



## Bullying: Unhealthy for Humankind

### Part I Bullying in Schools

By Darnell Lattal, Ph.D.

**T**he issue of coercion (threat and fear) has long been an interest of mine for what it does to the behavior of those coerced and how it shows up in workplaces, schools, and in larger society. The behaviors of those who do the coercing are of interest as well. How do we manage the conditions in which bullying, an extreme form of coercion, occurs so that it is no longer a culturally acceptable act? The evidence is that not only is bully behavior growing, it is doing so through positive peer support and the larger endorsement found in readily available and often anonymous social networks.

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**Labels miss the point.**

– Darnell Lattal

Considering the great harm many of us do through our behavior, why is the science of behavior analysis so rarely considered as a possible remedy to address individual as well as large-scale societal problems caused by how we treat one another? What would happen if behavioral solutions that reduce acts of threat were applied where most needed to provide a safe and secure future for our grandchildren and ourselves?

The challenge facing behavior analysts is to alert the larger community to the solutions that behavioral science offers. Answers go beyond individual change to designing organizational and societal infrastructure to guide valued behavior and eliminate harmful behavior. Seatbelts come to mind. Putting them on to keep us safe took a while but now almost all of us do it as an automatic habit. The problem with bullying, however, whether on a small or large scale, is that the consequences the bully receives usually increase the likelihood that more, not less, bullying will occur.

Yet, one of our greatest needs as a culture is learning to deal with bully behavior. The news is always full of stories about bullies in schools, some cases ending in the victim's



suicide. Too often, parents are forced to grapple with bullies threatening or actually physically abusing their children as they advance through school. Luckily, there is a growing urgency in finding solutions that work. Almost everyone has little difficulty identifying the specific behaviors of bullies, but there is great difficulty in knowing what to do to stop bully behavior and how to replace it with other socially correct behavior.

When extreme outcomes of unethical acts toward people come to function as reinforcers, what can we do about it? Can the application of this science help us? Yes, it can. In public schools in particular there are solid evidence-based practices of how best to reduce the reinforcing results for those who bully at school. It is a solid start. (Part II of this series on bullying will address the level at which punishment, threat and fear operates in larger society.)

### WHAT MAKES A BULLY?

What creates and sustains the schoolyard bully as well as the exceptionally fluent bullies of society? People are not born to bully but are shaped to bully by their environments. The





slippery slope toward becoming a bully is so very easy and each of us is vulnerable.

In our forthcoming book, Aubrey Daniels and I have included a chapter entitled “Nature’s Dirty Trick” in which we point out how easy it is to use negative reinforcement to get our way with others, rather than working to create positive environments for change. We discuss why punishment, threat and fear are all too often the management strategies of choice. We all use these methods for accelerating behavior we want and reducing behavior we don’t. It’s easy. It’s quick. It works.

Punishment, threat and fear create in those being bullied a predictable complacency in terms of how they respond—just enough behavior to stay safe, get by, avoid aversive consequences. Sadly, this response, very understandably only intensifies the likelihood of more bullying. To shift this predictable response by the bullied to something less reinforcing to the bully is worth a closer look. **Compliance is toxic because it fuels inhumane acts.** It is time that we all learn how to help our children and ourselves say an effective no to bullying. Research is beginning to produce ways to do so and thus to significantly reduce bullying in our schools.

**Teaching prejudice to a child is itself a form of bullying. You’ve got to be taught to hate.**

— Roger Ebert

Sometimes people state that bullying is unavoidable; it is the aggressive, unconstrained self, our “true nature.” Behavior analysis requires objectivity—labels like *evil* or *rotten to the core*, or *true nature* imply these actions are driven by some mystical, internal, demonic source. Labels miss the point. The causes of the vast majority of brutal acts arise from environmental conditions, with rare genesis from loss of brain function or genetics, but saying the “*devil made me do it*” as the



comedian Flip Wilson playing Geraldine used to say, doesn’t seriously explain anything related to the establishment and continuation of bully behavior.

#### **THE BULLIES MULTIPLIER: POSITIVE REINFORCEMENT UNCHECKED**

Bullying writ large defines the universe when it comes to the harmful extremes of behavior directed toward others. **Bullies take actions that harm physically and/or verbally.** They justify what they do in private dialogue with themselves or out loud with others on the grounds of what their victim believed or looked like or because of membership in a particular group. That verbal justification is often reinforced with nods, laughter, loud agreement, or slaps on the back.

Those who reinforce bullying do not necessarily agree with what the bully does—they too are operating under conditions of reinforcement, often working to avoid threat or because of fear of the bully. Speaking up is difficult. They say what they must to “survive.” Worse is that sometimes they too are persuaded that beliefs, looks, group membership, or something else are indeed reasons to



depersonalize and harm another. The bully behavior pattern potentially expands—like behavior in general—it flows where reinforcement goes. Size or age or relationships do not matter. Bullies may not describe or even “know” why they do what they do but, if they do it once and that behavior is reinforced by the responses of their victims or their peers, colleagues, or leaders, you can bet they will do it again. And as they do it again, physiological readiness intensifies, adding to the reinforcing properties of the bully event. Bullying escalates.

When bullies organize, they are then capable of massive destruction. Organized bully events in the day when Attila the Hun and his gang of thugs moved across the landscape were massively destructive to humankind as are the acts of modern-day aggressors. When gangs in the inner cities spread their hatred across schools, communities and cities, bully behavior and unique methods of bullying multiply, all through the readily available reinforcement for “getting their way”—along with lots of attention.

## REDUCING THE BULLY LEARNING CURVE

Disrupting the reinforcing properties of bullying is a major challenge. This process starts one behavior at a time. Society does not insist that children or adults are trained in the science of behavior or how to respond to things that get in our way, things we want now (reflected by the impatience and assumed entitlement of bullies), or how to handle the emotional reactions and verbal and physical acts generated when experiencing threat and fear in our daily lives. The work that behavior analysts are doing in school systems offers, in microcosm, methods to reduce the use of and acceleration of bullying. Here are some places to start:

### TEACH THE SCIENCE OF BEHAVIOR:

1. **Teach children, teachers and parents about the science of behavior.** Teach them in terms of how to bring out the best® in themselves and others. Teach them the power of shaping to make a difference in how joyful learning can be—embed the principles found in the Ben Franklin quote: “Carve mistakes in sand and success in stone.”
2. **Help children use the tools they learn about to influence and impact others.** Teach them how others influence and impact them. Describe what the role of consequences is in life—and with their peers, their pets and their adult parents. Teach them early. Children can in turn influence teachers, coaches and others through their understanding. It opens eyes. My three-year-old was being “lectured” by her father. She put her hands on her hips and said, “Big men should not yell at little girls.” She made her father laugh when she did that and while she still got the point, he also got the point. She was not going to be bullied into compliance.

3. **Teach children that all of us are greatly influenced by what each of us say and do.**
4. **Teach children the behaviors that are needed to acquire learning, to demonstrate values and interact well across a group.** Teach them that consequences (the unintended ones as well) affect future behavior. ([www.goodbehaviorgame.org](http://www.goodbehaviorgame.org))
5. **Teach children how to make ethical choices in ways that are age appropriate.** Children respond well to role models who ask them to be ethical in ways they can understand—to do the right thing even when it is difficult. ([http://charactercounts.org/programs/reportcard/2012/installment\\_report-card\\_honesty-integrity.html](http://charactercounts.org/programs/reportcard/2012/installment_report-card_honesty-integrity.html))
6. **Have children examine the consequences that reinforce their own actions.** Keeping positive behavior journals and positive reinforcement (R+) logs of what they do to others to make the day better can help them learn quickly to use themselves to influence good, not bad, whenever possible.
7. **Children need to understand that learning through positive social interaction is important.** The more they know about how behavior occurs, the stronger children can be in arranging conditions that reinforce doing the right thing, whether they're very young or almost grown-up teenagers.
8. **Practice and practice again.** The training must go well beyond learning a long list of should and ought statements about what is viewed as right or good to practicing new behaviors in varied conditions. Conditions that include temptations and unexpected reinforcement for doing the wrong thing. Behavior analysts know that the correlation between what we say we will do and what we actually do are too often not the same. Achieving a kind of moral vigilance is very difficult, even for the most honorable among us.

### SEEK EVIDENCE-BASED MODELS OF HOW TO RESPOND TO BULLY BEHAVIOR AT SCHOOL

There is a best practice model out there addressing bully prevention developed by behavioral scientists. Often in seeking answers to reducing bullying in schools or at work, the common solutions do little to reduce bullying: Posting rules or values about how we treat one another, expulsion of the bully (often the only and the right choice in the school or workplace if the bullying is severe, but rarely if ever an effective choice in terms of eliminating bullying), or to treat the bully with kindness to reduce his tendency to bully: these actions never deal directly with reducing the reinforcers for bullying. All these responses add to the likelihood that more, not less, bullying will occur. The possibility of creating a society committed to reducing bullying and increasing cooperation requires a clear understanding of the laws of behavior. (<http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2791686/>)

Though all such actions are well-intended none of them get to the consequences that sustain and accelerate bullying. Most of these efforts fall far short of what is being done in some schools using evidence-based behavior science to reduce the likelihood that bully behavior wins. Much more work needs to be done, but everyone who has children in school or wants effective strategies proven in scientific replication should know of this

**For too long, our society has shrugged off bullying by labeling it a 'rite of passage' and by asking students to simply 'get over it'... Every day, students are bullied into silence and are afraid to speak up. Let's break this silence.**

— Linda Sanchez



work sponsored by the Association for Positive Behavior Support (APBS). (<http://www.apbs.org/>)



The APBS has impressive data on reducing bullying across grades and socio-economic levels and provides a curriculum with specific skills to teach. It is among the best work available right now and the curriculum is free to anyone who wants to look closely at these verified principles for reducing bullying at school. I encourage you to go to their website and look for *bully reduction curriculums*: [http://www.pbis.org/school/bully\\_prevention.aspx](http://www.pbis.org/school/bully_prevention.aspx). While much is yet to be learned, they are dedicated to proving that their methods do indeed reduce the likelihood of bully behavior.

Peer attention is usually the primary condition that elicits and sustains bullying behavior. This behavior requires the support of the crowd or important others. Once the bully gets that attention from peers, pats on backs, smiles, crying, worried responses from teachers, distress from parents, and so on, the bullying continues and strengthens. All these things are reinforcing—they escalate the likelihood of more bullying.

Teaching the group how to respond in ways other than reinforcing bullying is at the heart of much of what goes on in the APBS curriculum—teachers and parents

need this instruction as well. There is also new emphasis on celebrating those who “step up” and practice the new rules of conduct in responding to bully behaviors. Systems are designed that actively support others who are using tools they have been taught when in the presence of bullying. Knowing what to do and having a teacher or counselor available if the bullying does not stop is a beginning. In such a system, the children who actively seek to address bullying correctly are described as the heroes they are in school assemblies. From the earliest year of a child’s education, experienced adults are providing the needed tools for young people to send a message that bullying is not cool and is not the way we work or learn here. Behavior-based education helps not only the students, but also enlightens and instructs teachers (who also have felt powerless in responding to bullies), or the parent who says such things as, “You could stop this if you weren’t so shy!” or “Just man up!”

Knowing they are not alone and are not to blame for the bullying they get is a wonderful gift for children at all ages in handling this school-based terror. Teachers are



taught how to respond as are principals and others. As these dedicated APBS specialists extend their model, they are also using these techniques with gangs and incarcerated youth. Such a valued effort is producing excellent results. Download their simple and easy-to- replicate strategy. Talk to those who are trained behavior analysts in this field and insist that your school system look carefully at such a program. Read their research. Nothing is more important to creating a safe and solid learning environment and for creating

socially alert children who become the adults of tomorrow than reducing bullying today.

[http://www.pbis.org/common/cms/files/pbis-resources/bullyprevention\\_ES.pdf](http://www.pbis.org/common/cms/files/pbis-resources/bullyprevention_ES.pdf)

*Coming soon, a look at the larger social conditions that surround us and how this science of behavior can be used to help reduce coercion and accelerate positive behavior change across our larger cultural interactions (www.aubreydanielsinstitute.org).*



## [About the Author]

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For more than 30 years, Darnell has been dedicated to supporting clients in areas such as strategy implementation, behavioral systems redesign, and leadership development. Her expertise lies in coaching individuals and organizations towards effective behavior change and is currently working to help advance the mission of The Aubrey Daniels Institute. Darnell's greatest joy is in furthering the incredible power for bringing out the best that behavior analysis provides to others, including to her seven grandchildren.

## [About ADI]

Regardless of your industry or expertise, one thing remains constant: People power your business. Since 1978 Aubrey Daniels International (ADI) has been dedicated to accelerating the business and safety performance of companies worldwide by using positive, practical approaches grounded in the science of behavior and engineered to ensure long-term sustainability. ADI provides clients with the tools and methodologies to help move people toward positive, results-driven accomplishments. Our clients accelerate strategy execution while fostering employee engagement and positive accountability at all levels of their organization.

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