



# Bullying

## A Longing To Belong

**Earlier this year, I facilitated a three day seminar in Sao Paolo. I was subsequently invited to write this article on the subject of bullying for the Brazilian journal, Conexao Sistemica Sul.**

Bullying amongst young people is now a concern worldwide. There are websites, books, plays, films, newspaper articles and discussion forums dedicated to the subject. Surprisingly, it was not until 2000 that the topic moved into mainstream awareness when Canada introduced the first 'Bullying Prevention Week'. Today, it is in our schools, amongst our children, that bullying is most clearly seen and felt. According to Child Helpline International which manages 173 helplines in over 142 countries, nine out of ten cases of bullying take place within schools.<sup>1</sup>

Policy makers and educators have introduced countless prevention and intervention strategies, but the frustration grows as none appear to be conclusively effective. Forceful language and prescribed punishment ring hollow as the problems associated with bullying continue to escalate.

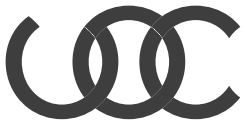
While researching this article, I entered the word 'Bully' into a search engine, specific in my choice of the word as I was interested in the psychology of the perpetrator. What I was offered were sites such as: 'Dealing with Bullies'/'Fighting Bullies'/'BulliesOut'. Most articles, it seems, counsel the victims of bullying. There appears to be very little professional discussion on services available for bullies themselves. Victims evoke our sympathy. Perpetrators elicit reactions of discomfort and aversion. Interestingly, the word 'bully' has its origins in the 16th century Dutch word 'boel', meaning brother or lover.

When I was five years old I bullied a girl in my kindergarten class. Hatija was quietly confident and she was very intelligent. Her presence was a constant reminder to me that I was considered neither of those things. I was fascinated by Hatija; I wanted to be like her, I wanted her to notice me and admire me too, but she took no interest in me. I didn't know how to win her friendship in a way that was kind and inviting, so I made my presence felt in other ways. I was angry at being ignored and so I began to provoke her. I sought to point out what I felt was lacking in her. This made me feel a little better about myself, but it wasn't long before Hatija's friend reported me. I was called in front of a panel of four teachers and was accused of being a bully and a racist. I didn't know what either of those words meant. If someone had explained the concept of victim and perpetrator to me in the language of a five year old, I believe I would have seen myself as the victim and Hatija as the perpetrator.

*'A bully generally feels like a victim. The furthest thing from being the victim is to become the perpetrator. Bullying behavior is an effort to cover up the bully's own vulnerability.'*<sup>2</sup>

On April 7th, 2011, 23 year old Wellington Menezes de Oliveira killed and wounded 24 students at Escola Municipal Tasso da Silveira in Rio de Janeiro. Oliveira, a former student at the school, had been badly bullied. In a video recorded two days before the massacre, Oliveira said the following:

*"The struggle for which many brothers died in the past, and for which I will die, is not solely because of what is known as bullying. Our fight is against cruel people, cowards, who take advantage of the kindness, the weakness of people unable to defend themselves."*<sup>3</sup>



It seems likely that Oliveira considered himself to be one of the 'kind and weak' people, persecuted by 'the cruel people'.

Children are not born 'bad seeds' and bullying is not instinctive. It is learned behaviour; it is behaviour modelled by adults. Grown up bullying can be dramatic and highly visible as in domestic violence and gangland crime or it can be subtle and concealed, so much so that the abuse is almost imperceptible. Adult bullies may portray their peers as overly sensitive to criticism, emotionally fragile, even a little unstable. Weakness is frightening, because it serves as a reminder to us all of the fragility of human life. We live with constant uncertainty and enduring vulnerability. Unconsciously, therefore, we gravitate towards what we perceive as strength in all its different forms – physical, financial, social. Some value the safety of the group; others seek positions of leadership, hoping to acquire an even greater measure of certainty through adulation. Bullying, whether physical or emotional, is an attempt to compensate for feeling unprotected. It is a display that masks a sense of powerlessness. At heart, it is a longing to belong, a quest for a cast iron certainty that our place in the group is guaranteed, always.

*'It's nice to be loved, but if someone fears you, it lasts longer. You can do something wrong and they won't love you anymore, but if you get respect through fear, you'll always have that 'bad man' badge,' even if you never make it, even if you're unemployed, even if you have 8 kids from different girls, you're always going to be able to go back to the area where you were raised and you're always going to be somebody. It's about belonging'.*<sup>4</sup>

The American Psychological Association advises on its website that parents who suspect that their children are bullying peers at school, should look carefully at their own behaviour. It asks parents to consider how they interact with each other, with friends and work colleagues. Do they motivate others with positive and enabling language and behaviour or do they use threat and punishment? What are the parents modelling? What are the children faithfully imitating?<sup>5</sup>

The issue of bullying has shivered down the system and has landed in the open arms of our children. Without a systemic perspective, there can be little hope of a good solution.

I spent five years working systemically and therapeutically in a number of inner city London schools and I observed that children who bully others share certain characteristics. They struggle academically, they come from families where there is conflict and they are often seen as leaders by their peers.

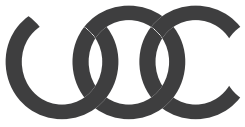
Many of the children who were sent to me because they bullied others, expressed the frustration they felt when school staff failed to listen to their point of view. Adults, they said, often criticised and punished without asking questions or attempting to understand all the facts. Most young children do not have adequate emotional literacy to articulate what they are experiencing and so expressing those feelings through their bodies becomes the most accessible way of releasing frustrated energy.

I was asked to run a series of lunch clubs, both for children who had difficulty managing their anger and for those lacking self-confidence. There was a clear gender divide – no girls ever attended the 'Strong feelings' clubs and there were never any boys in the 'Friendship' groups. The boys arrived with a label: 'violent in the playground'. The girls were defined as having: 'low self esteem'. The boys were clear and articulate about their rage and what lay beneath it. The girls' anger was palpable but it was fragmented and much more difficult to reach. There was, however, an uncomfortable sense that it was taking shape inside a chrysalis and that at some point it would break out in uncontrolled and possibly violent behaviour.

Bullying stems from exclusion; children who show hostility towards others do so because it permits them a level of protection, physically and emotionally. It is a form of self-exclusion. They may feel emotionally isolated but anger and physical violence also help them feel alive and in control. Bullying is often modelled in the home and is transferred to school. These children learn that it is more immediately manageable to incite fear in others than to feel the fear in themselves.

In schools, attention is focused on the bullying behaviour of children. Adult bullying is largely ignored, perhaps because it is more difficult to name and control. Head teachers, anxious about performance targets, make ever increasing demands on classroom teachers who, fearful for their jobs, insist on greater application and higher grades from their pupils. Angry parents verbally abuse and physically threaten teachers and head teachers, who, in turn, respond with indirect and more insidious forms of bullying. In one primary school where I worked, it was decided to run a Practical Parenting Programme. Instead of opening it to everyone, however, the school only sent letters of invitation to the most challenging families. The organisers were surprised and annoyed when no parents showed up for the course. 'Weighing the pig doesn't make it fatter' and shaming parents won't make them better parents.





Bullying is behaviour that makes another person feel bad about themselves, that makes them feel as though they don't belong. It can be words, actions or silence.

Belonging and inclusion are key themes in constellation work and they are key themes in education. In many schools, the ultimate solution to bullying is exclusion. According to an article in 'The Independent' newspaper, the number of primary school students permanently excluded from school rose by 13.9% in a single year.<sup>6</sup> Exclusion as a strategy to eliminate bullying is highly damaging because a child's difficult behaviour is based on a fundamental feeling of exclusion, which has its origins within the family. Excluding children from attending school doesn't teach them anything; it simply reinforces the idea that they deserve to be excluded.

Respect and kindness need to be modelled. In classrooms all over the world, teachers are managing very difficult behaviour. Many do this through punishment and they do it through shouting. Research has shown that the more teachers raise their voices in the classroom, the noisier the children are. The adults are modelling the behaviour.

There is a story, said to be true, about the people of the Solomon Islands in the South Pacific. If a tree is too large to be felled with an axe, the indigenous people cut it down by yelling at it. Every day at dawn, for 30 days they scream at the tree. The theory is that the screaming kills the spirit of the tree. According to villagers, it always works. The tree dies and falls over.<sup>7</sup> Screaming at children is a way to break their spirits too.

It is important to forbid bullying and yet its occurrence cannot be ignored. Its roots must be reckoned and respected. Anger can be rough and awkward but it needs to be expressed and children should be taught how to express it well. Strong feelings are instinctive in all of us and they can give us the courage to stand up for the things we consider to be important, such as injustice. Managing anger should be taught with intelligence and sensitivity as part of the school curriculum. In most schools, expressions of anger are simply forbidden and punished.

At Oak Park primary school, I was asked to offer classroom sessions on inclusion in an attempt to address the issue of bullying in the school. One of the first things I discovered was that children are extremely upset by what they consider to be 'unfairness'. In classrooms and playgrounds, teachers often misread a situation and known troublemakers are blamed for things that may not always be their fault. The sense of injustice and the lack of opportunity to explain leave children feeling angry and helpless. Situations like this may re-enforce what they are experiencing at home. We discussed the relevance of the saying: 'Sticks and Stones can break my

bones but words can never hurt me' and together we came up with a different ending '..... and words can break my heart'. We talked too about the impossibility of preventing people saying things that are unkind and untrue.

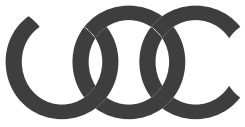
As we know from constellation work, it is not possible to change another person's behaviour. We cannot prevent what people choose to say, either to us or about us. As an example, I would say to a child in a green sweater: 'You're wearing a red sweater'. My mistake was obvious to everyone. However, if I accused someone of having taken my phone and that person denied it, who could the children believe? Who was telling the truth? It's possible that I left my phone at home, so the only person who really knew the truth was the person I was accusing. The children worked in pairs, practicing strong body language, calming breath and developing inner resources: 'I know the truth, even if nobody else does. There is no shame because there is no truth to the accusation'. I encouraged them to use their breath, to feel their truth travelling up through their bodies and into their chests, to hold it for a moment in their hearts, then to exhale gently allowing that inner certainty to unfold into the expression on their faces. If they felt strong and clear, they could look the person in the eye, be it another child, be it a teacher and, holding firmly to what they knew to be true, say out loud:

'I am sorry you have lost your phone. I didn't take it and I hope you find it'.

If we can stand up for ourselves in a calm way, it becomes easier to talk to each other and it becomes easier to listen.

In the 'Strong Feelings' lunch clubs, I would give the children a body map and ask them to plot the places of physical change as they felt their anger rising. For example: rapid breathing, flushed face, racing heart, tense muscles, clenched fists, sweaty palms. We would practice a body exercise to consciously draw the anger to the surface and then release it. I gave them the exercise for homework and asked them to practice it every morning before they got up and every evening before they went to sleep. If they felt under pressure during the school day, I suggested they find a quiet place and just hold their body tight for a moment, then release the frustrated energy. The children said they found the exercises helpful and practiced them regularly. Over the course of the term, they got into less trouble and received fewer detentions.

Boys get into fights in the playground; girls bully each other in more subtle ways. They exclude, they spread rumours through social media and often they deny that they are doing any of these things. For an adult, it can be a slippery issue to manage. At Oak Park, there was a system in place called 'Talk Time'.



In every classroom, there was a box and children who were struggling with a difficulty could complete a slip requesting a ten minute 'Talk Time' session. I found that it was mainly girls who used the Talk Time boxes and that most of their problems were focused around friendship. I noticed that as well as sadness, there was often a great sweetness around why one girl wanted to be friends with another. I became aware too that these girls had no way of articulating their feelings in a comfortable and safe environment within the school.

After listening to many girls, unhappy in their friendships, I decided to try something different. I suggested to one girl, I'll call her Amber, that instead of talking to me, she might like to speak directly to the girl with whom she wanted to be friends. I'll call her Kimberley. I explained to Amber that friendship is created between two people and is not something that can be forced. I said that if Kimberley didn't want to come out of class and speak to her, then she would need to accept that and find herself another friend. Gradually, these one to one sessions grew into girls' group discussions. I always offered the girls the choice of being in the room with them, but they invariably asked me to wait outside the door. When they had completed their discussion, they would invite me back and tell me what they had talked about and agreed to. I was impressed by how fairly and how kindly the girls managed these groups. I didn't contribute in any way, other than offering them a safe place in which to talk. In most cases, the girls either continued to nourish their friendships back in the classroom and in the playground or, the hostility subsided as new friendship groups were established.

Bullying is systemic and its origins lie upstream. If a child is bullying others, then the behaviour is an outlet for both rage and longing. As I write this, I hear on the news that a young man has randomly stabbed and shot dead six fellow students in California. He had declared his intention, through social media, to seek retribution for what he described as his feelings of exclusion, isolation and invisibility. I note, with a feeling of discomfort, that the boy's father is a director on a highly popular fantasy series about young people, forced to kill each other in violent televised contests.

'Bullying is a cultural issue,' says Corinne Gregory: 'We think of bullying as occurring between the bully and the victim, but really, it is the culture that supports the negative behavior. If you have a culture that tolerates bullying and participates in it, either implicitly or complicitly, it will continue.'<sup>8</sup>

As parents, as leaders and teachers, as adults, it is our responsibility to look at all that we say and do, how we behave and what we believe with as much honesty, integrity and congruity as possible. I am reminded of a comment made by a former gang member: 'I don't think kids are bad, they just learn what you teach them'.

Una O'Connell, September, 2014

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- 4 Gang member speaking on 'Disarming Britain: Kids, Knives, Broken Lives' Channel 4 July 2008
- 5 The American Psychological Association. 'Violence prevention for families of young children'.
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- 7 Robert Fulghum, 'All I really need to know I learned in Kindergarten'.
- 8 'Corinne Gregory, 'Breaking the Bullying Culture'

'Girl with Red Hair'

by kind permission of the artist, Henrietta Labouchere.