



## Defuse Bullying by Learning Its Dynamics

If you haven't experienced it directly, you've seen it in the movies and on TV: the overbearing, muscle-bound kid towering over smaller ones as he demands their lunch money or the "mean girls" who make fun of the new girl wearing thick glasses and last year's styles.

Usually they're played for comic effect and eventually get their comeuppance, like in "Revenge of the Nerds" or "Back to the Future." They're bullies, but they're cardboard bullies. The reality of bullying, though, is more complex, insidious, and often much more damaging.

JPA therapist Michele Lansing conducts trainings for school personnel about bullying and its many forms. She helps them understand what bullying is, how it manifests itself, and what they can do about it. The simplistic approach—separating the two parties and telling the bully not to do it again— isn't effective. It takes a lot of patience and understanding to approach this very complex problem.

Even more challenging is the fact that most people don't really know what bullying is. We "know it when we see it," perhaps, but there's a lot more to it than that. Sometimes children (and adults) just don't like each other and may express

that dislike occasionally. But that's not bullying, it's more likely to be simple "peer conflict," a condition everyone experiences with some people over time.

Michele's equation for identifying bullying is "Aggressive Behavior + Power Imbalance + Repetition." It's the older boy who continually taunts a younger classmate, or a popular girl who picks on a less popular one. Children who won't stop taking advantage of others, constantly threaten them, or tease them for being "different" can be classified as bullies.

The forms of bullying include verbal, physical, social, and now, of course, cyber. Children are surrounded and sometimes overwhelmed by the ways they can become victims. Rather than focusing solely on the bully's behavior, it's important to look at its context. In the first place, Michele says, "Bullying may be a sign of mental health issues." Additionally, it's necessary to look at the victim as an "actor" in the relationship in order to provide him or her with "the correct kind of support."

One thing standing in the way of dealing with bullies in schools is the idea that children must get along with everyone. But that's not realistic,

says Michele. “Allowing kids not to be friends can be healthy... ‘Conflict’ in and of itself isn’t bad; the ways it’s expressed can be harmful.” Adults need to look at both sides for effective approaches to the problem. The bully may be unknowingly acting out internal conflicts; the victim may not know how to stand up to the bully or find ways to extricate him or herself from the situation. Peers may not know how to intervene.

Michele stresses that there’s no “magic place where everyone agrees” all the time. But adults can help children by teaching them to be considerate and thoughtful and to stand up for themselves. Simply putting their thoughts and feelings into words may defuse a bullying situation. Saying “I don’t like it when you...” puts a bully on notice. She says “When you name something in your own words, you regain the power it once held over you.” As children develop their social skills, they can learn ways to gain this self-confidence.

In her training sessions, Michele has participants interact, coming up with their own definitions of bullying and setting benchmarks before moving on to the specific issues. They then take a few minutes each to present their thoughts on a quote about bullying, while developing ways to respond to bullying at their schools. Ultimately, one of her goals is to get people to see that “You don’t have to like everyone, though we do have to work together.”

Although incidents of bullying in middle schools have actually declined from 39% to 22% over the last eight years, its effects can be no less destructive. Isolation, self-harm, and even suicide can result from a constant barrage of teasing, rumor-mongering, physical abuse, or publishing of embarrassing pictures online. The more teachers and other adults understand the dynamics of bullying, the more effective they can be helping both the target and the instigator learn to behave more appropriately. **JPA**



To find out more about bullying and Michele’s presentation, contact her at [MLansing@jpachicago.org](mailto:MLansing@jpachicago.org) or at 312-698-6934. You can also visit the website [stopbullying.gov](http://stopbullying.gov) to learn more about the topic and how to deal with it.

LGBTQ students are especially prone to bullying. For more information, go to [nobullying.com](http://nobullying.com) and [nobullying.com/lgbt-bullying-statistics/](http://nobullying.com/lgbt-bullying-statistics/). GLSEN, the Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network, is organizing a “No Name-Calling Week” in schools, Jan. 15-20, 2018.