

# Why children become bullies

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Punishment is the first reaction most people think of when they find out that a child is a bully. They rarely investigate the reason why the child is emotionally, verbally or even physically harming their peers.

Tebello Mabusela, a psychology lecturer at the North-West University (NWU), discusses the various factors that could possibly lead to bullying, and the type of support that a 'bully' should be offered. According to Mabusela, a child's upbringing, possible unmet needs, socioeconomic issues and exposure to a violent and an aggressive environment where they have to fight for survival are some of the factors that could possibly contribute towards a child having bullying traits.

She adds that bullying can also be a learned behaviour. A child's environment plays a significant role in developing their personality and character. She uses a notion of 'a child not being an island' – a child's behaviour cannot be isolated from his environment, he learns and imitates the behaviour of those around him.

At a certain developmental stage children can differentiate themselves from those around them and start developing their own thinking, emotions and behaviours. However, some children find it difficult to differentiate and continue to imitate the behaviour learned from their environment until adulthood.



*Tebello Mabusela, a psychology lecturer at the NWU*

## Assistance to offer bullies

While there are various negative and positive reinforcement strategies with respect to bullying behaviour, severe punishment is usually the most common method used. However, this just escalates the behaviour.

Mabusela asserts that bullying can also be associated with mental health problems such as anxiety, depression and personality disorders. "Certain psychological needs have to be met for a child to function well as an adult. When those needs are not met, and rejection, aggression and neglect are experienced, a child develops anxiety and depression that manifest in aggression and anger towards themselves and others."

The aggression towards themselves can usually be identified as self-harm and suicidal thoughts.

She emphasises that the support from healthcare professionals such as psychologists, social workers and psychiatrists can assist bullies with processing childhood traumas that manifest as anger and aggression. Through psychoeducation and other intervention methods such as learning self-awareness, healthy coping, positive adaptation and resilience skills, this behaviour can be changed.



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Mabusela adds that if bullying traits are left uncorrected, they can be carried over into adulthood. "These adults will struggle with emotional regulation, they will not have insight into their triggers and will be violent and aggressive towards themselves and others in all areas of their lives," she concludes.

While it is easy to use punishment as a way to solve bullying, other interventions are encouraged.

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