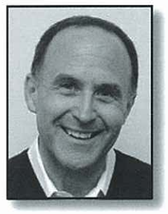

When Children Are Bullied at School: Clinical Issues of Adaptive and Maladaptive Coping

Richard S. Newman, PhD

Disagreements and arguments are taken in stride by most elementary and middle-school students. However, when conflicts are accompanied by taunts, threats, social ostracism and physical aggression, there can be serious psychological consequences such as anxiety, sadness, loneliness, and depression. Many children in many situations are able to cope with interpersonal conflict on their own; indeed, independent problem solving should be encouraged. But, there are times when children must ask a parent or teacher to intervene. Accurately assessing dangers of being bullied and knowing when it is appropriate to request assistance can present a dilemma. Unnecessary help seeking often has personal and social costs. Yet, failing to seek help when it is truly necessary can cause psychological as well as physical harm.

In my clinical practice, I often see children who have been harassed by peers and who respond in maladaptive ways. When coping is accurately calibrated to one's strengths and limitations and to specific situational demands, it is likely to be adaptive--in both reducing immediate stress and promoting the development of internal resources (e.g., autonomy, self confidence, knowledge about interpersonal relations, and communication skills) that are important in handling future stressors. Recent research by developmental psychologists (Newman, 2008) has examined reasons for, and clinical implications of, two common maladaptive approaches to the "help-seeking dilemma": (a) *dependent help seeking* (i.e., seeking help when it is unnecessary) and (b) *avoidance of help seeking* (i.e., failing to seek help when it is necessary). I focus in this article on one particular cause and set of implications of maladaptive coping with bullying: difficulty in judging whether help is necessary. First, I provide background information on bullying and then examine developmental and clinical issues for psychologists.

What Is Bullying?

Bullying is hostile and unprovoked aggression in which there is an imbalance of power between a victim and perpetrator. The most common direct forms of bullying are verbal (e.g., teasing, threats) and physical aggression; indirect bullying typically involves relational aggression (e.g., rumors, social ostracism). Some bullying is motivated by a desire to take the victim's property; some by an intentional desire to be hurtful. The more clearly an incident is perceived to be hostile, uncontrollable and chronic, the more appropriate it is to seek help from an adult.

Typical Places Where Bullying Occurs

The physical context of an incident makes a difference in how children respond to harassment. As early as kindergarten, students learn that "unowned places" (e.g., the bathroom, playground, school-bus) are likely sites of bullying. This is where children have to be on guard. Cyberbullying (using internet blogs, emailing, text messaging) usually involves relational aggression and is intended to hurt a child's self-esteem and reputation among peers.

The social context of an incident influences children's coping. A positive student-teacher relationship mitigates a child's anxiety, fear, and anger. Sometimes adults are unavailable or unwilling to help, believing children should simply be tough and take care of the problem themselves. When teachers believe a bully targets a particular child due to uncontrollable factors (e.g., physical disability), they usually are understanding of a request for help. On the other hand, if they believe a child is targeted because of behaviors under his or her control (e.g., showing off) or if the child is tattling, teachers look unfavorably on requests. The presence or absence of friends also makes a difference. If harassed in front of classmates, children are concerned that asking for help makes them appear weak, especially when peers "egg on" the bully. If classmates are available to help but do not intervene, children feel abandoned. Worse yet, when a presumed friend is the perpetrator, for example, in relational aggression, they feel violated. In contrast, "true" friends contribute to a child's sense of safety and provide an important buffer from chronic victimization.

How Emotions Influence Children's Coping

Children often ask their teacher for help when it is unnecessary because fear of the bully interferes with their judgment. Especially among younger children, anger and desire for retribution sometimes lead to tattling. Children often fail to seek help when, in fact, it is necessary because fear paralyzes them into inaction. Motivated by a sense of guilt, some children feel they deserve to be bullied. Some lack the confidence needed to approach an adult. Expecting to be victimized – and perhaps even blamed by their teacher – children may ask themselves, "Why should I even try to get help?" Angry and under pressure to look tough, children sometimes react in an overly-aggressive way that exacerbates the situation. Sometimes children give in to a bully because they want to stay friends and transform their self image from victim to victimizer; emulating the perpetrator lets them acquire some of his or her "cool" social status.

Personal Factors Related to Coping

Popularity. Popular children typically are seen as strong; whereas, unpopular children are easy to push around. Importantly, children viewed by peers as popular believe teasing is less serious than threats or physical aggression; whereas, those viewed as unpopular consider teasing to be just as serious and potentially dangerous (Newman & Murray, 2005).

Competence. Socially-competent children generally have an accurate sense of their personal strengths and weaknesses and a realistic sense of which types of conflict they can control – and not control. With a large repertoire of coping strategies (for example, negotiating, verbal and physical assertiveness, and distancing themselves from the bully), they tend not to worry about how peers perceive them if they do, in fact, need assistance. A child's physical competence also influences coping. At lower-elementary grades, children with poor self perceptions of their physical abilities are especially likely to give in to a bully and, in doing so, increase the chance they will be victimized in the future (Newman, Murray, & Lussier, 2001).

> Psychologists can help educate children and parents about the "basics" of bullying, coping strategies, and rules for monitoring access to cyberspace.

Gender. Girls and boys cope differently with harassment. Boys generally encounter physical aggression; whereas girls, relational aggression (including cyberbullying). Boys take name calling more in stride; it is less a violation of friendship. Girls are more concerned about being harassed when they are alone; boys are more concerned that a teacher might mistakenly think they are the perpetrator. Girls typically cope in prosocial ways; whereas, boys are more likely to use strategies that are confrontational and sometimes vengeful.

Developmental and Clinical Issues

In working with children who have difficulty coping with harassment, psychologists need to consider the developmental trajectory of one's maladaptive coping. That is, "How did the child develop his or her pattern of coping?" Research suggests the following scenarios (Newman, 2008).

As early as kindergarten, children who are withdrawn and shy often are overly-dependent on their teacher. They sometimes use their teacher as a shield to protect themselves from having to deal with day-to-day interpersonal interactions. When it comes to weighing costs and benefits of seeking help, uncertainty and anxiety are especially problematic for the young child who already is concerned about social exclusion. If they go to their teacher for help, they run the risk of being labeled a "tattletale," alienating themselves from the teacher and incurring reprisal from the bully. Yet, when they try to handle seemingly minor incidents on their own (for example, by being assertive), awkward and unsuccessful actions can backfire and reinforce a negative image among peers. If bullying continues, children may internalize taunts and blame themselves for causing the harassment and for their inability to make it cease.

Around the transition from lower- to upper-elementary grades, if they find themselves in truly dangerous situations, children may decide the costs of help seeking are too great. Passivity can turn into submissiveness and/or reactive aggression. By the end of elementary school, individuals who acquiesce to a bully often are described as *withdrawn-rejected*. If repeatedly victimized without resolving the problem on their own and without getting help, children may lash out at their tormentor, overreact, and escalate violence; these children often are said to be *aggressive-rejected* and may well be on their way to becoming a bully themselves (Dodge, Coie, & Lynam, 2006). For both groups of rejected children, the prognosis is poor: both submissiveness and aggressiveness can lead to anxiety, mood, oppositional-defiant, conduct, and substance-related disorders (Luthar, Burback, Cicchetti, & Weisz, 1997).

How can psychologists help children who are bullied or at risk of being bullied? Psychologists can help educate children and parents about the "basics" of bullying, coping strategies (including when it is appropriate to seek help), and rules for monitoring access to cyberspace. Psychologists must think carefully about therapeutic and legal/ethical issues of confidentiality and the pros and cons of informing parents of incidents of harassment. They can help parents and teachers collaborate regarding classroom practices and policies for reducing bullying. They attempt to alleviate immediate symptoms (e.g., anxiety- or mood-related) and address the child's internalization and perhaps trauma of having been victimized. And, importantly, psychologists can support the long-term development of protective factors (e.g., friendships, social competencies, and sense of autonomy) – thereby maximizing children's resilience and minimizing the risk they will be bullied in the first place.

References

Dodge, K. A., Coie, J. D., & Lynam, D. (2006). Aggression and antisocial behavior in youth. In W. Damon, R. Lerner, & N. Eisenberg (Eds.), *Handbook of child psychology: Vol. 3. Social, emotional, and personality development* (6th ed., pp. 719-788). New York: Wiley.

Luthar, S. S., Burback, J. A., Cicchetti, D., & Weisz, J. R. (Eds.). (1997). *Developmental psychopathology: Perspectives on adjustment, risk, and disorder.* New York: Cambridge University Press.

Newman, R. S. (2008). Adaptive and non-adaptive help seeking with peer harassment: An integrative perspective of coping and self regulation. *Educational Psychologist, 43*, 1-15.

Newman, R. S., & Murray, B. (2005). How students and teachers view the seriousness of peer harassment: When is it appropriate to seek help? *Journal of Educational Psychology, 97*, 347-365.

Newman, R. S., Murray, B., & Lussier, C. (2001). Confrontation with aggressive peers at school: Students' reluctance to seek help from the teacher. *Journal of Educational Psychology, 93*, 398-410.

Richard S. Newman, PhD, is a clinical psychologist in Woodland Hills, CA. His focus is how children and adolescents cope with peer harassment and academic difficulty. He is Professor Emeritus in the Graduate School of Education, University of California, Riverside, where he has taught and done research on achievement motivation and social and cognitive development.