

# The "In" Group

Bullying can take many forms beyond the particularly severe examples portrayed in the film *BULLY*. Bullies may also use ostracism and social exclusion, without inflicting any physical harm, to isolate the students they target. This type of behavior is called *relational bullying*. While sometimes less obvious than physical bullying, relational bullying can cause just as much pain.

When bullying occurs, regardless of its form, peers play a powerful role. All humans yearn to belong, and throughout our lives we define ourselves, in large part, by the groups to which we belong. Of course, the group that first shapes our identity is our family. As we become adolescents, however, our peers begin to play an extremely important role in how we define ourselves and in the decisions we make.<sup>1</sup>

Researchers consider bullying a social event, meaning that it involves many more people—including peers, educators, and parents—other than the tormentor and the target. In most cases, bullying takes place in the presence of others, but even peers who are not present are often aware that it is happening. As a result, the responses of peers can have a significant effect on the behavior of those who bully. Witnesses of bullying can choose to join in the bullying behavior, to be *bystanders* and do nothing, or to be *upstanders* and try to find a way to help the target.

Eve S., a high-school student, describes a time when she witnessed the exclusion of one of her classmates and she faced this choice:

My eighth grade consisted of 28 students, most of whom knew each other from the age of five or six. The class was close-knit and we knew each other so well that most of us could distinguish each other's handwriting at a glance. Although we grew up together, we still had class outcasts. From second grade on, a small elite group spent a large portion of their time harassing two or three of the others. I was one of those two or three, though I don't know why. In most cases when children get picked on, they aren't good at sports or they read too much or they wear the wrong clothes or they are of a different race. But in my class, we all read too much and didn't know how to play sports. We

had also been brought up to carefully respect each other's races. This is what was so strange about my situation. Usually, people are made outcasts because they are in some way different from the larger group. But in my class, large differences did not exist. It was as if the outcasts were invented by the group out of a need for them. Differences between us did not cause hatred; hatred caused differences between us.

The harassment was subtle. It came in the form of muffled giggles when I talked, and rolled eyes when I turned around. If I was out in the playground and approached a group of people, they often fell silent. Sometimes someone would not see me coming and I would catch the tail end of a joke at my expense.

I also have a memory of a different kind. There was another girl in our class who was perhaps even more rejected than I. She also tried harder than I did for acceptance, providing the group with ample material for jokes. One day during lunch I was sitting outside watching a basketball game. One of the popular girls in the class came up to me to show me something she said I wouldn't want to miss. We walked to a corner of the playground where a group of three or four sat. One of them read aloud from a small book, which I was told was the girl's diary. I sat down and, laughing till my sides hurt, heard my voice finally blend with the others. Looking back, I wonder how I could have participated in mocking this girl when I knew perfectly well what it felt like to be mocked myself. I would like to say that if I were in that situation today I would react differently, but I can't honestly be sure. Often being accepted by others is more satisfying than being accepted by oneself, even though the satisfaction does not last. Too often our actions are determined by the moment.<sup>2</sup>

## Classroom Suggestions

Eve's story contains several powerful and provocative statements about human behavior. You might ask students to choose a phrase or sentence that stands out to them from her story as the basis for a *Think, Pair, Share* (page 52) discussion. You can continue the discussion using Connections questions from above.

## Connections

1. How is ostracism similar to and different from other forms of bullying? When does ostracizing, or excluding someone from a group, become bullying?
2. How does Eve's story relate to bullying? Was she bullied? Did she bully? How would you explain her behavior in this story?
3. Psychologists Michael Thompson and Lawrence Cohen point to the powerful influence of peer groups in guiding our behavior. They write:

We all know that groups can go terribly astray in terms of their moral reasoning. Everyone not in the group can be considered an outsider, a legitimate target. . . . [I]t affects every group, because we are all prone to that feeling of us versus them and the idea that if you're not with us you're against us. Speaking out against a risky, immoral, or illegal decision is hard to do because that makes you an outsider yourself.<sup>3</sup>

How did Eve's need to belong affect the way she responded when another girl was mocked? Why does her response still trouble her? How do you like to think you would have responded to the incident?

4. What language should we use when discussing those who are involved in or affected by bullying? What does it mean to label someone as a *bully*? What does it mean to label someone as a *victim*? Can the same person be a bully and a victim in different situations?

5. Many times, those who are bullied are singled out because of some difference—such as sexual orientation, race, or disability—that separates them from the majority. However, Eve says that the members of her small class did not have any such differences. She writes, “It was as if the outcasts were invented by the group out of a need for them. Differences between us did not cause hatred; hatred caused differences between us.”

How does her observation change how you think about bullying and ostracism? What do you think is at the root of bullying behavior?

6. Eve concludes, “Often being accepted by others is more satisfying than being accepted by oneself, even though the satisfaction does not last.” What does she mean?
7. To what extent can the behavior of adults be affected by a need to be part of the “in” group? How might educators' responses to bullying and ostracism be affected by the popularity of the students involved?

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### Notes

- 1 Jing Wang, Ronald J. Iannotti, and Tonja R. Nansel, “School Bullying Among Adolescents in the United States: Physical, Verbal, Relational, and Cyber,” *Journal of Adolescent Health* 45, no. 4 (October 2009): 368–69, accessed October 20, 2011, doi:10.1016/j.jadohealth.2009.03.021.
- 2 Margot Stern Strom, *Facing History and Ourselves: Holocaust and Human Behavior*, (Brookline: Facing History and Ourselves National Foundation, Inc., 1994), 29.
- 3 Michael Thompson Ph.D., Lawrence J. Cohen Ph.D., and Catherine O'Neill Grace, *Mom, They're Teasing Me: Helping Your Child Solve Social Problems* (New York: Ballantine Books, 2002), 71.