

The Bullied Brain

by David Walsh, Ph.D.

Many of you know a kid like Tyrone. Tyrone, age twelve, came home from school 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.”

Tyrone’s mother then calls you upset and looking for answers.

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 and 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 stories of the students who come into your office distracted, depressed and possibly failing classes. But knowing what is happening in the bullied brain can inform your approach to helping your students.

What is happening in the bullied brain?

Brain science is showing us how serious and long term the damage from bullying 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.

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.

What you can do in your school?

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.

One trusted resource among many Minnesota schools is Youth Frontiers' character retreat programs and classroom curricula. Since 1987 Youth Frontiers has worked with more than 1,000,000 students. They partner with schools to build cultures of respect where students thrive socially, emotionally and academically. In a recent study by the University of Minnesota's Center for Applied Research and Educational Improvement, after participating in the Respect Retreat for 9th or 10th graders, five percent more students reported that students at their school "mostly resolve conflicts *without* fighting, insults or threats." Youth Frontiers heightens students' awareness of disrespectful behaviors and engages bystanders (those who stand by and watch bullying happen) to stand up against disrespect. They teach empathy and perspective-taking skills to help students understand how bullying hurts, and they empower students to stand up for what is right and good. You can learn more about Youth Frontiers retreats for students and staff at www.youthfrontiers.org.

Youth Frontiers is only a piece in the puzzle for helping to solve this complex issue. The federal government recently launched a website called **Stopbullying.gov** to give students, educators and parents resources to identify and take action against bullying. There is an excellent list for educators to assess how your school is doing in terms of tackling this issue. <http://www.stopbullying.gov/educators/index.html>.

Brain science clearly shows the long-term harm of bullying on victims' brain. Yet understanding what is happening in the brain can help us better support suffering students.

David Walsh, Ph.D. is founder of Mind Positive Parenting (<http://drdavewalsh.com/>) and is regarded as one of the world's leading authorities on children, teens, parenting, family life, and the impact of technology on children's health and development. Mind Positive Parenting translates brain science into helpful strategies for raising resilient children and youth and equipping children for school success. He is the author of nine books, including the national best sellers *Why Do They Act That Way? A Survival Guide to the Adolescent Brain for You and Your Teen*; *No: Why Kids – of All Ages – Need to Hear It and Ways Parents Can Say It*; and *Smart Parenting, Smarter Kids: The One Brain Book You Need to Help Your Child Grow Brighter, Healthier, and Happier*. Dr. Walsh serves on the Board of Directors for Youth Frontiers.