

LOS ANGELES TIMES

Op-Ed

Overusing the bully label

Unfriendliness, exclusion and unkind remarks aren't necessarily bullying.

By Susan Eva Porter

March 15, 2013

A Florida mother was arrested this month for allegedly stabbing her two sons' bullies in the back with box cutters. News reports stated that after calming down an altercation between her sons and a group of boys, the mother reignited the situation and attacked the boys, sending two to the hospital.

Last year, a teenage boy posted something nasty and hurtful in response to a teenage girl's Facebook posting. The girl was distraught, contemplated hurting herself and complained to her mother that she had been bullied. This caused the mother to become distraught. A short time later, police say, the mother saw the boy in a mall and took matters into her own hands, literally. She allegedly choked him.

But the reaction among many to the news reports was that the story was about a heroic mother seeking vengeance against a terrible bully on behalf of her victimized daughter, not an adult choking a child.

Although these two examples are extreme reactions to alleged bullying, many of us are overreacting to childhood aggression in less-extreme, everyday circumstances. It is not uncommon for adults to define even minor difficulties between children, such as being left out of social situations, as bullying. This is fundamentally changing the way we understand childhood.

We hear a lot about bullying — on the playgrounds, in schools, in the media. As a culture, we are infuriated with the bullies and terrified for the victims, and rightly so when it is appropriate. But the idea that childhood today is full of bullies is misleading. We do have a problem, but it's not with our children. It's with us, the adults.

Today we see children as being either dangerous villains or helpless victims, but the truth is kids haven't changed that much in the past generation. I have worked as an educator and a clinician in schools for 25 years, and I can attest that children are not meaner, nastier or more aggressive than they used to be. Nor are they more fragile. Admittedly, digital media amplifies some of their mistakes and pours salt into wounds, but the behavior and reactions aren't new. What's new is our reaction to childhood aggression — and our increasing impatience with children and readiness to label them when they make certain mistakes or experience pain.

What caused this shift? In a word, Columbine, but not for the reasons many believe.

Dave Cullen, in his book "Columbine," wrote that after the 1999 Colorado school massacre, the media crafted the explanation that shooters Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold had been bullied. They apparently hadn't been, but the nation — fearing a repeat of the tragedy — adopted a zero-tolerance attitude toward many normal, albeit painful, aspects of childhood behavior and development, and defined them as bullying.

As a result, behaviors such as social exclusion, persistent unfriendliness and a nasty remark on Facebook have become intolerable acts that cause grave victimization. We now react to the children who commit these acts with a degree of intolerance that we wouldn't consider in other areas of their lives, and we assume that when children feel pain as a result of such mistakes, they will be scarred for life.

Can you imagine if we called children stupid when they made mistakes in math? Or if we assumed they'd never recover when they fell off their bikes? This is how we're essentially reacting every time we label children bullies or victims for making typical childhood mistakes or when they feel any hurt in a relationship. And we're doing this with an unprecedented degree of abandon.

Stanford professor and author Carol Dweck explains that labels create something called a "fixed mind-set," which limits how children learn and perceive themselves, and how we perceive them. Think about it: The mother in the box-cutter case allegedly initiated her assault after the situation had cooled off — fueled, no doubt, by the thought that the boys deserved it because they were bullies. And chances are the mother in the choking incident would have had a hard time justifying her behavior if the boy was someone who had simply made a mistake. But once he was labeled a bully, all bets were off. She and her daughter became victims and were therefore absolved of all responsibility for examining their own behavior.

This is not just a question of semantics. Our penchant for labeling children in situations such as these, and our increasingly fixed mind-set about their behavior, is a real threat to their welfare. As soon as children are labeled bullies, this seems to give us permission to unleash on them a degree of anger and scorn that is frightening. As for the ones we label victims, we keep them identified with their pain and deny them the opportunity to develop true resilience.

We must admit that our approach to childhood aggression is flawed. Our children are not worse than they used to be, nor are they less resilient. But we adults seem to be. Instead of being so quick to label them, we must teach them how to deal with their aggression and pain appropriately and to develop compassion, impulse control and resilience in their relationships. And we must learn to do the same.

Susan Eva Porter, a clinical social worker and school administrator, is the author of "Bully Nation: Why America's Approach to Childhood Aggression is Bad for Everyone."

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