

Monday, Mar. 12, 2012

The Myths Of Bullying

By John Cloud

At around 7:30 A.M. on Feb. 27, a 17-year-old named T.J. Lane allegedly walked into a high school outside Cleveland with a .22 Ruger handgun. The shooter chose the Chardon High School cafeteria to begin his attack and got off 10 rounds. Police say he managed to hit five students. Three are dead.

Motives for the killings remain a mystery--the local prosecutor says Lane chose his victims at random, but a fellow student suggested that one victim may have been dating a girl Lane had courted. Yet even as police worked to secure the crime scene, one word quickly attached to the unfolding drama: bullying. Early reports described Lane as a "bullied outcast." Anguished callers to local radio stations decried bullying. The day after the shooting, reporters at the White House asked President Obama's chief spokesman whether bullying had caused the crime. The spokesman demurred, but the idea stuck: a bullied kid had struck back.

As more details emerged, the story shifted. Lane, a well-built kid who had a group of friends and a lively Facebook account, didn't look like a classic victim. What is clear is that he survived a rough childhood. His parents were both arrested for domestic violence, and his father served time in prison for assault. Lane was living with his grandparents when he was arrested. He will almost certainly be charged as an adult, and brutal truths will emerge. But for now, Lane seems like both a bully--he shot five kids--and a victim.

Approximately 400 miles from Chardon, in a New Brunswick, N.J., courtroom, bullying also became the focus of a trial that began a week before the Ohio shootings. Dharun Ravi is accused of having so viciously tormented his Rutgers University

roommate, a gay 18-year-old named Tyler Clementi, that in September 2010, Clementi leaped to his death from the George Washington Bridge. Partly because of the bridge's proximity to the nation's media capital and partly because of Clementi's gut-wrenching Facebook sign-off--"jumping off the gw bridge sorry"--the case ignited a furor over bullying that swept the tragedy from a local to an international story.

Details of the Clementi case show that it too is more nuanced than was initially reported. No one disputes that Ravi secretly set up a webcam to spy on Clementi after the latter asked to have their room to himself. No one disputes that Ravi watched as Clementi kissed another man, tweeted crudely that Clementi was gay and allowed at least one friend to watch Clementi's assignation. But in part because Ravi never posted the webcam video online, prosecutors are struggling to prove their case that he is guilty of "bias intimidation." The same day that Lane was shooting in Ohio, one of the New Jersey prosecutor's star witnesses, a friend of Ravi's, declined on the stand to testify that Ravi was biased against gays. In short, what began as a clear-cut case of bullying has led to a muddle that looks like a roommate dispute gone terribly wrong. Clementi was already out to his parents and others; he and Ravi both instant-messaged foolish and brutish things about each other. After the webcam incident, Clementi initially dismissed it: "he just like took a five sec peep lol," he IM'd a friend. The suicide came three days later.

The Bullying Conundrum

Very little about bullying conforms to popular belief. Not all that long ago, it was dismissed as an unfortunate rite of childhood. But because of high-profile cases like the Clementi tragedy and the 2010 suicide of Phoebe Prince, a Massachusetts girl, bullying has become cemented in public opinion as a growing epidemic. Measures rushed into place following these tragedies reinforce the sense of a spreading plague: today only two states, Montana and South Dakota, lack antibullying laws, and the White House has staged two antibullying conferences. The President has called

on school districts to adopt antibullying policies, and his chief civil rights litigator, Assistant Attorney General Thomas Perez, thundered at the second conference that "we're sailing into an undeniable headwind of intolerance." So when the news of a teen gunman in Ohio broke, it was easy for many to jump to the conclusion that bullying had claimed more victims.

But as painful as bullying can be, and as horrible as its victims' scars may be, research suggests that the talk of an epidemic may be exaggerated. At the same time, some of the supposed remedies swiftly implemented in response to tragedies like Clementi's are having unintended consequences. Some teachers feel forced to escalate routine playground spats into cases to present before school boards. And while tough sanctions against accused bullies are now everywhere, educators are divided on how effective they are at actually helping kids.

Statistics showing that bullying is a growing problem are contradictory at best. The U.S. Department of Justice has reported that 37% of students don't feel safe at school because of bullying. That figure, while disturbing, has remained stable over decades. And despite fears that cyberbullying via Facebook and Formspring has exploded, the Bureau of Justice Statistics' most recent figures, from 2007, show that only 3.9% of bullied students say they were bullied outside school grounds.

Other numbers suggest that many students are both victims and victimizers. In a survey of 43,000 high school students completed in 2010, the Josephson Institute's Center for Youth Ethics found that 47% had "been bullied, teased or taunted" at school but that 50% had been bullies themselves. This suggests a lot of overlap between the two groups, meaning that the world isn't cleanly divided into bullies and victims. Psychologists have long known that those who are brutalized are more likely to strike back than mere bystanders. It's not always easy for a teacher busy in the classroom to distinguish the bullied from the tormented.

What's more, the zeal to stop bullies has resulted in vague statutes that have collided with the law of unintended consequences. In one notorious incident in New Jersey--whose stringent law requires any school employee, even a bus driver, to report any possible bullying incident within hours to a designated official who informs the school board--the parents of a kid at Benjamin Franklin Middle School who called a fellow student a "retard" had to meet with school officials. Because of the antibullying law, the boy's insult had to be filed with the state's education department. If in a few years he applies to a state university, admissions officers will see the charge that he was a bully. "I think the new law crosses the line because it is trying to legislate good manners," the superintendent of New Jersey's Central Regional School District, Triantafillos Parlapanides, told his local paper, Bridgewater's Courier News. "That is what parents are supposed to be teaching."

The laws are costing schools even as recession-strapped states cut education budgets. Both for-profit and nonprofit companies offer antibullying packages that schools can adopt to meet the new legal expectations--for a fee. The largest antibullying company, the Olweus Bullying Prevention Program, charges thousands of dollars to large school districts that need to train educators to recognize and report warning signs of bullying, like repeated introverted behavior among possible victims. A common technique is to pair two kids who may have argued in the past and ask them to name something they like and something they dislike about the other person. Local firms have also entered the game. A New Jersey education consultancy, Strauss Esmay Associates, offers schools a \$1,295-minimum deal that provides a two-hour video, three hours of training for two staff members and a manual on preventing bullying.

Other programs, like the San Francisco--based nonprofit No Bully, offer cheaper services, but the financial toll on schools is neither trivial nor clear. The U.S. Department of Education collects no statistics on how much schools are spending to prevent bullying, and the many antibullying companies that have

emerged in recent years haven't formed a trade group. Many officials have begun to fight the new rules. In January, New Jersey's independent budget authority ruled 7 to 2 that the new antibullying legislation violates the state's constitution because it provides no funding for local districts to meet its requirements, which include assigning an administrator who can initiate proceedings against alleged bullies within the required 24 hours. One township in rural Warren County, New Jersey, has claimed that the new law will cost \$6,000 even though the township has only 427 students.

How to Fix the Problem

Amid unintended consequences and wasted funds, what can we do to stop bullying? Dr. Stuart Twemlow, co-author of *Why School Antibullying Programs Don't Work* and a former Baylor College of Medicine professor, recommends targeting antibullying efforts at neither bullies nor victims but a third party: bystanders who watch bullying--either on Facebook or in the hallway--and either laugh or cringe but do nothing more. In a 2004 study of nine schools, Twemlow and a colleague found that schools that focus on punishing bullies and counseling victims report more violence than schools that engage bystanders--and their parents--in understanding that saying something about what you see isn't always tattling.

Many educators on the front lines agree. One school administrator who deals regularly with new forms of bullying is Robin Lowe, principal of the biggest middle school in Houston: Pershing, home of the Pandas, of whom there are 1,750 on any given day. Lowe says that "probably once a week" she meets with a parent clutching a printout showing Facebook wall posts that degrade one of her students.

Most of the time, it turns out that the kids have been engaged in typical middle-school feuds over breakups or hallway slights. Lowe, who has been a principal in middle schools for 25 years, has found that bullying incidents are rarely simple cases of cool

kids attacking outcasts. Once she starts poking around, she says, "I can guarantee you that no one is an innocent on any of this. Something has come before." Many of the same parents who burst into her office with Facebook printouts later have to meet with her to see the aggressive Facebook posts their own kids have written. Lowe says "99.9%" of parents on both sides of alleged bullying incidents are shocked to realize what their kids have written. The best way to stop bullying, she says, is to get bystanders to step up: post a Facebook message telling both sides to calm down, or grab a teacher when students in a hallway are scrawling obscenities on lockers.

Lowe also says that although many argue that the digital era has escalated bullying, she disagrees. Just 20 years ago, a student might spray-paint "Whore" on a girl's locker. That insult might stay up for days, to be seen by many students or be scrubbed instantly. Anonymous insults on Formspring aren't so different: they can be deleted in a matter of seconds.

All of this argues for administrators and parents to take a deep breath and evaluate the scope of an incident before responding. Politically, the issue is a winner for both Democrats and Republicans. Democrats can please liberal donors outraged by the Clementi suicide, and Republicans can proclaim tolerance at little cost. In New Jersey, only one legislator voted against the tough antibullying law, and Governor Chris Christie signed it without hesitation.

No one who says the antibullying efforts are going to extremes would argue against kids' learning to treat one another with respect. But exaggerating the "epidemic" is taking its own kind of toll. Bureaucratic procedures can't substitute for teachers' and parents' showing kids that those who are bullied can become bullies themselves and that students can and should stand up for one another. Most of us are both bully and victim. Bullying may be seen as less a contagion than an unfortunate fact of childhood.