

Gifted and Bullied

By Daniel B. Peters

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Michael is 12 and in the 6th grade at his public middle school. He had a difficult time socially in elementary school. He never really fit in with his peers and was known as “smarty pants.” He always answered questions first, and exuberantly asked his teacher questions. Not being that good at sports, Michael was always picked last during games at recess. Michael was looking forward to a new start in middle school where he would meet new people from different schools who didn’t know about his reputation.

Michael had no idea that things could be worse in middle school. Short and thin, he started getting teased the first day, being called “four eyes,” “nerd,” and “dork” as he walked down the hall with his big backpack. Large 7th and 8th graders pushed him in the hall and laughed at him when he stumbled to keep his balance. While Michael used to find some solace in his classes by connecting with his teachers,

he was confused by some of his new teachers’ negative reactions to him. For example, although getting an A+ in his English class, publicly humiliated him by calling on him when she felt he wasn’t paying attention. She would say things like, “You think you’re so smart that you don’t need to pay attention like everyone else.”

Michael began to have trouble falling asleep and woke up in the middle of the night worrying about what was going to happen the next day at school. He started to get stomachaches before school and telling his parents he didn’t want to go to school anymore. When asked why, he burst into tears saying, “Why does everyone hate me? I don’t understand what I did to deserve this. Nobody likes me, not even my teachers. Why can’t people just accept me for who I am?”

WHAT IS BULLYING?

Bullying can take several different forms. The most obvious bullying is physical aggression. However, bullying behavior also

includes name-calling, threatening, intimidation, and more subtle forms of cyber-bullying through e-mails, texts, and chat rooms. In a study of gifted children who were bullied, Peterson and Ray (2006) found that quiet desperation, a sense of helplessness and worthlessness were commonly reported experiences of the children they studied.

WHY ARE GIFTED KIDS AT RISK FOR BEING BULLIED?

While gifted children exhibit advanced abilities in a number of areas, their personality characteristics often make them vulnerable and targets for bullies. Gifted children often act different from the norm. They often stand out because of an advanced, adult-like vocabulary or sophisticated sense of humor that is beyond their peers. They often don't want to "play the game" related to social hierarchies and peer acceptance, and further, many gifted kids don't know how to play this game even if they wanted to. Another characteristic that can make gifted children targets is their strong sense of justice and fairness, which may result in calling peers out in public situations or making a big deal out of something that is not a big deal to others. Related to this, gifted children often do not back down when they believe they are right or things are not the way they think they are supposed to be.

WHO GETS BULLIED?

Both boys and girls get bullied. Kids as young as pre-school age all the way through college get bullied. However, bullying tends to spike at the end of elementary school through middle school, then decline in high school. This is not to say that bullying does not occur outside of these time periods; however, it appears that bullying starts as social awareness and sophistication come into play in 4th and 5th grades and dominates in middle school. For some, bullying tends to decline in high school when there are more options for peer group affiliation such as band, drama, and other various clubs, which may act as a buffer.

The higher the intelligence a child possesses, the more different the child is from everyone else. The more different they are from the norm, the more vulnerable they are to being bullied. Further, often the higher the IQ, the more intense (even if it is a quiet intensity) and sensitive they are to their own experiences and to the behavior and feelings of others. Together, high IQ and sensitivities play a significant role in the subjective experience of the victim.

DEVELOPMENTAL IMPACT

Bullying, particularly chronic bullying, can have serious developmental implications. Being picked on, demeaned, and embarrassed negatively affects a child's self-perception and self-worth, and erodes self-confidence in one's abilities. Imagine going to school every day and being publicly humiliated for who you are and how you act. Further, being physically bullied negatively impacts a child's sense of personal safety in the world and in relationships. How can one feel safe if one is worried about being humiliated, pushed, punched, or slammed into a locker?

Being bullied also contributes to underachievement. When one is picked on for who one is—quirky, brainy, weird—it is natural to try to not be those things if one can help it. Further, when children are preoccupied with being picked on and humiliated,

they may not be able to focus on learning, as attention is turned to safety and survival. Finally, and as a result of all of the above, being bullied is often a precipitant to anxiety and depression.

CLINICAL SIGNS

Symptoms of anxiety and depression often result from being bullied. Bullied children may experience fear in and out of school and worry that something bad is going to happen to them. They often feel helpless that they cannot do anything about their situation, and feel hopeless that things will not change.

In chronic and severe cases, gifted children who are bullied experience symptoms associated with Post-traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). Chronically bullied children often turn inward, isolate, or shut down. They may exhibit more emotional meltdowns, or changes in mood than is normal for that child. They may exhibit apathy and emotional numbing. With the increase in anxiety, avoidance of school and social situations often emerges. Nightmares and other sleep disturbances often occur as well. Finally, "paranoia" may result, in that a gifted bullied child, due to prior experiences and extreme sensitivity, anticipates being mistreated by others even when others do not readily observe it.

Michael's parents were concerned about him. He seemed to have lost his excitement for learning and sharing information with them. Michael walked with his head down, and complained of always being tired. His parents often found him sitting and staring with a blank look on his face. He still did his schoolwork, but didn't seem to care about the quality, which was not like him. Once energetic, Michael was now usually quiet and withdrawn. His parents didn't know what to do. They spoke with his teachers who said they didn't notice anything out of the ordinary and that he was doing fine in their classes. They talked to the school counselor who said she would look into it, but they had not heard back from her. They knew something was wrong, but what could they do? How could they help him?

WHAT WE CAN DO

Gifted children who are bullied often feel alone, confused, and defenseless. First and foremost, these children need to feel heard and validated for their experiences. They often feel invisible. Dismissing or minimizing their experiences often results in even more helplessness and hopelessness. Gifted children need to have the experience of being liked and valued by someone other than their families. They need to have their strengths highlighted to remind them that they are good at something and that they matter.

Most of the time, interventions for bullying need to be multifaceted and include several people. The following are suggestions for people who play different roles in a child's life, including the child themselves:

Bullied children. You must tell someone what is happening even if you don't think it will help. Tell your parents. Tell your teacher. Talk to the school counselor. Try walking away from, and avoiding bullies if possible. When you are bullied, try not to let them see they are getting to you. This is very hard, yet bullies want to get a reaction. Do your best to find at least one person who is nice to you and stay with that person. Spend more time with a teacher or counselor you trust. Be strong, and remember you are a good person with talents who has a lot to offer.

Parents. Recognize when your child is acting differently than usual. Continue to investigate what is happening even if others tell you everything is fine. Listen to your child and validate his experience. Let his teachers know something is, or might be, happening at school. Talk to the school counselor about your concerns, as this will allow more eyes to be on your child. If your child is showing signs of depression or anxiety mentioned above, seek professional help. Early intervention is very important.

Teachers. Be aware that bullying is common and that gifted children are susceptible due to their unique characteristics. Set a classroom expectation of respect for all students. Infuse curriculum and discussions about bullying—what it is, and how to deal with it if it occurs. Make it clear that bullying is not tolerated. Watch for subtle bullying behavior such as teasing and ostracizing. Notice who has power in the classroom, and who is alone. Work with school counselors and administrators to address bullying situations and support children who are victimized.

Counselors and psychologists. Validate the child's experience. Teach the child tools for dealing with their particular situation, including basic and more sophisticated social skills. Help them to understand the impact of their behavior on others. What might they be doing that is eliciting negative attention? Teach them to be assertive and advocate for themselves. Practice role-playing different scenarios. Instill hope. Help them find meaning and purpose. Help them identify safe people and places. Be a consistent, kind, and compassionate presence in their life.

Parents often need assistance too. Guide parents in supporting their child through a difficult time. Parents will feel helpless too. Give them suggestions and reassure them. Help them navigate the school system by suggesting who to talk to.

When at all possible, provide a positive and healthy peer, or peer group, for the bullied child. Organized, and semi-structured counseling groups often provide a place for children to talk about their experiences and get feedback and validation from others. A useful resource is *The Essential Guide to Talking with Gifted Teens* by Jean Peterson.

Administrators. Implement a no tolerance policy for bullying behavior. Keep track of not only who is bullied, but also who does the bullying. Keep eyes on the bullied and the bullies. Establish a school culture of caring and compassion.

Michael's parents took him to see a child psychologist who worked with gifted children. Michael appreciated having someone other than his parents listen to his experiences. He learned about how his giftedness made him stand out to others, and while not an excuse for being mistreated, there were things he could do to avoid negative feedback. Michael and his psychologist practiced different responses to different situations; Michael agreed to try them and report back as to how they worked. Michael's parents received guidance regarding how they should talk to school personnel, so they could better understand Michael's experiences. A school staff person was identified as Michael's "go to" person.

SUMMARY

Bullying is all too common and gifted children, due to their characteristics, appear to be easy targets. Being bullied has a negative impact on children's personal, emotional, academic, and behavioral development. Gifted children who are bullied need support in being resilient. While trying to find meaning and purpose in their lives, they ultimately need to survive and persevere. Often they have to wait to get older—wait for their "peers" to mature and be less invested in teasing and bullying. A successful intervention depends on the nature and severity of bullying and the impact on the child. An intervention can range from giving a child strategies, talking to teachers and administrators, to changing schools where they are better understood or don't have the history of their reputation. In extreme situations, gifted children may have to be "unschooled" in order to recover from being misunderstood and mistreated, and regain their emotional health.

Despite counseling, and attempted school interventions, Michael continued to get bullied, humiliated, and ostracized. He was handling it better now that he had strategies, yet still experienced frequent sadness, and felt as though he didn't have much to offer, as he was internalizing the names he was regularly called. After a difficult process that included both him and his parents, it was decided that he would transfer to a school where he knew only a few other kids, and where there may be more opportunities for him to engage with other gifted students, and have a fresh start. Now in 7th grade, Michael reports having real friends and feels that he belongs. His confidence is returning and his energy for life and learning is back. When asked what he would tell other gifted kids who are being bullied, he responded, "Remember you are a good person. Don't let them destroy who you are. You will make it through—sometimes it is just really hard and painful."

SUGGESTED READINGS FOR TEENS

Galbraith, J., & Delisle, J. (2011). *The Gifted Teen Survival Guide: Smart, sharp, and ready for (almost) anything*. Fourth Edition. Minneapolis, MN: Free Spirit Publishing, Inc.

REFERENCES

- Peterson, J. & Ray, K. (2006). "Bullying Among the Gifted: The Subjective Experience." *Gifted Child Quarterly*, 50, 252-259.
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