

# On Punishment for Bullying — and Punishment as Bullying

By Alfie Kohn

Bullying at school has attracted an enormous amount of attention, spurring academic studies and popular books, regulations and training sessions for educators. By now its status as a serious problem is widely acknowledged, as it should be. We can never go back to the days when bullying was regarded as a boys-will-be-boys rite of passage, something that victims were left to deal with (and suffer from) alone.

But as with other ills, both within and beyond our schools, some responses are much less constructive than others. The least thoughtful (or useful) strategy is to announce a “zero tolerance” stance in regard to bullying. Either this phrase amounts to empty rhetoric — rather like responding to repeated instances of gun violence in our country by sending each cluster of victims our “thoughts and prayers” — or else it refers to a policy of harsh punishment for bullies.

The latter approach is worth our attention precisely because it comes so easily to us, complementing a punitive sensibility already well-established in our schools. Students who break the rules or otherwise displease us are subjected to suspension, expulsion, detention, enforced isolation (“time-out”), loss of opportunity to participate in enjoyable activities, and so on.

Making children suffer for what they’ve done is often defended on practical grounds, but I’ve been unable to find any evidence to support the claim that punishment makes schools safer or leads the children who have been punished to become more ethical or responsible. Indeed, punitive responses — even if they’re euphemistically called “consequences” — are often not merely ineffective but actively counterproductive. To cite only one in a long line of empirical investigations, an eight-year longitudinal [study](#) published in 2005 found that punitive discipline was subsequently associated with more antisocial behavior, less prosocial behavior, and increased levels of anxiety.

Interestingly, when many proponents of traditional discipline are presented with such evidence, they simply pivot to a very different defense, one that can’t be dislodged with evidence: They insist that if someone does something bad, something bad must be done to that person. He or she must be “held accountable”; a consequence must be imposed for moral reasons, even if there are no practical benefits. (In 2001, UCLA [researchers explored](#) the popularity of this retributive rationale on the part of teachers.)

But the effects of punishment do matter, and where bullying is concerned, they suggest a painful irony: Punishing kids who bully not only fails to address the source of the problem but actually makes things worse. As Barbara Coloroso pointed out in her book *The Bully, The Bullied, and the*

Bystander, punishment teaches the bully “to be more aggressive and hurtful. He will undoubtedly master the art of doing his bullying in ways that are sneaky or ‘under the radar’ of even the most observant and aware adults. More important,” she adds, “punishment degrades, humiliates, and dehumanizes the children who are its objects. (Sounds like bullying to me.)”

Decades’ worth of research shows that punishment – even when it doesn’t include physical force – promotes aggression. But studies conducted in [the U.S.](#) and in [Sweden](#) revealed another layer to that reality: Bullies in particular are more likely to have been raised by authoritarian parents who rely on punishment. Dan Olweus, a leading authority on the subject, conducted the latter study, and he, like other critics of punishment, has offered suggestions for what can curb bullying. The key is to “restructure the social environment” – the entire school culture – rather than trying to target individual students by encouraging intervention by bystanders, offering advice to potential victims, or, worst of all, punishing bullies.

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It’s easy to assume that punitive discipline is an inevitable part of school life. That leaves us quibbling only about the details of implementation – for example, how severe the penalty should be for a given offense. Once we take a step back and consider whether punishment itself really makes sense, the status quo becomes very troubling indeed.

Consider: A [punishment](#) is a response by someone with more power (say, an adult) to a prohibited action on the part of someone with less power (in this case, a child). Specifically, it consists of deliberately making the child suffer in some way. The intent may be to discourage the child from repeating the action, but the more common results of punishment are that the child (1) becomes angry and frustrated, (2) learns that you get your way in life by using your power over those who are weaker, and (3) becomes more focused on self-interest and less likely to consider how his actions affect others. Punishment induces kids to ask, “What do they, the people with the power, want me to do, and what’s the consequence to me if I don’t do it?”

From this perspective, it quickly becomes clear that the problem with school policy isn’t just that punishing bullies inevitably backfires. Rather, punishment in general is likely a hidden contributor to bullying, both because of what it models and because of its effects on the students who are punished.

Dig even deeper, though: Maybe it’s not just that punishment contributes to bullying. Maybe traditional discipline is a kind of bullying. That’s the unsettling implication of Coloroso’s parenthetical afterthought that I quoted above. Definitions of bullying tend to sound something like this: “a hostile action – or a pattern of abuse, intimidation, or harassment over time – in which those who are smaller or weaker are victimized by those who are larger or stronger.” That the larger, stronger people may have graduate degrees – or can spin out elaborate rationalizations for their actions – is really beside the point.

One barrier to acknowledging this, apart from our reluctance to admit the intrinsic unpleasantness of what we’re doing and the harm it may be causing, is the way unquestioned assumptions are built into our use of language. For example, when we talk about kids, the word respect typically refers to something they owe us, not something they’re owed by us. Likewise, bullying is a word we’re accustomed to using only to describe something done by students.

Another barrier is the difficulty of shifting our level of analysis. Even if, recalling certain bosses or colleagues, we concede that adults, too, may be bullies, and even if we were open to the possibility that they might victimize children, too, it’s much more disconcerting to consider that bullying isn’t

just done by individuals. Widely accepted practices and policies may amount to institutionalized bullying. Taking away recess, handing out zeroes, forcing children to stay after school, sending unpleasant reports home to parents, exiling students from the classroom (or school) — and threatening in advance to do these things to them if they fail to obey us — may not have been intended as bullying. But what matters, and what predicts the effects, is how these things appear to the people to whom they're done.

This shift in perspective should prompt us to transform schools from “doing to” to “working with” places, to see kids' troubling actions not as infractions to be punished (where someone must be made to suffer) but as problems to be solved — and opportunities for teaching. If we need a simple reason to support these shifts, maybe it's sufficient that we want to make sure our actions never resemble those of a bully.

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