



The *Real* Consequences of Bullying

| *What can we do to stop it?*

Introduction

The panel that investigated the Virginia Tech shooting found a disturbing pattern in the short life of twenty-three-year-old Seung-Hui Cho, the shooter who killed thirty-two students and wounded many more in the worst school shooting in U.S. history on April 16, 2007. The panel found that, at three years old, Seung-Hui Cho was described as frail, shy, and wary of physical contact. In the eighth grade, Cho was diagnosed with depression. A pattern of disturbing behavior and writing should have sounded the alarm that this young man was on the verge of doing something extreme.

But it was not until a package arrived at NBC two days after the shooting that anyone was given a key to the door into Cho's mind. The multimedia package contained an 1,800-word manifesto and photographs of Cho pointing guns and with ammunition strapped to his chest.

"Oh the happiness I could have had mingling among you hedonists, being counted as one of you, if only you didn't (blank) the living (blank) out of me," he wrote. "You could have been great. I could have been great. Ask me what you did to make me clean the slate."¹

Cho likened himself to Columbine shooters Dylan Klebold and Eric Harris, who killed twelve students and wounded twenty-three others in April 1999. Klebold was also described as extraordinarily shy, with few friends other than Harris. According to acquaintances, nothing in his behavior gave any clues as to what he would do. But in journal entries recovered after the shooting, he described himself as not fitting in, being depressed, and generally hating his existence.²

Harris's journal was also telling. One entry read, "I hate you people for leaving me out of so many fun things."

Session at a Glance

ARRIVING

- Are you guilty?

GATHERING

- Passing the buck

OPENING

- Prayer
- What is bullying?

EXPLORING

- Who are the bullies?
- Who are the bullied?
- Who are the bystanders?

RESPONDING

- Lending a hand

CLOSING

- Prayer and sharing

Like many schools, both Virginia Tech and Columbine had a culture of bullying. At Columbine, some students were systematically tormented, taunted, or excluded by more powerful or popular students, and administrators and teachers seemed unaware of the pervasiveness and the cruelty of the bullying. As a college, Virginia Tech's was more subtle—a process of silence, exclusion, and avoidance of Cho rather than overt aggression. Cho's ex-classmates at Westfield High School in Chantilly, Virginia, said he was often mocked for his shyness and the strange way he talked.³

In her report "The School Shooter: A Threat Assessment Perspective," FBI Supervisory Special Agent Mary Ellen

O'Toole said school shooting, school violence, and their root causes are not just the problems of schools and law enforcement. They are, she said, the problem of the entire community:

An adolescent comes to school with a collective life experience, both positive and negative, shaped by the environments of family, school, peers, community, and culture. Out of that collective experience comes values, prejudices, biases, emotions, and the student's responses to training, stress, and authority. His or her behavior at school is affected by the entire range of experiences and influences. No one factor is decisive. By the same token, however, no one factor is completely without effect, which means that when a student has shown signs of potential violent behavior, schools and other community institutions do have the capacity—and the responsibility—to keep that potential from turning real.⁴

Like O'Toole, the American Medical Association also takes bullying in school seriously. It confirms that bullying "is not just another childhood problem that will eventually be outgrown, but rather a public health problem that can have long-lasting effects for both the bully and the victim."⁵

Since bullying is obviously a pervasive problem with detrimental effects for all involved, it's a problem that Christians, especially Christian youth, should feel compelled to address. After all, as the American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry points out, as many as half of all children are bullied at some point in their lives and nearly 10 percent on a regular basis throughout their school career.⁶ That means that chances are most adults and teens were either bullied during school or know someone who was.

If youth and adults are going to fight this battle against bullying, it's important to understand what's behind this pervasive problem. Here are some facts:

It's about power. Bully can take many forms—from up-front, aggressive behaviors like hitting, intimidating, and name calling to less-direct, subtler behaviors such as spreading rumors and encouraging exclusion. However, the damage to the psyche of the person targeted by the behavior is the same. This repeated, prolonged effort to harm someone weaker or more vulnerable is a misuse of power, power wielded by one person over another.

Bullies are made, not born. While a child's temperament can indicate factors that might make him or her more

likely to bully, home environment seems to be a powerful shaper. Homes where parents interact little with their children or where their discipline habits are too harsh or too permissive can increase the risk of bullying among children.⁷

Everyone plays a role. Barbara Colerosa has identified several roles in most bullying situations: the bully, the bullied, and the bystander. Most people, if they haven't been a bully or the bullied in their life, have been a bystander, and by doing nothing, they too have contributed to the continuation of the behavior.

It's not always what you think. Dr. Dan Olweus, one of the pioneers in bullying research, found out some interesting things that debunked the conventional wisdom about bullies (see the appendix at the end of the Leader's Guide titled "Not Well-Enough-Known Facts about Bullying").

It's a sign of a spiritual crisis. Ronald Hecker Cram, an associate professor of Christian education at Columbia Theological Seminary, says bullying is "a behavioral manifestation of a spiritual crisis."⁸ He says violence is a fundamental human desire gone awry—the desire to connect to others. At its heart, bullying is the perverted desire to relate to another human being. A failure to address and correct that behavior means the community as a whole will continue to suffer.

It can be prevented. Olweus points out in his prevention program that, in fact, it can be. His is a four-step approach: positive interest and involvement from adults; firm limits on unacceptable behavior; consistent, nonpunitive application of sanctions for unacceptable behavior and violation of the rules; and influence of adults who act as authorities and positive role models.⁹

As Christians, we are used to uncertainty—our faith is built on questions, our future on hope. When it comes to bullying, however, there is more than just faith and hope to move us forward. There are knowledge and proven methods that can help to curb and eventually change the behavior. Participants in this session have the opportunity not only to delve into a deeper understanding of this common violent and abusive behavior and to recognize the warning signs but also to learn to recognize their own role in the situation and their moral and ethical responsibility to assist in its resolution.

Goal for the Session

Participants will explore the pervasive nature of bullying in our culture and consider Christian responses to bullying.

Preparing for the Session

- You will need:

Pencils/pens

Paper

Copies of the Participant Handout

Magazines with plenty of images of people or precut images

Construction paper

Glue or tape

A small toy buck, a picture of a buck, or one cut from construction paper

- Read over some of the news coverage and documentation associated with the Virginia Tech and Columbine shootings. You can Google each school name and get plenty of information, but you'll also find some valuable information in the Virginia Tech review panel report at <http://www.governor.virginia.gov/TempContent/techPanelReport.cfm> and on Columbine at <http://www.cnn.com/SPECIALS/2000/columbine.cd/frameset.exclude.html>.
- Explore the resources listed at the end of this study, and read a sampling from those for a little more background on this very touchy subject. The appendix titled "Not Well-Enough-Known Facts about Bullying" on Don Olweus's work is particularly insightful. It is at the end of this Leader's Guide.
- Don't forget to make your poster boards of the three categories and cut your construction paper rectangles in advance. Also, you'll want to allot a little time to track down that buck toy or image or to cut out one.



Teaching Tip

Kids may call it "teasing" or just "picking on" someone, but bullying is real, and dangerous, and an abuse of power. Within any group of participants, you will probably have former or current bullies, bullied, and bystanders. As is the case

with domestic or sexual abuse, be prepared for those participants who may have painful unhealed wounds from those experiences. Some may withdraw from the group, and others may wish to vent about their experience during the session. Talk in advance to your pastor about how to refer to counseling those persons with particularly extreme experiences. Establish an environment of trust for participants that makes them feel at home and comfortable with discussing the topic, but keep the focus on the topic as much as possible. Tell those who wish to discuss it more that you'll be glad to speak to them after the session, and honor that promise.

Arriving (5 minutes)

On a sheet of butcher paper on the wall, write down "Are you guilty?" As participants arrive, ask them to think hard about their past and find a time when they might have been guilty of bullying someone, if only slightly. If they have trouble thinking of an example, have them think of a time when they experienced bullying themselves. If they can't think of one, have them make up one.

Gathering (5 minutes)

Tell participants that the name of this exercise is "Passing the Buck." A few might be familiar with the idiom and roll their eyes at the literal interpretation, but encourage them to have fun with it. Have participants sit in a circle on the floor. Give one participant the "buck"—it can be a toy, a picture, or a cutout. Instruct them that the person holding the buck has to relate the bullying instance he or she just thought of as an "I never . . ." statement. The rest of the group will then guess whether or not they are telling the truth. Then pass the buck to the next person in the group.

Opening (5 minutes)

1. Prayer

Invite participants to read and repeat Psalm 61:1–5 together:

Hear my cry, O God;
listen to my prayer.
From the end of the earth I call to you,
when my heart is faint.

Lead me to the rock
that is higher than I;

for you are my refuge,
a strong tower against the enemy.

Let me abide in your tent forever,
find refuge under the shelter of your wings.

For you, O God, have heard my vows;
you have given me the heritage of those who
fear your name.

2. What Is Bullying?

Write “Bullying” in large letters in the center of a sheet of butcher paper, and have participants make an association web of words they associate with bullying. They can write names of bullies in their lives, adjectives or other terms, sentences, scenes in movies, and more. Add a few suggestions of your own based on the introduction. Encourage them to write down the first things that come to mind. Read over the words as a group to understand the consensus about the term.

Exploring (15 minutes)

3. Who Are the Bullies?

On a wall, tape up three pieces of large poster board labeled “Bullies,” “Bullied,” and “Bystanders.” Divide participants into small groups, and give each group a stack of magazines. Have them pull out or cut out pictures of people they think would fall into the three categories associated with bullying: the bullies, the bullied, and the bystanders. As they cut them out, have them tape or glue the pictures to the poster board. When they have finished, talk as a group about the pictures they chose to depict the bullies. What characteristics, expressions, or situations made them think these particular people could be bullies? Are these depictions all fact, or could some of them be myths? Do they identify at all with this group of people?

4. Who Are the Bullied?

Next, have participants look at the pictures they chose of the bullied. What characteristics do they have in common? Do they look weak, small, or unable to fight? Do they look angry? Again, are these depictions all fact, or could they too be myth? Do participants identify at all with this group? If so, why?

5. Who Are the Bystanders?

Last, look at the pictures of the bystanders. What characteristics do you notice about them? Are those character-

istics all fact, or are they likely the source of some myths too? Do any of the participants identify with this group?

Responding (10 minutes)

6. Lending a Hand

Pair up participants in teams of two. Have them each trace one of their hands on a piece of construction paper. Then, on rectangular pieces of precut construction paper, have them work together and write down scriptural references they can recall of ways that Christ recommended dealing with violence and other pacifist approaches. You can write a few suggestions on butcher paper, such as “turning the other cheek” and “when one part of the body hurts, everyone suffers.” Also, have them talk together about ways that all three of the groups involved in bullying can take proactive steps to stop bullying. You can offer some of the suggestions listed in the introduction to the study or tips from Dr. Olweus’s findings in the appendix. Bullies, for example, might need to try to find positive ways to release their anger or try to put themselves into the shoes of the bullied. Bystanders might need to talk to adults when they see something happen or shout “Hey! Stop!” The bullied might need to find friends to help them get through the school day instead of being alone, to talk to their parents, or to write about their experience in a journal. When the youth have about ten suggestions, have them tape or glue the ends of the construction paper pieces to form rings and link them together to form a chain. On a free wall in the church sanctuary or in your youth activity room, you can place the construction paper hands at either end of the construction paper chains. Encourage participants to revisit this display and to check back in with their partner about whether or not any of the techniques they wrote down have proven effective.

Closing (5 minutes)

7. Prayer

Have the group form a circle, and close by reading Colossians 3:13 as the prayer:

Bear with each other and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive.

Tell participants that forgiveness is the beginning of recovery, and go around the circle and have everybody say something they have forgiven someone for,

something they hope to be able to forgive someone for in the future, or something they themselves have been forgiven for that is related to bullying behavior.

Teaching Alternatives

- Watch the scene in *A Christmas Story* where Ralphie “snaps” and beats up Scott Farcus or the scene in *Back to the Future* when George McFly “snaps” and punches out Biff in the parking lot at the school dance. Discuss what led up to the incident. Was the character’s violent response appropriate? Is it understandable? Barring “dramatic license,” how could the situation have been resolved peacefully?
- Have participants role-play scenes from “The Drama of the Bully.” Assign participants to the parts of a quiet victim, the bully, the bully’s assistant, the bystander, the victim’s father, the teacher, and the administrator. Give participants time to brainstorm their approach to each role. Let them know that, while the bully has the “starring” role, the other participants in the drama are just as important to the outcome of the incident. Afterward, discuss how not only the victim suffers in this dramatization but the others involved too.
- Bring in newspaper articles, witness accounts, and other documents associated with the Virginia Tech shooting or the Columbine shooting. Use the panel’s recommendations and factual newspaper stories about Harris and Klebold’s backgrounds or Cho’s background. Be sensitive to pictures or text that might be disturbing to younger youth, and screen for those. Discuss what signs were present in the lives of these boys. What kind of bullying did these teens experience, and what did they inflict in return? What could have been done to prevent these shootings?
- Obtain a copy of *Let’s Get Real*, a video for use in anti-bullying programs. It’s available from the Respect for All Project of GroundSpark (<http://www.respectforall.org>).
- Talk to participants about a place where bullying is sometimes overlooked: in the video game world. Many of your participants probably play video games, and many have access to MMORPG (massively multi-player online role-playing game) such as SecondLife or a program such as Xbox Live. Both allow gamers to join a virtual world where there is a lot of freedom and very little responsibility for one’s

actions. Discuss how the video game world is a sub-culture that relies not only on violence but also on domination, control, and bullying. What kinds of bullying have they experienced while online? What do they do about it? What can they do to avoid it and to avoid falling into that trap themselves?

- Discuss the trend of cyberbullying, which involves threats, name calling, the spreading of rumors and more via cell phone, e-mail, or social networking sites.

Key Scriptures

Psalms 61:1–5

Colossians 3:13

For More Information

Ronald Hecker Cram, *Bullying: A Spiritual Crisis* (St. Louis: Chalice, 2003).

Dan Olweus, *Bullying at School: What We Know and What We Can Do* (Cambridge: Blackwell, 1993).

“Bullying Is Not a Fact of Life,” U.S. Department of Health and Human Services; available at <http://www.samhsa.gov>. Go to the home page and type the title of this document into the search engine to find it easily.

“Safe Schools Initiative: An Interim Report on the Prevention of Violence in Schools,” U.S. Secret Service National Threat Assessment Center, in collaboration with the U.S. Department of Education, with support from the National Institute of Justice, October 2000.

Find a complete copy of the Virginia Tech Review Panel’s report on the shooting at <http://www.governor.virginia.gov/TempContent/techPanelReport.cfm>.

Read excerpts from Cho’s manifesto at <http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/18185859/>.

Find details and reports on the Columbine shooting at <http://www.cnn.com/SPECIALS/2000/columbine.cd/frameset.exclude.html>.

Read Mary Ellen O’Toole’s threat assessment report on school shooters for the Department of Justice and the FBI at: http://eric.ed.gov/ERICWebPortal/custom/portlets/recordDetails/detailmini.jsp?_nfpb=true&_ERICExtSearch_SearchValue_0=ED446352&ERICExtSearch_SearchType_0=no&accno=ED446352.

See GroundSpark’s antibullying video at <http://www.respectforall.org>.

Check out Stop Bullying Now! at <http://www.stopbullyingnow.com>, a site devoted to stopping bullying in schools.

Bully Free Kids, <http://www.bullyfreekids.com>, offers tips for staying bully free.

About the Writer

Megan Pillow Davis is a writer, a freelance journalist, and a 2001 graduate of the University of Iowa Writers' Workshop. She currently lives with her husband and dog in China Grove, North Carolina.

Some background information cited in the introduction of this study, resources, and activities was adapted from "Bullying in the Classroom," an adult study from The Thoughtful Christian, courtesy of Martha Bettis Gee.

Endnotes

1. What We Know, <http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/18185859/>.
2. Information from the Jefferson County, Colorado Sheriff's Department, as cited by the Denver *Rocky Mountain News*.
3. "High School Classmates Say Gunman Was Bullied," MSNBC, April 19, 2007, <http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/18169776/>.
4. Mary Ellen O'Toole, "The School Shooter: A Threat Assessment Perspective," http://eric.ed.gov/ERICDocs/data/ericdocs2sql/content_storage_01/0000019b/80/16/91/c7.pdf.
5. As cited at The Anti-Bullying Website, <http://www.bullyingawarenessnetwork.ca>.
6. "Facts for Families," American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry, http://www.aacap.org/cs/root/facts_for_families/bullying.
7. Dan Olweus, *Bullying At School: What We Know and What We Can Do* (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1993), as cited at <http://www.psychologymatters.org/bullying>.
8. Ronald Hecker Cram, *Bullying: A Spiritual Crisis* (St. Louis: Chalice, 2003).
9. See reports of the Olweus Bullying Prevention Program at <http://www.psychologymatters.org/bullying.html>.

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Appendix

Not-Well-Enough-Known Facts about Bullying

The following facts come from the work of Dan Olweus in a book titled *Bullying at School: What We Know and What We Can Do*.

1. Most bullies don't suffer from low self-esteem. Some have circles of friends and may have a high status among their peers.
2. Most bullies are not looking for attention, so ignoring the bullying is not a way to make it stop. Bullies look for control. The behavior is likely to escalate if adults ignore it.
3. Bullying behavior isn't something a child or young person outgrows. Research shows bullies are at much higher risk of later becoming involved in a crime, alcohol or drug abuse, or tobacco use.
4. Victims of bullies are rarely able to stand up to bullies and deal with the situation themselves. They are usually younger or physically weaker than their tormentors. In order to withstand bullying, children need a system of supportive friendships, something victims often lack the social skills to form.
5. Contrary to what many parents believe, most bullying does not occur off school grounds. Almost all bullying occurs at school.
6. Bullying is not an isolated instance but rather a fact of life in a majority of schools.
7. Most bullying takes place outside the sight of teachers. Many of those targeted are reluctant to report their harassment because they are afraid of retaliation, and most bullies deny the behavior if confronted.
8. Many victims of bullying suffer lifelong side effects, including depression and mental health problems. Some suicides are attributed to bullying.