

The Bullied Brain

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Tyrone, age twelve, came home crying, shaking and barely able to speak. “What happened?” his mother screamed. Between sobs he was finally able to tell his mother about the terrifying ordeal he had endured on the way home from the park.

“Three kids jumped me and forced me into a ‘PortaPotty.’” he explained. “They wouldn’t let me out, beat on the walls and told me they were going to shove my head into the tank. I think they would have, but they ran when a jogger came along.”

“How long were you in there?” his mother asked.

“I don’t know. Ten, fifteen minutes, maybe” Tyrone replied.

“Do you know the boys?” she asked as she hugged her son.

“Yeah,” he answered. “They’re a year ahead of me in school and always picking on us younger kids.”

Bullying incidents like Tyrone’s have been getting a lot of attention lately. And well they should. Even though bullying has been going on for many generations we are learning just how devastating its effects can be.

Some bullying tragedies make national headlines. It turned out, for example, that Eric Harris Dylan Klebold, the Columbine High School murderers, had suffered years of bullying. Massachusetts teenager Phoebe Prince committed suicide after months of being victimized by older students.

Tyrone’s story won’t make cable news nor will the millions of other bullying incidents that happen every year. Brain science, however, is showing us how serious and long term the damage can be. Studies reveal that there are long lasting chemical and structural brain changes that account for the cognitive and emotional damage that can be as severe as the harm done by child abuse.

Canadian psychologist Tracy Vaillancourt, for example, reports that the levels of the stress hormone cortisol are higher in bullied boys meaning that their stress reaction system is in constant overdrive. Curiously cortisol levels are below normal for bullied girls, perhaps meaning that their stress response systems are hampered.

McLean Hospital researcher Martin Teicher scanned the brains of bullying victims and found significant shrinkage in the corpus callosum—the brain tissue connecting the left and right hemispheres. This makes it difficult for victims to process what is happening around them and to respond appropriately.

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The amygdala is the brain's alarm center. When it is repeatedly activated the brain is in a constant state of arousal. It's as if the radar is finely tuned, always ready to pick up the slightest hint of a threat. It is very difficult to concentrate, remember and learn when the brain is always scanning for danger.

These brain changes are the explanations for the symptoms bullying victims have: avoidance behaviors, anxiety, depression, appetite and sleep problems, feelings of helplessness and suicidal thoughts. Bullying also causes cognitive problems like impaired memory, attention and concentration. It's hard for the bullied brain to learn when it's always in a state of high alert, prepared for the next attack. Bullying victims and PTSD sufferers have a lot in common. The hypersensitivity makes it very hard to relax and enjoy activities.

Life for bullied youngsters can be miserable. Bullies are often smart enough to avoid the types of physical attacks that could get them into trouble. So they resort to threats, insults, or ridicule. Victims have to endure being ignored, excluded, insulted and laughed at.

The same technology that can entertain, educate and bring young people together also provides the bully with a new set of weapons leading to an epidemic of cyber-bullying, a word that wasn't even in our vocabularies a few years ago. Instead of waiting by the door after school, cyberbullies do their damage via text messages, emails, and Facebook posts from a remote location. Cyberbullies send insults and threats electronically, often many of them. They circulate humiliating pictures or post demeaning descriptions on websites. Victims are often taunted on home computers or cell phones and feel there is no escape from torturers. Research shows that three times as many kids are cyberbullied as are bullied face to face.

Brain science lends even more urgency to confronting the scourge of bullying. There are studies suggesting that the brain changes are long term and therefore can create emotional scars that last for a lifetime.

Here are some things parents can do.

1. Let your children know that if they are victims they should tell adults right away.
2. If your child is a bullying victim, get involved by contacting the bully's parents, school, or, if needed, law enforcement.
3. Help kids learn how to apologize and work out conflict with others face-to-face.
4. Make sure your children and teens know that there is a zero tolerance policy for bullying.
5. Check with your school to see if they have a bullying prevention policy that they follow and enforce.
6. Encourage your school to provide bullying prevention training for students, teachers and staff.
7. Make sure that your children know that if they act like bullies, the punishment will be swift and sure.

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