

school bullying

a problem for deaf and hard of hearing students?

INSIGHTS & STRATEGIES

By William P. McCrone

If we are to have peace in the world, we have to start with the children. ~ Gandhi

Louis, a slender, bright, 11-year-old black deaf residential school student with mild cerebral palsy, has fallen behind in his personal hygiene and his classroom work because older deaf boys in his dorm physically and sexually taunt him when he is trying to sleep and when he uses the bathroom or shower of the dormitory. Spending money, clothes, and gifts from his parents have been regularly stolen. Louis's tearful complaints have been brushed aside by a houseparent who told Louis "not to be a baby."

Amy, a 16-year-old white deaf student with a cochlear implant, attended a large mainstream school where she was teased by hearing "sorority sisters" on the school bus and through on-line instant messaging about her weight, braces, cochlear implant, sign language, and efforts to read lips. Amy frequently told her mother she was too ill to go to school. After a physical altercation in the cafeteria with the hearing girls who had been teasing her, Amy, working through the classroom interpreter, told the itinerant, part-time hearing school counselor that she uses marijuana and alcohol to deal with the stress of the bullying by the hearing girls and that she often thinks about suicide.

Mohammed, an artistic hard of hearing 15-year-old Iranian American student in a small, rural mainstream program, found that he socialized mostly with hearing female students because the hearing male students taunted him about being Muslim, hard of hearing, and homosexual. A teacher confronted Mohammed when she saw a box cutter knife in Mohammed's backpack. Mohammed told the teacher he would use the knife against the school bullies if necessary. The teacher reported Mohammed's weapon possession, which resulted in an Individualized Education Program disciplinary suspension. Mohammed's parents are exploring home schooling.

Photography by John T. Consoli





William P. McCrone,

Ed.D., J.D., is a professor of counseling and former dean of the School of Education and Human Services at Gallaudet University in Washington, D.C. He was a legislative fellow to U.S. Senator Tom Harkin, Chief Senate sponsor of the Americans with Disabilities Act.

Left: Bullying can happen at any age, but it peaks in middle school and junior high school.



The names have been changed but, with the exception of Mohammed whose story can be checked out at <http://www.wrights law.com/info/discipl.suspend.crabtree.htm>, each of these incidents comes from my files. The bullying of deaf and hard of hearing students is surely at least as common as bullying among hearing students. Olweus (1993) found that 15 percent of students are either bullied regularly or are the initiators of bullying behavior. A Nickelodeon/Kaiser Family Foundation survey (2001) of 8- to 15-year-old students found that “teasing and bullying” tops the list of school problems identified by these students. These students ranked teasing and bullying as a bigger problem than “alcohol and drugs” or “pressure to have sex.”

Bullies of deaf and hard of hearing students can be deaf, hard of hearing, or hearing. For some resilient students, incidents of bullying pass without lasting psychological damage. But for other students, bullying results in lifelong emotional damage and/or attempts, sometimes successful, at suicide. Studies show that students who are chronically victimized by bullies are at increased risk for depression, schizophrenia, self-concept problems, anxiety disorders, social

withdrawal, and long-term victim status identification (Batsche & Knoff, 1994; Olweus, 1993). Occasionally bullying results in murder. The suicide note left by Eric Harris, one of the two attackers at Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado, said: “Your children who have ridiculed me, who have chosen not to accept me, who have treated me like I am not worth their time, are dead.” Approximately 50 percent of boys who bully and 30 percent of girls who bully, as well as 36 percent of boys and 15 percent of girls who have been bullied, carry weapons (Nansel, Overpeck, Haynie, Ruan, & Scheidt, 2003).

Definitions and Explorations

What is bullying? Are deaf and hard of hearing students particularly vulnerable to bullying? What motivates hearing and deaf bullies to bully deaf and hard of hearing students? What resources are available to help parents and educators prevent bullying in schools for deaf and hard of hearing students?

Bullying is an ongoing method of mistreating, dominating, hurting, frightening, and/or browbeating another person by an individual or group. Bullies use physical, verbal, and psychological methods to humiliate, embarrass, and overpower others (Fried & Fried, 1996). Bullying by boys and girls can happen at any age, but it peaks in the middle school/junior high school years (Bosworth, Espelage, & Simon, 1999; Harris & Petrie, 2002; Aber, Brown, & Jones, 2003). Ironically, this is the same period when male testosterone levels, drug and alcohol abuse experimentation, sexual identity struggles, and teen suicide rates take off (McCrone, 2003).

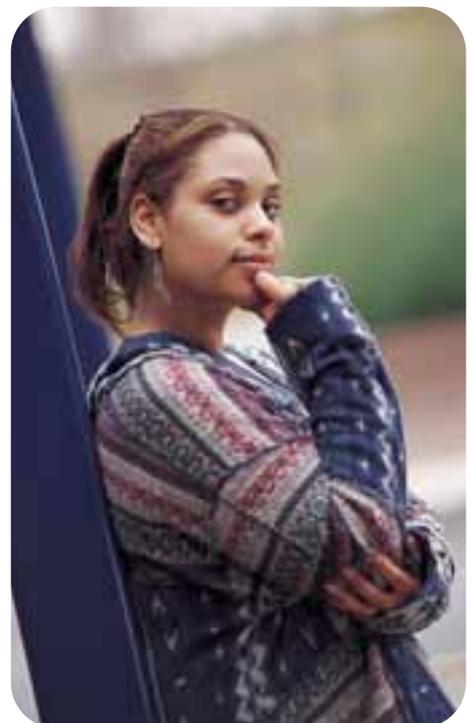
Bullying can take many forms—sexual harassment, extortion, physical abuse, racist behavior, teasing, pressuring, name-calling, social isolation, lying about and/or stealing from the victim. An Archives of Pediatrics and Adolescent Medicine study (Nansel et al., 2003) of 15,000 students in grades six to ten suggests that school bullying should not be considered a normal part of growing

up, but as a risk factor for more extreme violence in the future by both the bully and the victim of the bullying. Approximately 60 percent of children characterized as bullies in sixth through ninth grade had at least one criminal conviction by age 24 (Olweus, 1993).

A Culture of Mixed Messages

Do we send children mixed messages about bullying? Is it possible that deaf and hearing youth are seeing and learning far more pro-bully messages in our culture than anti-bully messages? What message does the “win at all cost” junior varsity coach send to student athletes when he or she encourages and rewards defensive players for twist tackling the knees of opposing quarterbacks? What are students to think about out of control parents who assault referees at Little League and club hockey games?

Children do not live and learn in a vacuum. How many of us have seen adults driving cars with bumper stickers that say “My kid beat up your honor roll student!” How many deaf and hearing children have seen their parents engaged in “road rage” incidents? Bullying dominates many of





the most popular TV cartoon and action programs (Klopfer, et al., 2002).

Bullying is a common theme in World Wrestling Federation programs that hearing, hard of hearing, and deaf children like to watch on TV.

The best-selling video games, “Grand Theft Auto” and “Hitman,” contain pervasive bullying. Many parents in Illinois told the school that the hazing that sent dozens of younger sorority pledges to the emergency room was not the school’s business and some parents sued to be sure that their daughters—who had bullied the pledges to the point that they had to go to the hospital—would graduate on time (Walsh, 2003).

Kip Kinkel, a troubled Oregon student in counseling because of emotional problems and related bullying, murdered four people and tried to kill 25 more at Thurston High School with guns his father, a teacher, had bought for him for his birthday (www.cnn.com/US/9806/16/kinkel.arraign.update).

A music video by rap performer 50 Cent that is seen frequently on after-school MTV shows the sexist performer dominating near-nude women so he can qualify as a pimp before a “pimp council.” What might this have to do with the sexual harassment of middle

school girls by bullies? An argument can be made that our culture and our media flood children—deaf, hard of hearing, and hearing—with pro-bully messages that subvert civility. Unfortunately, many families and school personnel simply view bullying as a “rite of passage.” Children are told to “suck it up,” as if cruel pecking orders are a given in life.

Bullying and Deaf and Hard of Hearing Students

How many academically unsuccessful deaf students have been the victims of bullying by hearing students and by more powerful deaf students? Are the deaf or hearing bullies acting out the prejudices of their families?

According to research by John Hoover and Ronald Oliver (1996), “not fitting in” is the most common characteristic of children who are bullied by their peers. Espelage, Asidao, and Vion (1999) found that students who are physically different and those who are perceived to be “not as good at things as everyone else is” are more likely to be victimized by bullies. The academic failure and

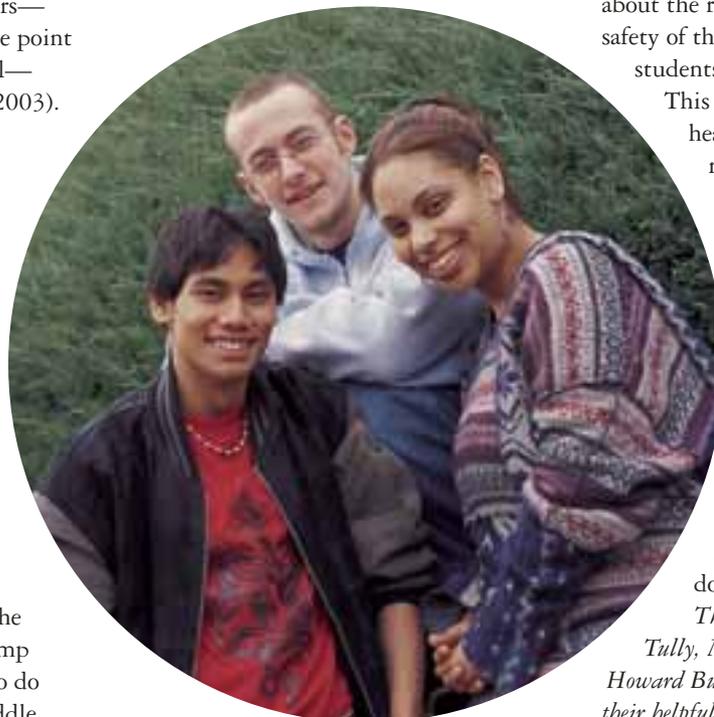
school dropout rates of deaf and hard of hearing children are national scandals. Only about 29 percent of deaf and hard of hearing students are leaving school with diplomas as opposed to certificates of attendance (U.S. Department of Education, 2001).

In the same way that children often learn racial prejudice from their parents (Holmes, 1995), hearing bullies who victimize deaf and hard of hearing students could partially reflect the attitudes of their parents—and some public school administrators—who feel that special education students “don’t belong” (Cirasuolo, 1999). These adults state that students with disabilities are a drain on the local taxpayers. With almost all states and local school districts currently experiencing significant budget deficits, these parental feelings and the resulting dinner table messages may influence hearing students prone to bullying deaf and hard of hearing students.

If the wrath of the school bully is triggered and he or she feels support in the perception that certain students are vulnerable or not perceived to belong, then we have reason to be concerned about the resiliency, coping skills, and safety of the deaf and hard of hearing students in public school classrooms.

This includes all students with hearing loss—the “at risk” resource room-bound deaf child in a large mainstream school, the oral hard of hearing student caught between hearing and deaf student groups, deaf students whose parents are newly arrived in the United States or are from ethnic minority cultures, as well as the deaf students with mental retardation who live in the residential dormitory.

The author thanks Drs. Norm Tully, Mac Vernon, Fran White, Howard Busby, and Cathryn Carroll for their helpful feedback on this article.



counseling strategies

finding the person in the bully and the bullied

By William P. McCrone

School counselors, essential in working with elementary-level students, should make sure that interventions are consistent with school policies, local assault and battery criminal codes, the Safe Schools Act of 1994 [20 U.S.C. 2701 et seq], and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act provisions about discipline, suspensions, and expulsions [20 U.S.C. Sec. 1415(k)].

Funding for special projects on bullying prevention is available through the U.S. Department of Justice Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (<http://ojjdp.ncjrs.org>) and the U.S. Department of Education Safe and Drug-Free Schools Program (<http://www.ed.gov/offices/OSDFS/index.html>).

1. Notice and Prevention • Engage students in discussions, role plays, and rule making about bullying, including by-standing during bullying (Hazler, 1996). Dozens of elementary-level books about bullying (e.g., Amos, 1994; Bosch, 1988; Bottner, 1992; Boyd, 1989) can be used to stimulate group discussions. Be sure that deaf and hearing students participate in the same group discussions and role plays. The plain language student handbook at your school should make the “zero tolerance” bullying rules clear to students and parents. But, like two sides of a coin, deaf and hearing elementary students must complement their discussions about bullying with skill building in communication, relationships, character, and appropriate assertiveness. Wonderful, age-appropriate books are available for this purpose, too (see Lalli, 1997; Frankel, 1996; Gainer, 1998; Palmer, 1991).

2. Parents and Families • Conduct parent and family workshops that include insights into possible mixed messages about bullying at home, bullying of deaf children by hearing siblings, secrets and problems that may underlie bullying behavior by students, and inappropriate video games and TV programs, as well as effective communication and relationship skill building at home. In mainstream schools, families of deaf and hearing students should work together in these workshops.

3. Counseling and Bullies • Communicate directly whenever possible. If an interpreter is required, however, he or she should be ethically and technically qualified for such duties. Do not use the bully’s classroom interpreter. School counselors are urged to use Carl Rogers’ Person Centered Therapy (Rogers and Freiberg, 1994; Rogers, 1995) with deaf or hearing bullies

because it emphasizes establishing a genuine valuing relationship with a difficult child in a way that distinguishes the person from the bullying acts.

4. Insight • Establish a trusting, caring relationship with the bully—a process similar to solving a psychological “Rubik’s cube.” Adler (1946) contended that children will find a place of significance for themselves somehow, as the academic star, the class clown, or the bully. Rarely is the bully also an academic and/or athletic celebrity. Search for the reasons behind the bully’s behavior. Is there any possibility that he or she is the victim of sexual or physical abuse? Is the bully a “latchkey” child who is home alone too much? Exhibitionist bullying can be a call for help by the bully. Does the bully have an undiagnosed or untreated learning disability?

5. Rational Thinking • Encourage rational thinking to redirect behavior (Ellis & Wilde, 2001). Does the deaf or hearing bully believe that his or her identity and worth must be built on power, domination, and physical strength? Does the deaf bully believe that his or her cultural pride can only survive if he or she picks on other children? Does the bully believe that school failure cannot be turned around so he or she spends the days venting anger on other students?

6. Behavioral Analysis • Assess the behavior. When does the bullying occur? On the school bus? In the lunchroom? At night in the dormitories? In class? Who are the victims of the bullying? Is the bullying always with deaf students? Always with deaf students with disabilities? Always with females? We better understand the bullying if we chart the timing, precipitating events, circumstances, and pay-offs of the bullying. Behavioral assessment forms are available online at <http://mfba.net/forms.html>.

7. Action • Develop a prescriptive counseling plan. A strong counseling relationship, insight, rational thinking discussions, and the information that comes from a behavioral analysis can change behavior, but more likely each of these steps will form a springboard for a prescriptive school counseling plan (Glasser, 2001; Knapp & Jongsma, 2002) with the deaf or hearing bully. These interventions can include role playing, positive skill building (communication, relationship, problem solving, anger management), modeling, peer mediation and conflict resolution, and teaching, as well as structured athletic, recreational, and social activities.

8. Administrative and Family Action • Address the larger picture. The entire burden for change should not be on the bullying student alone. What needs to change at home? TV viewing? Video game use? Should dormitories be checked more randomly and more frequently by houseparent supervisors? Are the school lunchrooms and playgrounds adequately supervised? Should your school policy about bullying include provisions about cyber bullying and off-campus bullying? Is your school psychologist qualified to differentially diagnose bullying and deafness-related bullying in an IDEA functional behavioral assessment. Should a deaf student face suspension for bullying?

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