The Roots of Bullying in Early Childhood

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It is clear that the old adage "Sticks and stones may break my bones but words can never hurt me" isn't borne out by the research. Far from being a "right of passage," evidence demonstrates that bullying has lasting negative psychological, emotional, and health impacts well into adulthood.[1] A more nuanced understanding of the impact of bullying has propelled a national conversation about school climate and the importance of creating safe and supportive learning environments for all students.[2] Schools now allocate resources for professional development, parent engagement strategies, and school curriculum designed to prevent and address bullying at the elementary and high school levels. While these solutions are obviously important, many argue that they are "too little, too late" and do not begin early enough to prevent the emergence of bullying behaviors. By the time a child enters 6th grade, nearly 28% of students report being targeted in the previous year.[3] Is it possible to catch "mean" behaviors in early childhood before they develop into bullying? Are there factors in early childhood that either contribute to or protect from bullying behaviors later on?

While bullying is a term used casually by many adults as broad reference to toxic, cruel, or hurtful behaviors of all stripes, it is helpful to remember the formal definition of bullying before exploring its origins in early childhood. Bullying has three central characteristics: It is deliberate aggressive behavior, repeated over time, and reflects a power imbalance between the bully and the victim.[4] Many researchers argue that these criteria are less useful in early childhood. At this age, relationships don't always reflect a consistent power imbalance, and dynamics are often much less targeted and organized over time.[5] Another challenge is that unkind behaviors are quite normal in early childhood as children learn emotional regulation, develop empathy, and navigate more complex social relationships. We need to be careful not to pathologize normal patterns of child development.

That said, there is evidence that *stable* levels of aggression throughout early childhood do predict bullying later in life.[6] It is also likely that mean or cruel behaviors become increasingly organized and intentional over time if caring adults do not intervene and teach more appropriate skills. A recent review of the research by Child Trends concluded that while research is still limited and there is not currently a fleshed out developmental pathway or theoretical model that accounts for developmental stages of bullying, there is evidence of early mediating factors that do catalyze its development:[7]

1. **Parental characteristics.** While the majority of research focuses on mothers, it does appear that parenting style, involvement, and engagement are related to the development of aggressive behaviors. For example, overly permissive or authoritarian parenting and parental hostility and low empathy are risk factors for bullying. Conversely, positive parental interactions and warm, consistent boundaries correlate to a lower likelihood of bullying.

2. **Early childhood maltreatment.** Research repeatedly finds an association between physical abuse and aggressive behavior in children, including some studies that demonstrate a link between maltreatment in early childhood and bullying behaviors later on. Early and consistent exposure to toxic stress can change the architecture of the brain, making it more likely that children struggle in social and emotional domains.[8]

3. **Quantity and quality of media content.** There is a relationship between high screen time and the development of bullying behaviors. Lots of time watching television in particular, even if the content is not violent, predicts a greater likelihood of bullying later in life. The good news is that exposure to pro-social messages in television shows have been shown to increase pro-social behaviors in children.

There are of course many complex factors that combine in the life of a child to propel bullying behaviors. More research is needed to unpack the variables and provide a more comprehensive view. Some of the mediating factors in early childhood, such as maltreatment, are complex issues that require attention to both acute services and systems-level change.[9] That said, there are things that can be done in early care settings right now that can serve as protective factors and facilitate the development of pro-social skills in the early years. Rather than focusing on identifying specific young children as "bullies," all children benefit from programs and approaches that promote inclusion and positive interactions. Evidence indicates that prioritizing consistent, safe, and welcoming relationships and classrooms that promote emotional regulation can significantly reduce aggression.

There are things that you can do now to play an active role in preventing the development of bullying behaviors:

Understanding:

- Read the Child Trends report *Bullying in the Block Area: The Origin of Bullying in Early Childhood* for a more in depth review of the latest research.
- Read the *Eyes on Bullying in Early Childhood* report by the Eduation Development Center.

Prevention and Intervention:

- Look to evidence-based programs for guidance.
    - For teachers, look to programs such as PATHS for Preschool, Second Step, and Al's Pals.
    - For parents, look to programs such as The Incredible Years or Raising Safe Kids.
- For practical strategies on helping children manage emotions and regulate their behaviors read the *Guidance Matters* blog at the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC).
- For practical strategies for identifying and addressing bullying behaviors in the early childhood classroom read the *Eyes on Bullying Toolkit*.
- Look for guidance on age-appropriate media use from resources like:
    - Fred Rogers Center for Early Learning and Children's Media
    - Common Sense Media
    - Center for Media and Child Health

Resources & Notes:

1. Costello, J. (2014). Adult Outcomes of Childhood Bullying Victimization. *The American Journal of Psychiatry.* 171(7). pp. 709-711.
2. See https://safesupportivelearning.ed.gov/

3. U.S. Department of Education (2015). Student Reports of Bullying and Cyberbullying. Access at: http://nces.ed.gov/pubs2015/2015056.pdf
4. Juvonen, J., Graham, S. (2014). "Bullying in Schools: The Power of Bullies and the Plight of Victims". *Annual Review of Psychology* (Annual Reviews) 65: 159–85.
5. Monks, C., Smith, P., & Swettenham, J. (2003). Aggressors, victims, and defenders in preschool: Peer, self, and teacher reports. *Merrill-Palmer Quarterly*, 49, 453–469.
6. Campbell, S., Spieker, S., Burchinal, M., Poe, M. and The NICHD Early Child Care Research Network (2006). Trajectories of aggression from toddlerhood to age 9 predict academic and social functioning through age 12. *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry*. 47, 791–800.
7. DeVooght, K. (2015). Bullying in the Block Area: The Early Childhood Origins of "Mean" Behavior. *Child Trends.* Access at: http://www.childtrends.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/08/2015-31BulliesBlockArea.pdf
8. Child Welfare Information Gateway (2009). Understanding the effects of maltreatment on brain development. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Health and Humans Services, Children's Bureau.
9. Harvard Center on Child Development. *Building Adult Capacities to Improve Child Outcomes: A Theory of Change.* Access multimedia synopsis at: http://developingchild.harvard.edu/resources/building-adult-capabilities-to-improve-child-outcomes-a-theory-of-change/