

*For Parents, Educators and Mental Health Professionals Who Care About Teens*

*A Special Segment:*

**1**  
**BULLYING  
AND  
AGGRESSION  
IN SCHOOL**

*This issue of The Practical Parent focuses on bullying and social aggression. Michael just returned from the Blueprints for Violence Prevention Conference in San Antonio, Texas. He has long been interested in helping schools respond to the challenges of bullying (in person and online). The article outlines the problem of bullying and begins to show us what is necessary to effectively address the issue. We hope you find this Practical Parent useful!*

**3**  
**ASK  
MICHAEL...**

*I'm feeling so helpless and overwhelmed! How can I help my son? I'm sure he's being bullied at school but he won't let me do anything.*



FEATURE ARTICLE

## Bullying and Aggression in Schools

*I just attended the Olweus Bullying Prevention Program at the Violence Prevention Conference in San Antonio, Texas. As we approach the April 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Columbine shootings, and in the wake of the tragic and preventable suicide of Phoebe Prince at South Hadley High School, this seemed a crucial time to address the topic of bullying.*

On January 14, 2010 Phoebe Prince, a recent emigrant from Ireland, hanged herself at the family home in South Hadley, Massachusetts. She had been relentlessly and brutally teased, taunted and bullied by classmates at her high school and online. She decided she could no longer endure the torture. Six of the teens (three are female) will be indicted on charges connected to Prince's suicide. They are charged with violating Prince's civil rights, criminal harassment and disturbing a school assembly. Two of the indicted students, a 17-year-old male and an 18-year-old male, will also be charged with statutory rape. Criminal complaints were filed against

students remain at school and three have been expelled. In many ways this case is not unique but like the horrific tragedy at Columbine, it is going to forever change our country's understanding of and approach to bullying.

### What is Bullying?

Part of the problem with getting schools, parents, students and communities to respond to the issue of bullying is that it is too often misunderstood as "kids being kids." Social aggression, dominance hierarchies, ordering/rankings and even routine violence appear natural throughout the animal kingdom. While we don't want our children to bully or be bullied, we usually throw up our hands and think of bullying as "part of the real world" or something that kids just have to tolerate or "get tougher" about. But Dan Olweus, the world's foremost researcher and writer on school bullying, begs to differ.



## Bullying in Schools *(continued from page 1)*

He explains that bullying is, at its root, *peer abuse*. “Bullying,” writes Olweus, occurs “when someone *repeatedly* and *on purpose* says or does mean or hurtful things to another person *who has a hard time defending him or herself*; it always involves an *imbalance of power* and the person bullying *derives satisfaction from the act(s)* [italics mine].” Dr. Olweus’ definition makes clear the distinction between normal and even healthy, playful teasing and the sort of behavior that can lead to violence against self (as in Phoebe’s case) or another (as in the Columbine shootings). And contrary to what many believe, those who bully do not suffer from low self-esteem; in fact they have average or even high amounts of self-esteem, believing that they are special—the regular rules don’t apply to them and they somehow deserve to be “above” others.

You’ll notice that I’m avoiding talking about “bullies” and “victims” in static terms. The research on bullying shows us that these roles can shift: those who end up bullying may have been bullied (at home, by teachers or by peers). And bullying is never just about “bullies” and “victims.”

*Direct bullying* (in the form of taunting, teasing, name-calling, hitting, kicking, shoving, spitting or physical assault) or *indirect bullying* (in the form of getting another person to bully, spreading rumors or causing another person to be socially isolated) occurs often because disengaged onlookers allow the behavior to happen. In other

simple matter of getting bullies to change their behavior or victims to “toughen up” or “stand up for themselves.” It is about the long-term work of changing the community and culture so that passive witnesses and disengaged bystanders begin to intervene.

Come on, it’s not that bad, is it? Well, a 2003 Harris poll of 2,279 girls aged 8-17 reported that forty-one percent of tweens said they were two times more afraid of bullying as war, terrorist attacks or natural disaster; fifteen times more worried about bullying than losing a loved one and worried, on average thirty times more about bullying than about grades. Bullying prevention is about basic safety, civil rights and about education: when kids are afraid they do not learn.

Work at Clemson University, supported by the decades of groundbreaking research by Dr. Olweus in his home country of Norway, along with numerous studies done since the early 1990s have shown us what works and what doesn’t work in keeping children safe (Olweus, 1993; Charach, Pepler and Zieler, 1995; Juvonen, 2003; Fekes et al., 2004; Buhs et al., 2006). The largest model program on bullying prevention is currently being conducted in Pennsylvania, with big insurance companies, research agencies, local governments and school districts getting in on the act. In the wake of Phoebe’s senseless death, Massachusetts will surely (and soon) pass one of the toughest anti-bullying laws in the country. Let’s not wait until something happens in our communities to begin to understand more about bullying and its prevention. ✦

**Students Who Bully.**  
These students want to play a leader role.

**Followers or Henchmen**  
These students are positive and take an active part, but don’t ally initiate it and do not play a lead role.

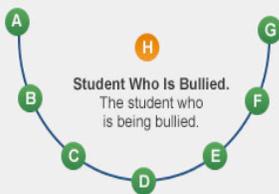
**Supporters or Passive Bullies**  
These students actively and openly support the bullying, for example, through laughter or calling attention to the situation, but they don’t join in.

**Passive Supporters or Possible Bullies**  
These students like the bullying but do not show outward signs of support.

**Disengaged Onlookers**  
These students do not get involved and do not take a stand, nor do they participate actively in either direction. (They might think or say: “It’s none of my business,” or “Let’s watch and see what happens.”)

**Possible Defenders**  
These students dislike the bullying and think they should help the student who is being bullied but do nothing.

**Defenders**  
These students dislike the bullying and help or try to help the student who is being bullied.



### *The Olweus Bullying Circle:* How Bullying Works



## Parents and Teens Ask Michael...

Dear Michael,

I suspect my 12-year-old son is being bullied at school. I've tried asking him about it but he just says he's "fine" and "doesn't want to talk about it." You might think I'm just an overreactive mom but I've noticed that his general mood has just been worse and worse since beginning middle school. He used to eat a ton when he got home from school and would pretty much happily do his schoolwork. He won't go to any extra-curricular events and just seems to want to avoid anything and everything connected with the school, including talking about it. He's actually asked to stay home or missed more school this year than any other year. I even sort of spied on last semester after I dropped him off and saw some kids pushing and shoving him and taking his books, his pens and his hat, but he just laughed with them and seemed to go along. He gets really sullen and angry if I ask him about it all. I'm overwhelmed and don't know what to do.

*[The following is a portion of my response to the mother who wrote in...]*

*Hang in there, mom. Parents who suspect bullying at school are often met with this kind of "stonewalling" from their child when they first try to address the issue. Children can feel disloyal for "tattling" on their peers and can even come to feel that the person(s) doing the bullying are their "friends." In extreme cases, kids can be threatened that if they tell others what's going on they'll be excluded, further shunned, teased or even physically attacked.*

*If you believe that your son might be being bullied at school, its important that you trust your instincts and follow-up with the school. School administrators and teachers, who are often overworked and under-appreciated, can feel attacked and get defensive though, if you go in*

*with "guns blazing" and accuse them of not adequately noticing or protecting your child against bullying. I think you'll get a better result if you go in to the school with an inquisitive attitude and ask for their help—letting them know that you aren't sure about what's going on but that you trust that they want every child to feel safe and would certainly support the investigation of your concerns.*

*You've identified at least some of the potential signs of bullying: your son's behavior (eating/appetite, general mood, school attendance) has really changed; the general sense I'm getting from your letter is that these changes don't quite seem like the normal changes of adolescence. You witnessed something that could be normal "horseplay" but kids who are bullied are often pushed or have their books and property taken, all in the guise of "good fun." Kids who are being bullied can also come to feel that they might be able to stop the bullying by just going along with the hurtful behavior and even by kind of "joining in" with the bullying behavior. This doesn't mean he is having fun, though or enjoying himself. In fact, the signs point to something else. You might be interested to know some of the myths about bullying, in an effort to feel more secure in approaching the school and continuing to listen to and support your son:*



### *Myths and Facts About Bullying*

1. Studies suggest that less than 10 percent of children are involved in bullying in middle school.  
FALSE: Over 43 percent report being bullied.
2. The vast majority of bullied children tell a teacher or other school staff.  
FALSE: Many more children do not report to parents; many tell no one. Older students and boys are less likely to tell (vs. younger/female).
3. Bullying is likely on the way to and from school as during school.  
FALSE: It's common during school hours...for every 100 kids bullied, 48 are bullied in the hallway/stairwell; 32 in class with teacher gone; 29 in gym; 27 in class w/teacher present; 24 at lunch; 17 in bathroom; 15 on bus; 16 on way to /from school; 8 at bus stop
4. Most students who observe bullying don't think they should get involved.  
FALSE: Almost 60 percent believe they should help, but don't.
5. Adults usually have a very accurate sense of the bullying issues going on at the school.  
FALSE: 70 percent of teachers believed adults intervene almost all the time, but only 25% of students agree, and...90 percent of teachers on playgrounds say they intervene ALL the time but videotapes showed intervention 5% of the time (Charach, 1995; Pepler and

We receive far more letters than we can ever answer...so please don't take it personally if you don't get a personal response. All submissions for "Ask Michael" should go to: Michael@practicalhelpforparents.com



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**Because There's No  
Such Thing as Too  
Much Support.**

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[www.PracticalHelp  
forParents.com](http://www.PracticalHelpforParents.com)

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## Selected Resources on Bullying and Bullying Prevention

### **Web Resources**

National Youth Violence Prevention Resource Center

<http://www.safeyouth.org/scripts/topics/bullying.asp>

Olweus Bullying Prevention Program

<http://www.olweus.org>

Center for the Study and Prevention of violence,  
University of Colorado, Boulder

[www.colorado.edu/cspv/blueprints/](http://www.colorado.edu/cspv/blueprints/)

Cyber Bullying Quick Reference Guide for Parents

[http://www.cyberbullyhelp.com/Cyber%20Bullying%20  
Guide%20for%20Parents.pdf](http://www.cyberbullyhelp.com/Cyber%20Bullying%20Guide%20for%20Parents.pdf)

### **Books/Publications**

*Please note that there are now hundreds of books on bullying and bullying prevention, but unfortunately, many of them advocate methods that either do not work or cause additional problems for individuals and*

### *About Our Organization...*

Founded by adolescent specialist Michael Y. Simon, MFT, a high school counseling director, noted speaker/educator and psychotherapist in private practice, Practical Help for Parents provides real-life solutions as you parent, support and understand the teens and pre-teens in your life. PHFP offers informative, entertaining, research-based

*schools that try to implement suggestions piecemeal. I personally favor a research-based approach and consider the work of Dan Olweus and his colleagues to represent the most thoughtful and thorough approach.*

*Cyber Bullying: Bullying in the Digital Age* (Kowalski et al., Wiley and Sons, 2007)

*Bullying at School: What We Know and What We Can Do* (Olweus, Blackwell, 1993)

*The Bully, The Bullied and The Bystander: From Preschool to High School* (Coloroso, HarperCollins, 2003)

"Bullying Behaviors Among U.S. Youth," *Journal of the American Medical Association* 285, No. 16 (2001): 2094-2100.

*Best Friends, Worst Enemies: Understanding the Social Lives of Boys* (Thompson et al., Ballantine, 2002)

*Odd Girl Out: The Hidden Culture of Aggression in Girls* (Simmons, Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2002)

workshops for students and parents, keynotes and presentations to high school and middle school parents, teachers and administrators; access to online Practical Help Tips, articles, web resources and; program development and consultation to mental health professionals, policymakers and schools/school districts. ☒

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