

Is bullying a risk factor for domestic violence?

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BY PAUL J. FINK, M.D.

Bullying and domestic violence have largely been considered in practice and in the literature as “unconnected phenomena,” according to sociologists Kenneth Corvo, Ph.D., and Ellen deLara, Ph.D. (Aggress. Violent Behav. 2010;15:181-90). However, as a clinician, I see a clear continuum between the two.

In my experience, boys who are big and powerful learn to use their power early and generally find it to be pleasurable. Becoming dominant is important for these boys in school, sports, and social settings, and those who are less powerful tend to fall into line as followers. Shaming and humiliating a weaker boy makes the bully feel highly regarded. We see the learning pattern take place in schools across the country. The pattern gets established: “I am a winner, and I need to win.” In addition, youngsters are under pressure to succeed at home and at school, so the pressure is on them to demonstrate prowess.

Rarely do we meet a family or parents who spend time cataloging their son’s failures. It’s all about winning! The child hears his father telling people about his son’s success on the basketball court, his fabulous grades, and so on, and he learns at a very early age what is important to the parent and how to measure himself.

The child who is bullied has a seriously damaged self-esteem and does little to put himself forward. Clinically, we see a similar process occur in marriage. I have never seen a couple in psychotherapy where each person isn’t blaming the other, finding fault with the other, and wanting either retribution or an apology.

Men who beat or injure their wives have the same psychological needs as the bully I’ve described. They, too, need to win, dominate, and in many cases, overpower. They bring these ideas to the marriage from their family home, school, ball field, and workplace.

In America, 3 million to 10 million incidents of domestic violence are reported annually, hundreds of shelters for abused women exist across the country, and thousands of social workers are dedicated to helping these women and their children. But the problem, generally, is not with the women, although many do stay in the relationship and are reportedly further abused. Usually, men – and the way in which they are socialized – are the problem.

Factors Contributing to Bad Behavior

If the man is the boss at work, he needs to remain in that role in the house. Furthermore, the man cannot tolerate losing an argument or being denied sex or perceive any other “threat” to his authority. If, on the other hand, the husband has no power at work, feels like he is pushed around by everyone, and is low on the totem pole, he comes home looking for some outlet for his frustrated power.

The issue that appears to be underlying most marital difficulties revolves around that of control. Who is in charge? Who makes the decisions? In many marriages, there is a frustration of dreams and expectations. A man who deals with frustration by hitting his opponent will be the fellow who commits domestic violence.

I was once consulted by a couple in the days before couples lived together before marriage. They had a great wedding and flew off to their honeymoon. The husband had come from a family of six children whose mother got up every day at 6 a.m. and made a big breakfast for everybody. The wife had grown up in a small apartment where everyone fought over the one bathroom and flew out of the house with a cup of coffee in her hands.

On their first day at home, the husband went to the kitchen and sat down at the kitchen table with a knife and fork in his hand waiting for his breakfast. He felt a breeze go by as his wife flew out of the apartment with her coffee. That’s how it

began. They agreed that the honeymoon had been wonderful, but each of them had an idea of what they wanted or expected, and the frustrations, hurts, and disappointments had accumulated by the time they asked for help because of his violent outbursts. All clinicians have heard such stories.

Too often, we fail to explore whether the husband had been a bully as a boy. Was he regularly beaten by his father when his behavior was bad? To test out the concept of whether male aggressive behavior is on a continuum, we have to work collectively to get the data. One small study examined three issues shared by men who use violence in their intimate relationships. Those issues are "being part of a family culture that promoted violence, being part of a non-family culture that promoted violence; and early experiences of maltreatment or trauma" (Issues Ment. Health Nurs. 2010;31:498-506). We also must acknowledge that men, too, are victims of domestic violence (J. Psychiatric. Ment. Health Nurs. 2008;15:322-7). But, of course, this phenomenon is far less common.

In some couples, each partner figures out how to frustrate the other. And so, while still proposing love, the need to hurt takes precedence. In a similar fashion, the school bully plans his attack before he even starts out for school. Almost every adolescent arrested has the word "assault" among the charges that are brought to the court. It seems to start early, and I have for many years thought that we would reduce youth violence and youth murder if we could reduce the fighting, hitting, and hurting that takes place in 2nd, 3rd, and 4th grade. These early elementary school years are the training ground.

Some boys don't even learn to talk to peers about issues or problems. In a similar fashion, husbands don't talk to their wives when they are frustrated or unhappy. I believe the feelings precede the hitting and hurting of their wives. We often ask why they can't just sit down and discuss the issue with their wives. And what I hear as a response is to blame the woman who "doesn't listen to them," "thinks she is always right," and so on. The wife's chatter, which always contains some criticisms of the husband as far as he's concerned, further infuriates him. Often, that chatter triggers the first punch.

It's clear that I believe we do not need blood tests or MRIs to understand what leads to bullying and domestic violence. They are related. Inherent in this connection is the training the boy gets in developing anger and hatred. Children who are brutalized in their homes are very angry about it. They need love; instead, they get hurt. Their response is to hurt others. They are filled with anger toward a parent – to whom they cannot retaliate. So the boy's career as a bully starts.

Bullying is always related to a power differential, just like a big daddy and a little son. They have to find someone smaller, weaker, and who isn't going to try to retaliate. The bullying continues for many years. In violent relationships in which the two people get married, the man is all set for domestic violence and marital rape (Trauma Violence Abuse 2003;4:228-46). And when we take a close look at bullying, we see that these perpetrators often were victims themselves.

How the Data Stack Up

A study on bullying among middle and high school students in Massachusetts in 2009 found that the adjusted odds ratios for middle school students being physically hurt by a family member were 2.9 for victims, 4.4 for bullies, and 5 for bully-victims. For witnessing violence in the family, those ratios were 2.6, 2.9 and 3.9, respectively after adjusting for potential difference by age group, sex, and race/ethnicity (MMWR 2011;60:465-71).

For high school students being physically hurt by a family member the ratios were 2.8 for victims, 3.8 for bullies, and 5.8 for bully-victims, and for witnessing violence in the family 2.3, 2.7 and 6.8 respectively. "As schools and health departments continue to address the problem of bullying and its consequences, an understanding of the broad range of associated risk factors is important for creating successful prevention and intervention strategies that include involvement by families," the authors wrote.

These associations between getting bullied and becoming a bully also were found several years ago, in a comprehensive report undertaken by the U.S. Secret Service and the U.S. Department of Education ("The Final Report and Findings of the Safe School Initiative: Implications for the Prevention of School Attacks in the United States," Washington: 2002). The report, described as "the culmination of an extensive examination of 37 incidents of targeted school violence that occurred in the United States from December 1974 through May 2000," found that "almost three-quarters of the attackers (in the school shootings) felt persecuted, bullied, threatened, attacked, or injured by others

prior to the incident.” In fact, the report says that many of the attackers in the school shootings “told of behaviors that, if they occurred within the workplace, likely would meet legal definitions of harassment and/or assault.”

Role of Psychiatry in Reversing Trends

In our work, we need to help a child feel included, not excluded; loved, not dominated; and have a true understanding that “real men” don’t have to win every battle. A man has to come away with a feeling of some power, some ability to succeed, because if he doesn’t, he will lose self-esteem, feel worthless, and get depressed.

I’ve seen numerous older men who come into psychotherapy with feelings of defeat. These are men who have lived lives of great success, and now the world is passing them by. All the things that used to matter are no longer exciting or available to them. And, for them, the relative loss of power is excruciatingly painful. They feel that no one understands them. These men are beyond domestic violence, but the underlying factors and needs are still burning brightly within them.

For a younger man just starting out, his wife has to have some sense of what he needs, and help him to feel adequate and hopeful. If she adds to his feelings of shame and worthlessness, the only answer – in his mind – is to turn on her.

The battering of women for centuries was seen as an acceptable form of behavior that supported patriarchy (Victimology: An International Journal 1978;2:426-42). Thankfully – in contemporary America – we vilify domestic violence and its perpetrators. However, despite the perpetrator’s shame and regret, too often, he cannot stop. Psychological factors drive him to continue his behavior. As psychiatrists, we must be aware that in every home in which domestic violence occurs, if there is a child who witnesses or hears it, he or she is traumatized.

Clearly, I believe that aggression is on a continuum. It also is a modality that has to change. First, parents worldwide have to stop the practice of beating their children. Second, I support a nationwide campaign aimed at stopping all bullying in schools. Finally, we have to find a way to get couples to talk before they get married. Such conversations will bring out aggressive tendencies held by either partner and should lead to a discussion about the kinds of changes needed for the pair to have a successful and respectful marriage.

Dr. Fink is a consultant and psychiatrist in Bala Cynwyd, Pa., and professor of psychiatry at Temple University in Philadelphia. He can be reached at cpnews@elsevier.com.

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