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The Troop Bully

Other articles in this issue ...

Is there a Scout intimidating someone in your unit? Here's how to stop the troop bully.

By Kathy Seal

Illustrations by Ralph Butler

- [Five Myths About Bullying](#)
- [Seven Steps to Stop Bullying](#)
- [Cyberbullying](#)
- [Get Trained, Online](#)

Have you ever been bullied? Probably not like this.

One of the finest boys Scout leader Brian Henry ever worked with had a great sorrow: His father had died while saving him from drowning. The 13-year-old believed he'd caused his father's death. During a Klondike derby, an older Scout threw ice at him and spewed a stream of taunts such as, "You killed your father!" and "Your mother hates you because you made your father die!"

Eventually, the younger boy began pounding the bully with his fists. As the other Scouts pulled the two boys apart, the Scout leaders came running, and for the remainder of camp the adults kept the two boys apart. Once home, the leaders talked to both boys and their parents, and the story came out that

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boys apart. Once home, the leaders talked to both boys and their parents, and the story came out that the bully was forced into Scouting by a father who later was convicted of murdering his wife.

The bully eventually left the troop, and the 13-year-old became a caring, helpful patrol leader. The adults tell this story now to every new group. “To hear it, the bully is still hiding from the fury of the leaders somewhere on a mountain, living with wolves,” says Henry, a former Scoutmaster in the Great Salt Lake Council. “Whenever a boy starts teasing or hazing, someone asks if he wants to ‘live with the wolves’—and it stops immediately.”

That’s one way to stop the bullying. There are others—less imaginative, perhaps, but just as effective—from modeling correct behavior for your Scouts to knowing when to broaden a discussion beyond just the target and the bully to establishing an effective procedure for reporting occurrences to the adults.

Bullying in Scouts rarely reaches the intensity of that incident, of course, and the Guide to Safe Scouting states that “Physical violence, hazing, bullying, theft, verbal insults ... have no place in the Scouting program and may result in the revocation of a Scout’s membership in the unit.” But no unit is immune from at least its milder forms.

Studies show that the majority of kids have experienced bullying at some point in their lives. “If you ask, ‘Have you ever been bullied?’ about half of kids will say yes,” says UCLA education professor Sandra Graham.

The psychologists and experienced Scout leaders we consulted for this article offer their experiences and recommendations for recognizing the warning signs of a bully, or multiple bullies, in your troop or pack. These experts give you specific methods for dealing with the target, the bully, and the rest of the boys, and they offer ways to prevent you from some day having to deal with a situation like what happened in Brian Henry’s troop.

None of the suggested techniques involve your Scouts fighting back, and all flow logically from the Scout Oath and Scout Law.

BULLYING ALWAYS INVOLVES one person or group trying to overpower another—repeatedly. It might involve a physical act: hitting, kicking, biting, or shoving. And it can involve verbal or emotional abuse: teasing, put-downs, name-calling, hazing, hurtful joking, or intimidation. Bullies also sometimes wield racial or sexual slurs or make threatening gestures.

Although girls are notorious for emotional bullying such as spreading rumors and exclusion, boys do it, too, says Efrain Gonzalez, assistant director of admissions at Clarity Child Guidance Center, a children’s mental health treatment facility in San Antonio, Tex. “They’ll say, ‘Don’t talk to John today. He’s stupid, and he acts like a girl.’” That can hurt kids far more than a punch in the face, Gonzalez adds.

Bullying usually takes place out of adults’ sight. That’s why boys frequently don’t show how much bullying upsets them and why they often remain silent. The bully often threatens reprisals for “telling.” The victim also may think adults won’t or can’t help him, or he may feel ashamed for not defending himself. “There’s a stigma attached to identifying yourself as a victim,” says Steve Barreto, a child psychologist at Bradley Hospital in East Providence, R.I.

Furthermore, when Scout leaders do hear about bullying, they might feel helpless. “We weren’t psychologists. We were trying to figure out what to do!” recalls one leader, dismayed when a 12-year-old threw rocks at other boys who kept teasing him for acting feminine. Also, Scout leaders sometimes don’t act because they mistakenly believe that bullying toughens up the targets.

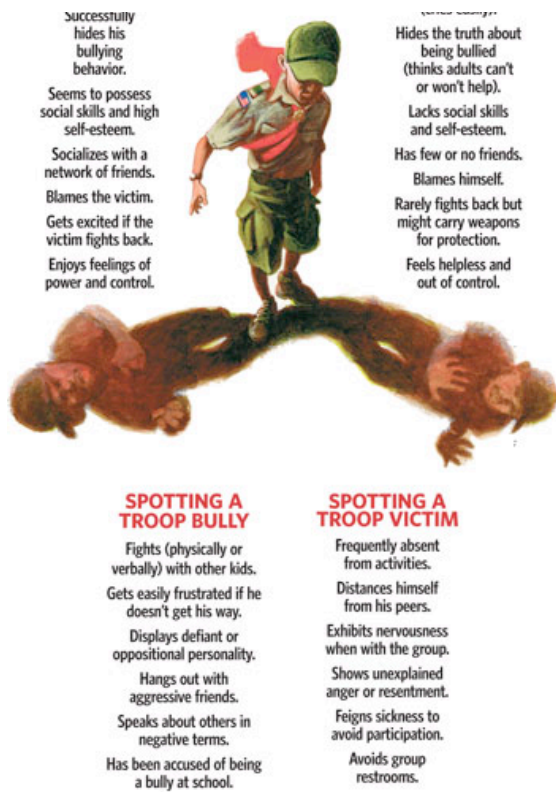


WHAT MAKES A BULLY OR VICTIM?

TRAITS OF A BULLY
Shows little emotion.

TRAITS OF A PASSIVE VICTIM
Shows a lot of emotion (cries easily).

“Older male leaders like me sometimes think, wrongly, ‘We put up with bullying, and we survived. It’s part of becoming a man,’” explains Neil Lupton, chairman of the Supplemental Training Task Force of the BSA’s



(SOURCE: SCOUTING.ORG BULLY PREVENTION TIPS)

Every boy fears, who's next?

ALTHOUGH IT MIGHT SEEM paradoxical, bullies try to overpower others because “[Bullies] are people who feel weak,” says Barbara Sabbeth, a psychologist in New Rochelle, N.Y. Picking on someone else gives them a momentary feeling of strength.

Often family problems—parents at each other's throats or divorcing—are bothering a bully. Or a parent is bullying him. “They're aggressive because they've been hurt and want to get back, because they've been made to feel vulnerable themselves,” explains Sabbeth.

Similarly, a boy who calls another a “crybaby” likely feels ashamed of his own wish to be babied. A Scout who calls another boy “gay” may be embarrassed about his own sensitive side and underconfident in his own masculinity.

Sometimes a Scout who lacks social skills may try bullying to make friends. He's trying to “achieve social recognition through dominance,” says Barreto. That's what happened when an older boy transferred into one Michigan troop. At summer camp he kept ridiculing a younger, heavy-set boy, remembers Bob Geier, chartered organization representative for St. Thomas the Apostle parish in Ann Arbor, Mich. Frustration mounting, the patrol leaders asked the adults, half-jokingly, if they could “take the bully out into the woods.”

Instead, they moved the target into a tent with one of the “cool” senior guys and put a big, self-confident Scout in the bully's tent. Everyone worked to quash the bully's nickname for the target, “Dumpling,” and the Scoutmaster and senior patrol leader talked to the bully and put him into mandatory camp “labor and service” with other older boys. Later they spoke to the bully's parents. Not only was the bullying controlled, Geier recalls, but the younger boys learned that standing up to a bully was “cool.”

Bullying also can surface when an untrained Scout intimidates younger boys with a “my way or the highway” form of leadership or when a well-intentioned leader makes a boy sing a silly song in front of the group to enforce discipline, says Ginger McClure, a Loudoun County, Va., school psychologist, former Scout leader, and member-at-large of the National Capital Area Council. It can also occur when a boy is on the Internet.

Cyberbullying takes place when someone harasses, threatens, or harms others online or with a cell phone. It includes spreading gossip or embarrassing pictures, repeatedly sending or forwarding mean or hateful text or e-mail messages, name-calling, revealing someone else's intimate personal information, or impersonating someone else online and posting damaging words about them.

National Volunteer Development Committee.

That's what happened when one Webelos den leader took five Cub Scouts to check out a large troop. While adults talked in another room, some of the Boy Scouts called the Cub Scouts stupid for not knowing about patrol boxes. Two of the younger boys were near tears. Afterward, the Scoutmaster told the Webelos den leader, “Boys will be boys. They just took the fun too seriously. They [the Cub Scouts] shouldn't be so thin-skinned.” The Cub Scouts found another troop.

That's a price leaders can pay for not getting a bully under control. Research shows that the fear and anxiety of bullying causes kids to avoid not just the bully but also the places where he hangs out. And far from “toughening” them up, bullying can devastate the targets' self-esteem and self-confidence.

If it continues, the victim may suffer long-lasting feelings of isolation and sadness—even depression, says Gonzalez. Bystanders suffer, too, ashamed about not ending the bullying, and it spreads mistrust throughout the group.

According to UCLA psychology professor Jaana Juvonen, more than 70 percent of kids who use the Internet regularly have experienced at least one incident of cyberbullying. And 90 percent of them don't tell adults about these occurrences because they think they should deal with it themselves or because they worry that parents will restrict their Internet access.

So what can you do to stop bullying before it starts?

CREATE AN ANTI-BULLYING CULTURE. That means modeling mutual respect, kindness, and inclusion and never solving problems through aggression. “If kids see adults running the meeting or talking with other adults in an intimidating way and using yelling to control the group,” says McClure, “that’s what the kids are going to do.”

Instead, model positive feedback. Statements such as, “You did a terrific job of cleaning up after the court of honor” or “I really appreciate that you remembered to bring a flashlight” will show Scouts how to connect constructively to one another.

In addition to role modeling, leaders can build an anti-bullying culture through discussions with the patrol leaders’ council, parents, and the troop, using the supplemental training unit (see sidebar)

Emphasize that fighting back physically doesn't help and that reporting bullying to adults is mandatory.

Pay particular attention to any boy who seems vulnerable or atypical. “The biggest predictor of being victimized is being different,” notes Graham. Some youth groups even make inclusion a rule: “We tell kids, ‘If you see someone sitting by himself, you have to go over and ask them to play,’” says Adam Jacobs, executive director at Kids Creative, an after-school and summer program in New York City.

Create a sense of belonging by giving a new Scout a sense of responsibility, and don't forget to urge older boys to lead and teach the younger ones, Geier advises.

Finally, leaders can help the bully. Even if he starts to minimize his behavior (“I only called him a nerd”), let him know that he's violated the Scout Law. That's not negotiable.

When you talk with him:

- Keep your voice calm.
- Show empathy and let the boy know you value him.
- Without labeling him a bully, discuss his unacceptable behavior.
- Impose consequences.
- Encourage an apology or making amends.
- Set realistic goals and don't expect immediate change.
- Tell him he can always ask you for help.

It may seem counterintuitive, but giving the troubled Scout a carefully supervised leadership or teaching role can stem the bullying by making him feel connected. Help him use his strengths or develop some.

If the bullying persists, you can ask the boy to sign a contract pledging to support, encourage, and respect his fellow Scouts. Outline specific consequences in the contract, including that the bully bring his parents in to discuss any incidents.

Creating an anti-bullying culture while helping both the bully and the target is a tall order, so don't try it alone. Adults working together can create an environment where bullying has no chance of thriving.

“The answer,” says Barreto, “is working together to create a network of support.”

A longtime writer on parent/child issues, Kathy Seal co-authored, with Dr. Wendy Grolnick, Pressured Parents, Stressed-Out Kids (Prometheus Books, \$18.98)..

Five Myths About Bullying

MYTH: Bullies suffer from low self-esteem.

FACT: Studies suggest bullies generally have inflated perceptions of themselves and often experience less social anxiety than those not involved in bullying.

MYTH: Bullies are social outcasts.

FACT: Actually, they're often popular with their friends (ones that reinforce the behaviors) and may be considered "cool" by their classmates, a situation that requires "changing the peer group norms that reinforce bullying."

MYTH: Bullying builds character.

FACT: Bullying increases a target's sense of vulnerability. If they're already socially withdrawn, bullying can increase their fear of social contact and further deplete their already low self-esteem.

MYTH: Victims of bullying become violent in their teens.

FACT: Most often, they suffer in silence, unable to stand up to the bully due to the depression or anxiety caused by thinking that the abuse is their fault. This generally makes them withdrawn, not aggressive.

MYTH: Bullying represents a problem only for the bullies and their victims.

FACT: Anyone who witnesses a bullying incident—teachers, parents, other kids, adults—can be adversely affected. And as one study points out, witnesses are not necessarily innocent bystanders. They often play a role in the bullying.

(Adapted from an article in *Behavioral Health Management* By Jaana Juvonen, Ph.D.)

Seven Steps to Stop Bullying

Because kids often don't report bullying, Scout leaders need to look for "red flags" such as frequent absences, nervousness around certain other Scouts, and anger and resentment with no apparent cause. Physical signs such as cuts or bruises and avoiding group restrooms are also possible signs. If you suspect bullying, investigate by talking individually to a suspected target and increasing adult supervision, especially of the suspected bully. When you know it's happening:

1. Stop the actions and protect the target from danger.

Nip put-downs and hurtful teasing in the bud. Call a meeting to remind Scouts such behavior is unacceptable. Separating the bully from others may help, especially for physical bullying. Interview other Scouts if they witnessed the bullying.

2. Identify the behavior in a calm tone and say that it's not O.K.

That's what former Scoutmaster Dallas Stout, now a professor of child and adolescent studies at Cal State Fullerton, did when he heard some older boys discuss hazing younger ones. "That is not only not cool, but it's not happening," he told them. Then let everyone know you'll deal with the incident in private. That lets the bully save face and increases his openness to your redirecting him.

3. Talk to the target, explaining that, "Bullies may appear big and strong, but emotionally they're troubled," suggests psychologist Barbara Sabbeth. "Often bullies act strong because inside they feel weak." Make sure he knows there's nothing wrong with him and that he can change behaviors to protect himself and not bring on the bullying.

4. Encourage the Target to tell his parents, stressing that this act shows his strength, rather than his weakness. Parents should be understanding and discuss strategies for dealing with the issue.

5. Talk to the parents of the bully and consider requiring them to accompany him to activities. Recognize that they might get defensive, blame the target, or refuse to cooperate. Seek help from an experienced source.

6. Convene a patrol leaders' council to review the incident and any other bullying they've noticed. The patrol leaders can brainstorm ways to prevent future bullying. Ask them, "What are we going to do about this?"

7. Call a board of review for serious incidents of Bullying. Adult committee members can formally tell the bully Scout he must do his best to live up to the Scout Oath and Law if he's to



remain in the program (consult with your unit commissioner or district executive before dismissing a Scout from the troop). The committee can outline expectations and consequences.

Cyberbullying

Results of a Stanford survey of 1,500 students grades 4-8 during the 2003-2004 school year, reported on isafe.org:

42 percent have been bullied while online (one in four have had it happen more than once).

35 percent have been threatened online (nearly one in five have had it happen more than once).

53 percent admit having said something mean or hurtful to another person online (more than one in three have done it more than once).

21 percent have received mean or threatening e-mail or other messages.

58 percent admit someone has said mean or hurtful things to them online (more than four out of 10 say it has happened more than once).

58 percent have not told their parents or an adult about something mean or hurtful that happened to them online.



Get Trained, Online

Find the PowerPoint presentation “Bullying: Prevention and Intervention Tips for Scout Leaders and Parents” at scouting.org/filestore/ppt/bullyingprevention.ppt. Developed by Loudoun County, Va., school psychologist and former Scout leader Ginger McClure, the module reviews the definition and causes of bullying, instructs leaders in response and prevention, and tells parents and Scout leaders what to do if a Scout tells them he’s a victim of cyberbullying.

[Top of Page](#)

[September - October 2010 Table of Contents](#)

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