

Bullying: A Survey

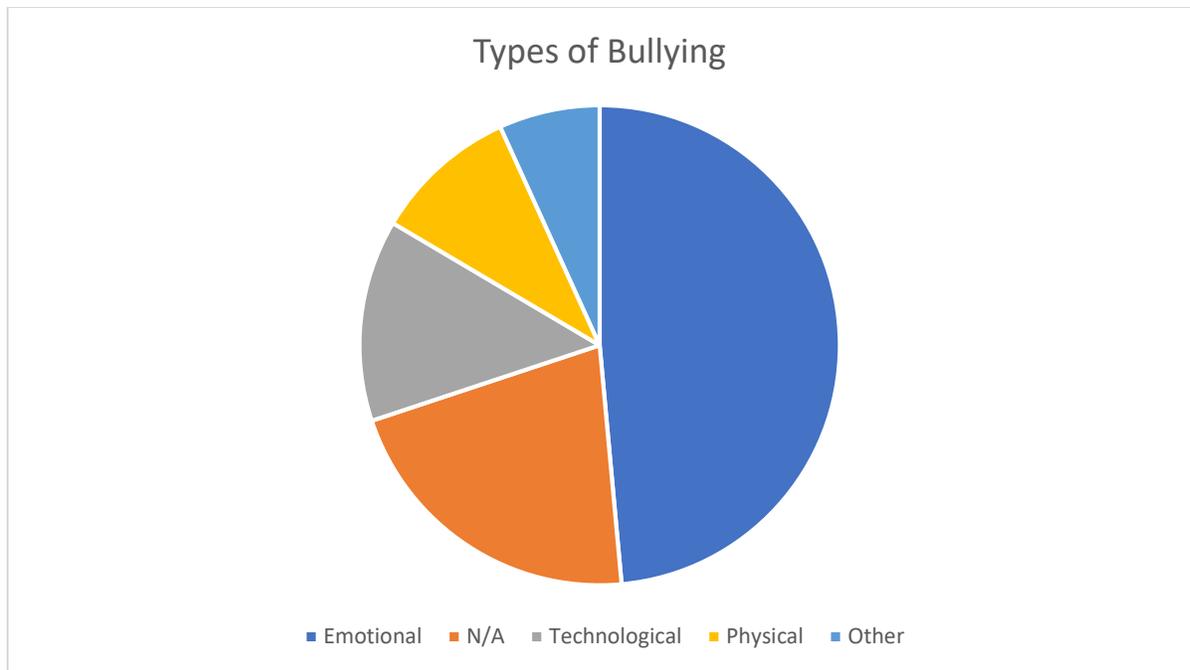
Macy Schimmel

Before you begin reading this article I want to preface it by confessing that this was one of the most challenging things I've ever had to write. I received so much emotional feedback, and because many individuals responded with such powerful and painful words, some even bringing me to tears. Thank you for sharing your experiences.

For those who don't know, I created a survey on the topic of bullying which I had high school students take. I've taken those results and written an article based on them; most of what I have to say comes from high school students, with a little of my own writing as well. I know that this was not a scientific survey, but there is much to be learned from it.

I started the survey with a simple question on the definition of "bullying." One student explained bullying as an act of judging others, where the bully breaks down someone else by means of words, actions, or social media. Another said bullies look down upon those around them, those they deem unworthy of normal treatment. The hierarchies that are created by bullies segregate the "wolves" from the "sheep;" those who are eager to prey on someone "lesser" and more vulnerable than themselves. And there are those who don't participate in bullying, but tend to be easy targets for the bullies' attacks.

The proof of our depravity is demonstrated in the fact that out of the students who took the survey, 68% reported having been bullied. That's almost 7 out of every 10 students. This isn't an uncommon occurrence, and we shouldn't be naïve to think that our schools are outside of the realm of bullying, because they aren't. No one can escape the reach of sin, "for all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God" (Rom. 3:23).



¹Fig. 1

68% of students have experienced one or more of the following types of bullying: verbal, technological, physical, and emotional. From the chart above, you can see that emotional bullying is by far the greatest type of bullying students experience. Emotional bullying is the largest percentage because it encapsulates all the other types of bullying. One cannot be attacked physically or verbally without feeling some type of emotional pain as well. No two bullying experiences are the same, but most have the same consequences; emotional hurt leading to feelings of worthlessness, betrayal, fear, anxiety, and humiliation.

One student confessed how they would fake an illness to skip school because they were too afraid to face their bully, the attacks being so bad that dying felt like it would be easier than living. Another student shared that after being made fun of for having some supposedly “undesirable” trait, they felt unimportant, unloved, and attempted suicide at least twice, ending in

¹ Fig. 1 – This chart illustrates the types of bullying that students experienced during high school. Students were able to select multiple, so there are students who have experienced more than one type. I also gave the opportunity to share an “Other” where students wrote a type I had missed, but most restated a type I had already given.

a diagnosis of post-traumatic stress disorder from the entire ordeal. Bullying is not a light matter and shouldn't be treated like a joke or something to be swept under the rug. There are students, adults even now, who have been brutalized to the point of severe depression.

Therefore, we need to be proactive in how we treat bullies and bullying situations. Too many bullies get away with what they've done to other students and too many bullied students fall through the cracks. We need to make a stand as parents, as fellow classmates, and as teachers to adequately address bullying.

With the rise of social media, which most students have, bullying is easier than ever. About 17% of the students who have been bullied have been bullied through some form of social media—Facebook, Snapchat, Instagram, etc. Social media is an easy way to confront someone without having to see their physical reactions; it's a place where bullies can hide in plain sight and erase their existence in one click, a quality that makes it all the more dangerous for younger children to have access to. Parents, be conscientious about what your children are doing, who they're talking to, what apps they're using, because without supervision, your child could become a bully or be bullied without you even realizing it.

Consequently, the number of students who've witnessed some form of bullying is 92%. Even though this number is tremendously high, only 51% acted in some way to stop bullying. Those who did do something shared what types of things they did to step in. Many stood up to face the bully while others went over after the incident and comforted the person who was bullied.

Why is there such a disconnect? If students are seeing it happening, why aren't they doing anything about it? Someone admitted to having opportunity to stand up but didn't, explaining, "I do not do enough. It is hard to stand up in a high school environment. You can do

all [that can be done], but the bully will just find a new target.” This person seemed hopeless, not finding it worth it to stop bullying because they knew it was going to continue anyway. This seems like an excuse to sit and watch rather than to be actively helping others. We are constantly reminded that sin covers everything we do, yet we still are called to live lives pleasing to God, even when we know nothing we do will be perfect. I understand that sometimes situations do seem hopeless, but “[you] can do all things through Christ which strengtheneth [you]” (Phil. 4:13). He might use your single word, “Stop!” to do great things. There is more harm in staying quiet than telling someone else about what you saw.

When you feel as if you cannot do any more, go tell a teacher or parent. Only 2 out of 86 people said that they had talked with an authoritative figure about a bullying incident. High school students, your teachers are ready and willing to help in a bad situation. They have the training, the resources, and the authority to step in when you no longer can. I encourage you to go to them with your problems, especially if you see someone being bullied, either in person or online. By doing so, you will be helping all parties involved. Not only should you go to a teacher, but you should go to God. He hears all your prayers, your cries for help. He has the power to “heal the broken in heart and bind up [your] wounds” (Ps. 147:3).

Since I requested honest answers, I asked difficult questions. I dared to ask how many had bullied other students and 35% said they had in some way. Although this number is still 1/3 of the population, I suspect the number should be higher. What does this number say about our youth? Everyone has the potential to be a bully because we all have the old man of sin badgering and tempting us to pick on and point out others’ faults. But, this doesn’t mean that we should accept the inevitable. Rather, we are called to fight back by living a holy life. Following in the footsteps of Christ is the best medicine for the epidemic. Not only must you talk the talk, but also

walk the walk. Christ will give you the strength to step in and show kindness to those who need it.

We aren't entirely helpless. We can take preventative measures to ensure the safety of our children, students, and classmates. According to some students, we can start by setting good examples through kindness and living daily lifestyles of love. A smile of encouragement, a few short words of affirmation, or a hug is a simple, yet effective, way to show the love of God to others. Use love to "overcome evil" (Rom. 12:21). As one student commented, "A little kindness can go a long way."

Students aren't the only ones called to treat their peers with love and respect; parents, this applies just as much to you as to your children. Your children watch everything you do and hear everything you say. As someone very dear to me used to say, "Little kids have big ears." Yelling at the referee or your own coach because of a call or substitution you think was questionable, or replying with snark and disgust at something your spouse said are not ways to demonstrate respect and love to your children. God has given you the responsibility to teach your children the importance of kindness and respect. So, when you treat others without the respect they deserve or talk maliciously behind their backs, you are doing absolutely nothing to give your children the correct message of love.

Not only is setting a good example of kindness an important path to emulate, but also standing up and saying something to the bully is as well, as students suggested. A full conversation isn't necessary—simply starting a conversation provokes thoughts. Words like, "Hey, please stop. It's not nice," puts a seed of thought into the minds of the bullies, pricking their consciences. I also want to emphasize the importance of rebuking in love. Don't, by any means, fight fire with fire; you will only cause more issues (2 Tim. 4:2). Solomon responds to

such situations in Proverbs 15:1, where he writes, “A soft answer turneth away wrath...” By speaking kindly and respectfully to the bully, you do not ostracize them, rather you give them a chance to return to love.

In no way must we have the mindset of “us vs. them”. It is always us, together. We are the body of Christ, and when one of our members struggles with a sin, we encourage them, and pray with and for them. When one of the members of the body of Christ suffers, we all suffer with them. When a member creates schism, our Christian calling is to fix the gaping wound in our body by using the love we have for one another, given to us by God, remembering that “the greatest of these is charity” (1 Cor. 13:13).

I want to end with three simple words: pray, forgive, and hope.

Pray—for your brothers and sisters struggling with bullying, for those who have been hurt by words and physical abuse, and for yourself that God will give you strength to stand up for what’s right and to use love to help others.

Forgive—those who’ve bullied you, just as God has forgiven you.

Hope—not in ourselves, for we are weak creatures and the strength that we need is not to be found in us. Rather hope the “hope (that) maketh not ashamed; because the love of God is shed abroad in our hearts by the Holy Ghost which is given unto us” (Rom 5:5). In all things put your trust and confidence in God knowing that “we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ” (Rom 5:1).

*Macy Schimmel attends Georgetown Protestant Reformed Church in Hudsonville, MI and

serves as Promotions Manager of *Beacon Lights* magazine.

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