



# How I See It

By Donald McPherson, President of Don McPherson Enterprises, LLC

## Where do Bullies come from?

Bullies come in many forms and operate in many ways for different reasons. The obvious, overtly “mean” students have always been on our radar and for them we have created detention and suspension. We have more casually labeled them the ‘big bully’ and they are often known entities from which we caution less assertive students to stay away. However, the bullying and behaviors that are more difficult to address are those that are less obvious and even more difficult to detect. Such bullying may involve compliant victims who are eager to join a socially elite group or can take place over a span of several years as students matriculate. The language and attitudes in these cases mirror that of the larger culture. The result of such prolonged behavior usually manifests in explosive episodes that seem difficult to trace.

Students who attempt or commit suicide, or bring lethal violence to schools are certainly the exception; however such incidents have shed light on the subtle and pervasive bullying that goes beyond a lone disgruntled teen who comes from a difficult home environment. Cyber-bullying and homophobic language that torment and alienate have been at the center of recent tragedies and poignantly underscore this point.

To truly understand the impact of subtle behavior, we need to



look no further than our behavior as adults.

The social hierarchies of the larger culture play out in schools every day and often support how many bullies function. Society values athletes; the wealthy, charismatic, and even “good looks” are based on predominant cultural “norms.” Being outside or on the lower end of the hierarchy may leave anyone, especially children, vulnerable to teasing and eventual bullying. Like most forms of interpersonal conflict, violence is the end game. Verbal and psychological abuse are more common and typically always precede physical violence.

The reality of this social hierarchy in schools is that very few students fit in all categories. The vast majority of students are talented or possess admirable qualities that range across the spectrum. And, like crabs in a barrel, they constantly find ways to rise above one another and socially

it begins with teasing language. Smart students tease those less academically astute; students who are better dressed and groomed (which is usually a sign of greater family wealth or stability) tease those who are not and so on.

In the subtle bullying that comes from social hierarchies, consensus is often necessary and adult compliance is usually unknowing and most powerful.

Several years ago, in a workshop for high school students who were mentoring an elementary school class, one of the high school boys told me of a group of fifth grade students who tried to coerce him to join their bullying. Another member of their class had soiled his pants in the first grade and, four years later, was still being teased about it. The attempt to enlist the high school student -

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came from the understanding that hierarchies exist and that it's best to be a part of the higher class than not. The elementary students who were teasing were looking for validation from the "cool" high school student. When the high school student would not comply, suddenly the student who was being teased had an ally-an adult (or older student with status) who did not stand by while bullies teased. At that point, he no longer had to be invisible, to accept the taunting to belong. He was empowered by the support.

As I think of the boy who went to school every day, grade one through five with the same group of students, I thought of the impact of such behavior on his sense of self. I admire all those who have channeled such frustration into positive behaviors and understand those who don't. It is for this reason that I have turned to "prevention" by addressing and teaching social competency and awareness rather than punitive measures in response to incidents. This is especially important since the explosive

incidents that get our attention represent a vastly limited picture of the bullying that occurs each day in our schools. ■

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