



BULLYING!

The tactics may change, but the bad behaviours know no age

BY LEONARD CARR



One of the most perplexing and ubiquitous problems in schools today is that of bullying. It might be useful to pause and consider some of the underlying social and psychological dynamics that get played out among children and adults who never outgrew these issues. If you observe people from the earliest age, you will notice that human interaction is very much organised around the quest for power and competition. Who will control the game? Who will be daddy's favourite? Who will be in charge, me or the teacher? Who is going to get to play who and who will be excluded? Issues like these often get played out and with perplexing results. Boys on the whole tend to play with power and competition explicitly, usually directed towards mastery of concrete tasks. Girls tend to compete more in the

social realm through verbal undermining, lobbying, forming exclusive coalitions, and ruthlessly shunning outsiders by using covert emotional bullying tactics. If you watch adults, you will notice that all that changes for most people is their level of sophistication and finesse, not the actual games that they play. The biting, grabbing, lying, sulking, and stealing or messing up others people's work continues in adult versions of those same be-

haviours. Competing to impress or monopolise daddy's attention translates into monopolising meetings to shine the most brightly in the eyes of the boss. The child who wished to unseat the teacher and take power will try the same with a boss. In childhood you did not have the power to remove siblings who parents preferred or classmates who were more capable and posed the threat of outshining you. As an adult, however, you do have the power to remove threats, exclude potential competitors, and monopolise power and glory, especially if you are in a position of power. The boundaries and rules about how people and competition should be managed are determined by culture.

Where no explicit culture exists or the authority figures are too complacent or indifferent to enforce the rules, people will make up their own rules based on what suits them. The more manipulative or dominating individuals will exert the greatest influence. The most important role of a leader in any group of any age is to be the primary custodian of the culture. In the context of power and competition, it means managing people's roles and relationships so that everyone's efforts are directed towards achieving common objectives and values in service of

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the greatest good. When leadership avoids confronting abuses of power or tries to appease destructive elements, they create a moral vacuum that will be filled with conflict and exploitative self-interest. They not only fail their constituency, but create the conditions for their own demise.

There are certain social codes that are almost never consciously known, and when known are never acknowledged or articulated. They operate best when they are kept completely opaque. In fact, if known, they can be challenged, undermined, and ultimately subverted. When kept hidden as if unknown, they can be used to preserve secret caste systems that operate forcefully and consistently to keep power and privilege within the appointed group. The secrecy of these codes and the vehemence with which they would be denied is in direct inverse proportion to the power that's required to preserve the franchise of the group members and disenfranchise those meant to be excluded from the group.

Consider the following scenario: A wealthy entrepreneur who possesses fine tastes and a willingness to spend money on luxury and self-indulgence is one of two children. His brother is an academic with equally fine taste and enjoyment of good things but does not consider spending his meagre income on anything other than necessities and social investment projects. When the rich brother gets married, wealthy relatives give him rare antique silver. When the other brother marries, the same relatives give him a small cash gift. The brother of lesser means knows his pursuits are not respected in the family and, so as to not look like a loser, spends more than he can afford on a decent gift for relatives, and it goes virtually unacknowledged. The wealthy brother buys something cheap but presents it in a novel way and everyone admires the gift and fawns over him. Another scenario: a very smart consultant gives great business advice to a friend who keeps coming back for more advice, makes great business moves based on the advice, but never offers the friend a business opportunity.

“WHAT CHILDREN ACT OUT WHEN THEY PLAY THE ROLE OF BULLY OR VICTIM IS A REFLECTION WHAT THEY HAVE BEEN TAUGHT IN THE HOME AND HOW THEY SEE THEIR PARENTS MANAGING SOCIAL STATUS, CONFLICT RIVALRY, AND VALUES LIKE LOYALTY AND RESPECT.”

When someone exploits their power in a relationship with someone of lesser power, other people in power rally to defend, protect, and vindicate the perpetrator and collectively crucify the victim. The moneyed are a caste that often prefer to keep wealth within the caste and do not admit poor people entry because that threatens the collective worth of the group. They prefer to merge fortunes rather than join two people in love. There are people who prefer marriage prospects for their children who reflect their caste values rather than being at all concerned about, or even considering, the interests, tastes, values, and feelings of the child. The examples are endless. The ambitious, the thin, the boys, the adults, the addicts, the rebels, all have unspoken rules about how to look after each other's interests, eliminate threats, and keep the group in the pound seats. Understandably, people who write about these groups never get invited to their parties.

What children act out when they play the role of bully or victim is a reflection of what they have been taught in the home and how they see their parents managing social status, conflict rivalry, and values like loyalty and respect. Everyone from the earliest age is taught where they belong and under what circumstances they are welcome to participate as an equal. You get to understand where you fit in the family as the oldest, favourite, or even step-child. Each position affords privileges and responsibilities, or alternatively handicaps and exclusion. You are taught whether and when you may speak, to whom, and in what manner it is acceptable to join a conversation of those making the rules. Overstepping the boundaries usually leads to shaming or even rejection. At school you quickly learn whose answer or opinion is sought after and valued and who gets overlooked or ig-

nored. In essence, you are taught when and when not to be visible, to look or notice, to listen or hear, to enter or stay out when you have not been invited. You are taught not to comment or express an opinion when your voice is unwelcome. This leaves its mark on people's view of themselves, their worth, entitlement, and sense of being welcome within the dominant group or faction.

The experience of self gets passed on through families and cultures. It becomes encoded into your being through the stories and vicarious witnessing of history that transfers emotions, beliefs, perceptions, and meanings from one generation to the next. The feelings and beliefs do not necessarily end when the circumstances that gave rise to them are over. You also do not instantly change your experience of and feelings about the world just because someone tells you that the rules and, therefore, your positions in the world and social structure have changed. Depending on where you believed that you belonged in the scheme of things, you tend to recreate that role in your work and social circle. This results in the dominant group ignoring them, not listening or responding when they do try to enter the conversation. The behaviour on each side becomes mutually supporting. The result is in an invisible barrier that keeps many stuck on the outside with seemingly no chance of an entry point.

The only way to overcome the problem of bullying is for parents and teachers to start to recognise and own up to these issues. This means acknowledging family attitudes towards power and money and how you discriminate through comments and behaviours in ways that tell your children who to value and who to ignore or marginalise, or whether they in fact deserve to belong or to feel like the poor relation. ■