

Verbal Aggression: Coping Strategies for Children

By David Reitman, PhD, & Manuela Villa
Nova Southeastern University

Threats, teasing, criticism, and other forms of verbal aggression, all of which are types of bullying in general, occur in many schools and neighborhoods. This is why it is very important that parents, teachers, and children know how to respond.

Research suggests that approximately 15% of students ages 8–16 are involved in bully/victim problems with some regularity, either as bullies, victims, or both. Specifically, about 6% of school-age children bully other students, 9% can be described as victims, and about 17% of the victims engage in bullying themselves. Those children who are both bullies and victims appear to suffer more psychological difficulties than do all others. Victims appear to suffer social isolation and depression at rates higher than their peers, even after the bullying has stopped. Also, it remains unclear whether bullying generally causes victims to become socially isolated and withdrawn or if victims are selected for bullying because they are socially isolated.

Verbal aggression may be an ignored and under-reported problem. Perpetrators don't volunteer information, victims don't usually report the verbal aggression, and adults generally don't perceive it as a problem. Other students may refuse to speak out for fear of becoming targets themselves. The shame associated with being victimized is so strong that many children will refuse to admit it, even to their parents and siblings. Because such a large number of children will experience bullying and verbal aggression, and because these problems are often not reported, teachers and parents need to take an active role in prevention and intervention when it occurs.

Characteristics

Definition. Verbal aggression can be defined as deliberately harmful behavior that is typically both unprovoked and repeated. It is an intentional abuse of power, such as teasing, taunting, or threatening, that is initiated by one or more individuals of relatively greater status or power (by virtue of their numbers or size) against a victim of somewhat lesser status or power.

Relevance to bullying. Verbal aggression is similar to bullying except it does not include physical aggression. It is the use of words or gestures to cause psychological harm that differentiates verbal aggression from physical bullying. Many bullies rely on verbal, social, and physical methods of intimidation and harassment. These actions frequently occur on the playground or in the hallways between classes, so they usually don't disrupt class and therefore rarely come to the attention of adults.

Sometimes bullying is witnessed by school personnel and parents, but it may be downplayed because bullying is considered by many to be a natural part of growing up. Verbal aggression may also be downplayed sometimes because it is misperceived as good natured teasing that is done within the structure of the peer group. Some adults even regard verbal aggression and bullying as events that help children toughen up for the real world.

Researchers describe two types of bullying that are relevant to verbal aggression: direct or overt bullying and covert or indirect bullying. Direct or overt bullying consists of taking things, hitting, kicking, pushing, tripping, and shoving, as well as cursing, yelling, and threatening. Covert or indirect bullying, consists of secretive actions, typically involving others. Covert aggression is intended to harm the victim without confrontation. Girls are more likely to engage in covert or indirect bullying by spreading rumors (which is covert or indirect aggression). An example of this type of indirect aggression is the devaluing statements written in notes about a student with the intent to hurt or make fun of the student. Other verbal behaviors, such as taunting, cursing, and threatening, better fit the overt confrontational category.

Developmental factors. Research suggests that verbal aggression and bullying may start in the preschool and early elementary years. Perpetrators tend to become repeat offenders because their verbal and sometimes physical aggression (such as name-calling or biting and hitting) results in other children surrendering desired objects (such as toys) or because the offending child enjoys the effect produced by verbal aggression on other children. For example, the perpetrator's criticism or teasing may cause the victim to cry and nearby peers or adults to laugh. Interestingly, children who stand up to such verbal aggression or bullying by counterattacking in the same way (with teasing, taunts, or physical aggression) sometime go on to become bullies themselves. In any case, once initiated, bullying behaviors are likely to continue, with the frequency of verbal aggression and bullying peaking in the middle school/junior high school years.

Outcomes of Verbal Aggression

Children identified as bullies often have difficulties in forming genuine relationships, although some appear relatively well adjusted. Bullies may also be skilled at orchestrating events to minimize discovery and blame, and they may develop a pattern of resisting accepting responsibility for their actions. Boys are more likely than girls to advance to more serious forms of violence, such as sexual harassment and partner abuse.

Research suggests that children who are merely bystanders in bullying incidents experience feelings of anxiety and powerlessness similar to

that of victims. Because of their passive participation in bullying, bystanders may have a tendency to minimize their role or rationalize the bullying. Ultimately, even passive exposure may diminish children's empathy for victims and possibly contribute to a more general acceptance of this behavior in the school environment.

Interventions

What to look for in a child who has been a target of verbal aggression

- Being afraid of walking to or from school/changing route every day
- Having nightmares or other sleep disturbances
- Showing a marked drop in quality of school work
- Being unwilling to go to school
- Missing possessions
- Asking for or beginning to steal money
- Returning home from school very hungry
- Frequently losing pocket money
- A period of bedwetting after the child has established the ability to sleep without accidents
- Refusing to describe changes in mood or personality or attitudes about school
- Frequent crying • Giving improbable excuses for behavior
- Developing stomachaches or headaches before school

Strategies for parents

Teach your child to avoid children who bully and tease, that walking away is a sign of strength, and that you can't tease someone who isn't there.

Build your child's self-esteem, giving your child lots of specific praise and physical affection, reminding your child of his or her strengths, and encouraging participation in social activities where bullies are not present and children are well supervised.

Help your child understand why other children bully and tease. Explain that many bullies are unhappy, confused, insecure, or are themselves victim of someone else's verbal aggression. The bully may also be satisfied with the role of intimidator of others.

Encourage your child to use peer mediation through participation in the school's Peer Mediator program if one is available. Make sure that the program is well supervised by an adult who will not allow the bully to continue to maintain power over the child who has been targeted.

Teach your child to use positive self-talk when bullied such as, "I'm okay, I like myself. What he or she (the bully) thinks doesn't matter."

Be a model for your child, by avoiding watching violent TV programs, by not being verbally aggressive yourself, and by modeling good problem-solving and communication skills.

Brainstorm solutions with your child, and agree on a possible solution to the problem, as well as a backup plan.

Teach your child to be assertive by encouraging your child to ask the bully to STOP.