

childPSYCH News

A newsletter for professionals and parents

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Rd, Sherwood

Special points of interest:

- We have a NEW learning centre! Call us now for more information
- At *childpsych* only psychologists who are registered teachers and/or Educational Psychologists will write the report on learning difficulties
- To unsubscribe from this newsletter at any time, either email or call *childpsych*

You asked for it!

By Philip Gosschalk MAPS, Director of *childpsych*

There are many beliefs about victims of bullying. One of the most perpetuated beliefs is that victims of bullying somehow behave in a way that results in others bullying them. I recall many years ago working in a high school where a boy was referred to me for counselling as he had been bullied. When I asked the referrer to tell me more about him, he responded "he's the one with red hair, pimples, a loud mouth and large red target on his back!"

So is this true, do victims of bullying behave in ways that result in them being bullied? Well a recent research study attempted to answer this question by examining much of the research conducted on bullying and victimisation (called a meta analysis). This study concluded that the typical child who is at risk of being bullied is sad and/or anxious, may act inappropriately (e.g. talking loudly, acting silly), has poor social skills, has low self esteem, and is considered by their peers as being on the "outer". Interestingly, the typical bully had a similar profile to the typical victim except the bully was more likely to come from a family environment characterised by conflict and they tended to dislike school. This means that the typical bully is just as likely to have a poor self esteem as the victim but is more aggressive. So there may be some truth



So there may be some truth to one of the beliefs that victims are "sensitive" and bullies are "aggressive".

to one of the beliefs that victims are "sensitive" and bullies are "aggressive". It should be pointed out however, that there are some children who are not only bullies, but also victims themselves of bullying.

Unfortunately, victims of bullying are at increased risk of mental health problems and suicide in adulthood. Sadly, it appears that only a quarter of children who have been bullied will have received counselling and support. Certainly in our practice we commonly see children who are very sad and even depressed as a result of being bullied. So does this mean we should be teaching children to be assertive and how to *respond* to being bullied, as well as how to *cope* with being bullied?

Do the strategies we suggest to victims of bullying work?

Schools have been fairly proactive recently in developing programs to combat bullying. These programs typically teach strategies such as: telling the bully to stop, telling a teacher, how to

respond wittily to the bully and so on.

However, do these strategies work for the type of child who is at risk of being bullied? Remember, this is a sensitive child who may lack the confidence to carry out the suggested strategies in a confident manner. A client of mine was taught to respond to bullies, while in a junior grade, by putting his hand out to signify "stop" and say, "stop it or else". Even though he was in early primary school, the other children began to tease him about his chosen strategy. Again research suggests that it is the limited social skills of our sensitive children that seem to place them at the greatest risk. Unfortunately, these children react to being bullied in ways that suggest a loss of emotional and behavioural control (e.g., crying, running away). When we consider that the child is likely to display this loss of control in front of their peer group, then we can begin to see how their peer's continue to see them as "different". So it seems that ineffective strategies for responding to being bullied are not only a consequence of being bullied, but also a cause. This is a clear vicious cycle.

How should victims of bullying respond?

There are however gender differences. Girls who were more likely to be bullied did not seem to use any strategies and seemed more pessi-

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Victims of bullying con't

mistic. This could be because girls tend to experience different forms of bullying from within their group of friends (e.g. being left out of social activities). However, boys who were bullied found the strategies of walking away, making a joke and so on ineffective. There is strong suggestion then that responding to bullying requires assisting the victim to respond in a way that is socially acceptable by their peer group. Other research has suggested that victims' of bullying have so much self doubt and low self esteem that when they are interacting with their peers, they are not picking up on the social cues. This means that such children continue to have difficulty with developing appropriate social skills, thereby allowing them to "fit in" with their peer group. One intervention study paired bullied children with a lunch time mentor which

resulted in the victim being perceived by the rest of the grade as "accepted" which resulted in no more bullying. I have worked with victims of bullying to develop social skills to play handball at school! Handball in primary and lower high school is often linked to social status/peer acceptance.

So what should we do?

It goes without saying that a school culture that takes a strong stance against aggression is important in reducing bullying. In addition, it is important that victims of bullying receive counselling as well as assistance with how to respond to being bullied if they need it. This assistance should help the child to learn how to respond in a socially appropriate manner. Helping the bullied child to "fit in" with their peer group and be accepted may be important for some children. Encouraging such children to join a school club or

skills appreciated by their peers (e.g., handball) are examples. There is strong suggestion from the research that bullied children may cope poorly with any stress. It is important for these children to learn how to cope with stress by taking what psychologists call a "solution orientated approach to reasoning" rather than an "emotion focussed approach". This means that some children may benefit from learning how to problem solve their way out of a situation rather than reacting emotionally (e.g. by crying or running away). Finally, it goes without saying that the bully themselves needs to be managed. However, bullying exists in many contexts, and is not just a problem confined to only children and schools. Helping children who have been bullied to respond and cope is an unfortunate life skill.

Helping Children Cope with Divorce

About 40% of marriages will end in divorce within 30 years of the marriage. By the age of sixteen, approximately 30% of children will have experienced the divorce of their parents. For everyone in the family, divorce means significant changes. Some children will progress through this time relatively well, whereas other children will be devastated by their parents divorce.

Psychologists have long known that children of divorced parents are a "high risk" group for emotional difficulties. The good news is that 75% of children from divorced families will cope well with the end of their parent's marriage. However, the rest will have difficulty with adjusting to this change. So what are the indications that a child may not adjust well? Age seems to be a factor. Preschoolers seem to have greater problems adjusting to their parent's separation/divorce. This may be because they lack the ability to understand what is happening. Adolescence is also another period of vulnerability as



it seems there is less discipline in the household. Of course divorce also impacts upon the quality of the parent's relationship with the child. This seems to be because the parent who has majority custody carries the burden of being the sole disciplinarian which is very tiring. The result is that the parent may resort to harsher forms of discipline out of stress which in turn affects the parent-child bond. Of course the child themselves bring their own "personality". Some children are naturally more easily irritated or annoyed and so react worse to their parents divorce than would be expected. Finally, divorced parents who fight and argue in front of the children seem to create children who are angrier

(particularly boys). In fact it seems it is parental conflict rather than divorce itself that is the main risk factor for emotional problems in children!

So what can be done to help children in divorced families?

Some suggestions are:

1. Consider pre divorce or post divorce counselling for the children.
2. Keep routines such as bed times, meal times and bath times consistent across both households.
3. Let children take toys between houses. This will help with "transitioning" between homes and act as a "security blanket".
4. Allow children to call the other parent when they are away from them.
5. Ease children into overnight stays by first letting them get used to day visits.
6. Allow children to have an individual photograph of the other parent in their room.

"Psychologists have long known that children of divorced parents are a "high risk" group for emotional difficulties"

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