

Lecture Topic: “Power Triangles: Bullies, Targets and Bystanders”
Speaker: Dr. Stuart Twemlow, MD
Medical Director, HOPE Program for treatment of refractory adults, The Menninger Clinic, Baylor College of Medicine; Editor-in-Chief, International Journal for Applied Psychoanalytic Studies
Sponsor: Family Awareness Network of New Trier Township (FAN)
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Submitted By: Lonnie Stonitsch/NSCDS FAN School Liaison

This report was prepared from both my own notes and Dr. Twemlow’s slides.

SUMMARY:

In addition to the above-cited roles, Dr. Stuart Twemlow is the director of the Peaceful Schools and Communities Project of The Child and Family Program at The Menninger Clinic and Baylor (fast becoming a national model for reducing bullying), and a professor of psychiatry in the Menninger Department of Psychiatry and Behavioral Sciences, a faculty member of Houston-Galveston Psychoanalytic Institute, and board-certified in adult psychiatry. Dr. Twemlow had a private practice in psychoanalysis and psychiatry for more than 30 years, with a special interest in problems of organizations and social systems.

Dr. Twemlow’s lecture focused on updating conventional notions of bullying, with special emphasis on the role of the bystander. He also discussed cyberbullying, teachers-as-bullies, the negative consequences of parental expectations of excellence, and the special nature of bullying in affluent environments.

OUTLINE:

I. Opening Commentary

- A. Dr. Twemlow noted that his own background is quite different from that of the majority of students at New Trier H.S. Born in New Zealand, he was an orphan from a working poor background of foster homes, completely unfamiliar with affluent communities.
- B. Dr. Twemlow was a consultant to the FBI re: Columbine H.S. after the mass shootings there. At one time, Columbine was considered the #2 high school in the country, on par with New Trier H.S. Dr. Twemlow found that the culture at Columbine was deeply problematic, with very little communication between teachers, students and administrators. Many of the teachers didn’t even know each other. No one in a position of authority had any idea of what was occurring with the student body.
- C. Dr. Twemlow posits that the bullying at affluent schools is actually worse than in ghetto schools, absent overt violence. It’s meaner, nastier. More subtle and harder to detect. His goal is to persuade those involved in the schools that bullying exists, and that it’s a huge problem.

- D. 99.9% of kids really love school – the .5% that don't “can bring you to your knees.” 2% of the students at an average high school are sadists, psychopaths – they have a genetic inability to control themselves. Callousness is genetically determined.
- E. Dr. Twemlow referenced Tennyson's *The Lotus-Eaters*, where lethargy and ennui (induced from eating the fruit of the lotus) predominate, leading to a state of blissful unawareness of the surrounding environment.
- F. Within the human condition, feelings of love are easy to accept, but feelings of hate are hard to accept. Our culture is full of deep suppression of hatred. Yet hatred is there as long as we are human.
- G. The big fish eats the little fish. The language of Wall St. is about hatred, using the language of combat and the military. One of the most popular business books is the *Book of 5 Rings*, written in the 1600s by a Japanese samurai. Its discussion of conflict and taking the advantage has many admirers.

II. Bullying Quantified and Defined

- A. 16% of American school children are bullied, with 30% of 6th to 10th grade students (over 5.7 million children) reporting moderate or frequent bullying. On a given day, 160,000 children stay home from school because they don't feel safe.
- B. Bullying is a perverse form of violence.
 1. It is always abnormal and is a sadomasochistic ritual. It is most destructive as social aggression, as a completely psychological phenomenon. The worst occurs in high school, when it is subtle, less obvious and less physical. High school students have mastered abstract symbolic thinking, so their bullying is much craftier. Girls and boys bully the same, with girls utilizing ostracism, exclusivity – they can be serious social bullies.
 2. The most damaging bullying involves humiliation and coercion, e.g., nasty tricks played on someone to highlight problems publicly. Rumors, ostracism, cyberbullying are all examples.
 3. The high-achieving schools like New Trier are most at risk for social aggression, since it's more about cleverness – in the ghettos, the issues are ones of survival, not cleverness. When children feel safe, the bullying becomes ingenious. Inner city children love each other, and hate the teacher; affluent children hate each other, and love the teacher. For affluent kids, hatred is expressed by competing for the attention of teachers.
 4. Bystanders are the causal agents in bullying and prime targets for intervention. The “abdicating bystander,” whether a fellow student, or a teacher, or administrator, is not only about abdicating responsibility, but about hiding the bullying. The notion that “if you name the bullying, it will happen,” is simply wrong.
 5. Punishing the bully is also bullying, and won't work – you'll only increase the bullying.

- C. Teachers may also bully students. This is very rarely discussed, since it would affect the chain of command. Many times coaches are bullies, and athletes are often bullies as well, since they enjoy special social status at most schools.
 - 1. 45% of teachers admit to bullying students. The damage occurs when the teacher bullying is an ongoing activity, not just an occasional incident.
 - 2. Bully teachers often report being bullied as children, and are bullied by their own students. They also see more bullying by other teachers.
 - 3. Teachers view a lack of administration support, a lack of discipline training and too-large classrooms as causes for their bullying.
 - 4. 2 types of bully teachers: sadistic teachers who enviously humiliate students, and bully-victim teachers with chronic absenteeism and finger-pointing.
- D. Children learn from watching their parents and other adults, their tempers and conflicts. The bully with the eyes of a microscope, examining his parents' lives.
 - 1. Consider the affluent father, a millionaire, 30 lbs. overweight, angina, problems with alcohol, working a 70 hour work week. What is the child learning? Perhaps he learns the value of excellence, competition and tenacity – but more likely, he's learning that making money and getting a good education is the primary focus of selfhood. The child sees the parents have no time to enjoy all the money they make.
 - 2. This is where the real life lessons are learned, in the home.
- E. The whole community must be involved in school climate change. It's usually the mental health workers and social workers at schools who push most for bullying programs – they're the one who have to deal with the fallout the most.
- F. Bullying is a process, not a person. It begins early in development and continues into adulthood. It is always about a power differential, with the bully on top and the victim on bottom. 60% - 65% of all children who develop a presence as a bully in school will end up in prison by age 25.
- G. Fighting is not bullying, and fighting is not violence. Normal children, especially boys in elementary school, fight as a way of demonstrating a normal dominance hierarchy. This can actually be healthy.
 - 1. Such fighting is a wish to express and experiment with peer aggression, is usually horse play, and does not involve injury. The perversion occurs when the wish to inflict repetitive pain on others is involved, from which the bully gains pleasure, then fighting becomes violent rather than healthy.
 - 2. Bullying in elementary and middle school is rarely physically damaging – serious injury would result in the bully getting in

trouble. So the infractions are less severe – teasing, poking, groping, slapping, pushing.

- H. There can be normal aggression, but no normal bullying. The difference is that bullying involves sadomasochism, coercion and humiliation.

III. The Triadic Social Context of Bullying

- A. Rather than a dyadic victim-victimizer scenario, bullying is actually triadic: bully-victim-bystander. The roles are co-created, and always in flux. All people occupy all roles at different times. When roles become fixed, then patterns are repeated.
- B. The bystander role should not be construed solely as passive – it can be quite active and complex.
 - 1. Some of the active bystander roles include the “bully bystander” (very problematic; helps the bully, sets up the bullying mechanism); the “puppet master” (often voyeurs); and the “sham bystander.” The passive bystander roles include the “victim bystander” (typically too scared to speak out against the bully’s authority); the “avoidant bystander;” the “abdicated bystander;” and the “copycat bystander.”
 - 2. The bystander is always at the center, since the social context is prominent.
- C. Need to shift focus from behavioral change to social climate change, from a focus on individuals to a focus on self-awareness, reflective mindsets and an accurate reading of others. Bullies often get enormous social rewards, particularly in affluent schools.
- D. Bullying is always violent, because it always involves injury. There is a sadomasochistic sexualized element to bullying acted out in front of an internal or external bystanding audience.
 - 1. Studies have shown that there exists an element of sexual arousal in inflicting pain. It’s well-documented that sex and aggression are closely linked. There is often a loving quality to blood.
- E. Internet bullying is on the rise, and is unfamiliar terrain to many adults. The internet and instant messaging has collapsed all boundaries between home and school. Difficult to escape bullies today. The speed of transmission and wide-ranging distribution heightens social aggression. It’s much easier for a child to say things in an email that they would never say in person.
 - 1. The sender can remain anonymous, but the target is exposed to the world.
 - 2. Children exploit the knowledge differential between themselves and their parents – most are simply much more “digital” than their parents. Allows for more deception and more cruelty that adults cannot understand or prevent.

3. Cyberbullying has greatly enhanced bullying methods. Your child may be more at risk from his/her peers online than from a stranger.
- F. The impact of chronic bullying on children is seen in a variety of antisocial and anxiety disorders.
1. Bullies: Antisocial; personality disorders; vandalism; shoplifting; dropping out; substance use; criminal behavior; variable academics.
 2. Victims: Loneliness; lack of friends; school phobia; clinical depression; suicidal; poor academics; boys more than girls; anxiety disorders.
 3. Bystanders: Poor academics due to distracted teachers and distracting children.
- G. The bully can achieve compliance but never cooperation. The target requires constant reinforcement to obey the bully's demands. This applies not only to students, but to bully teachers and bully coaches.

IV. What Works?

- A. First thing to address is the background framework.
1. Program won't be a success unless there is across the board buy-in – teachers, parents, superintendents, students, staff.
 2. The role of the bystander must be clearly articulated and identified. Bullies only do what bystanders allow.
 3. Students must not only feel safe – they must be safe.
 4. Power issues and power struggles must be made manifest.
 5. Natural leaders must be identified, and a focus on altruism and “mentalization” developed. Mentalization is a new concept that refers to being reflective, i.e., to think before acting, to empathize accurately with self and others, to modulate affect and set boundaries.
 - a. Natural leaders aren't necessarily the captain of the football team or president of the student council. They have passion, and are the right-hand helpers. They can become quite affected by their role, and may need counseling to assist them.
 - b. Natural leaders empathize with peers and are highly creative. Their personal needs are met by altruistic activity.
 - c. Contrast with a narcissistic leader, one who is cutting, sarcastic, cold, aloof – who victimizes peers to gain social dominance. This type of leader creates hostile subgroups, and promotes self at the expense of others. Has a personal need to dominate others, and often bullies younger children.

- B. Bullying cannot be resolved by mediation or negotiation, because the parties do not start out equal. It is hard to discuss with teachers, is often hidden, and present

V. The Problem of Excellence

- A. Parents and other adults are powerful role models. At high-performing schools, children are pressured to achieve very high GPAs, the better to apply to Ivy League schools. Anything less is seen as a failure to parents, who can resort to mockery and punishment at home. A parent can even become mentally ill as a result of their child's failure to achieve highly.
- B. A highly-driven CEO parent with a spouse who similarly pushed academic performance will create both a bad model and a problem child across generations.
- C. The child then becomes victim to the parent's problem with excellence, leading to either psychiatric illness or deception of parents – or hides it until adulthood and then projects their issues onto their own children.
- D. Relaxation and stress reduction are essential for mental and physical health. Constant drive leads later in life to drug abuse, poor family relationships, possible promiscuity, and the loss of money and prestige.