positive, encouraging interactions. Here’s the positive intervention that actually occurred following the first scenario at the beginning of this article:

Teacher: “Ben, pushing and name-calling need to stop. It’s scaring Owen. What’s the problem?”

Ben: “My brother does that to me all the time.”

Teacher, with concern: “That must be really hard for you.”

Ben: “Yeah. I hate him.”

Teacher: “You sound really angry with him.”

Ben nods.

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The teacher facilitates a discussion between Ben and Owen, giving Owen a chance to speak.

As Ben, Owen, and their teacher conclude this discussion, she decides to speak with Ben’s parents about his brother. When Owen has resumed his play, she supports Ben with 5 positive interactions by:

1. playing for a couple of minutes in the block area alongside Ben and Owen
2. asking Ben to ring the clean-up bell
3. helping Ben and Owen clean up
4. sitting with Ben during snack
5. listening attentively to Ben when he begins to talk about puppies

Though some may worry that the teacher’s attention will reinforce Ben’s negative behavior, the contrary is true. Ben

Strategies for Preventing Bullying by Young Children

1. Understand the difference between a pattern of bullying and predictable preschool behaviors.

2. Avoid general directives such as “Let’s all be friends” and “Be nice.”

3. Problem solve when there are conflicts or hurtful comments.

4. Set limits on any intimidating behaviors and follow up with positive interactions.

5. Recognize hurtful behaviors that are intense and repeated as a possible red flag that children need more attention to the reasons behind their behaviors and provide consistent problem-solving guidance as they learn to express their feelings constructively.

6. Eliminate bullying by adults: examine adult behaviors for the use of yelling, shaming, threatening, and/or punishing in interactions with young children.
has now experienced the replacement of negative attention-getting behaviors with the fun of being a community leader, reinforced by positive interactions with an adult and another child.

Summary

As we consider what strategies are needed to prevent intimidating behaviors from developing into bullying as a social strategy, it is important to understand the critical role we play as models of positive relationship skills. It is also important to appreciate the fact that, for children, understanding how to create positive influences on their peers and in their world is a skill analogous to going from scribbling to writing words—a major developmental effort that requires problem solving and practice everyday with the constant encouragement of the adults in their lives.

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References


