

Bulling: Living under the shadow of constant threats, abuse can inflict damage that lasts a lifetime

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Though it's often mistakenly considered a normal part of growing up, bullying is a serious problem that affects millions of children and adolescents.

Almost 30 percent of teens in the United States - more than 5.7 million - are estimated to be involved in bullying as either a bully, a target of bullying, or both, according to the National Youth Violence Prevention Resource Center. Some surveys have found that about half of all children have been bullied at some point during their youth.

"Being the target of a bully involves real suffering," said Dr. Earlene Strayhorn, a child and adolescent psychiatrist at Loyola University Medical Center in Maywood, Ill. "The constant stress of physical assaults, threats, coercion and intimidation can take a heavy toll on a child's psyche over time. The abuse may end at some point, but the psychological, developmental, social and emotional damage can linger for years, if not a lifetime."

Victims of bullying can be constantly tense, anxious and afraid. They are frequently unable to focus on schoolwork and in some cases skip school altogether to avoid a bully. Over time a bullied child's sense of self-esteem and self-worth can become affected, causing the child to become withdrawn, depressed and insecure.

"There have even been a number of instances in which victims have committed or attempted suicide in a desperate effort to find reprieve from bullying," Strayhorn said. "Some victims have violently struck back at their tormentors, in some cases targeting innocent bystanders."

All children periodically find themselves the butt of jokes or teasing by their peers, but bullying is different. It is generally relentless and can include physical violence, coercion, name calling, social ostracism or verbal and written threats. In extreme cases, death or sexual assaults have resulted from bullying.

"Bullying has even taken to cyberspace with some children reporting it in online chat rooms, through e-mail and on social networking sites," Strayhorn said.

Bullying can involve one child against another or also a group of youths united against a single individual or another group. Boys are more likely to be the initiators and targets of bullying. Their victims can include both boys and girls. Bullied boys are more likely to be hit, slapped, kicked or pushed.

"Generally, when girls engage in bullying, it's more often verbal and their targets are other girls," Strayhorn said.

Bullies thrive on intimidating and controlling others so they tend to target children who are more passive, easily intimidated and who have fewer friends. Their victims also tend to be smaller or younger and have a harder time defending themselves. If you suspect that your child is being bullied, you should realize that you have a very serious problem on your hands.

"Let your child know that he or she is not alone and not at fault. Tell your child that no one deserves to be bullied for any reason, and then

take action," Strayhorn said.

If the bullying is occurring at school, meet with a teacher, principal, sports coach or school counselor and demand someone intervene to defuse the situation. Frequently, the problem can be solved by an authority figure without the bully ever learning who reported it. If the bullying is occurring outside of the school, tell your child to seek safety in numbers by sticking close to friends or other classmates when walking home or while in a place where the bullying usually occurs.

In some instances, though, it may be necessary to get the authorities involved. Don't shirk. Your child's well-being is at stake. Fortunately, many states - including Illinois - have cracked down on bullying, so the legal tools should be available to you and your child.

"Importantly, if the bullying persists or has occurred over a period of time, it may be necessary to schedule an evaluation with a child or adolescent psychiatrist, psychologist or other mental health professional, all of whom can help you and your [child](#) develop strategies to deal with [bullying](#)," Strayhorn said.

Provided by Loyola University Health System

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