

# Understanding the Mind of a Bully



*By Horacio Sanchez*

Exposure to violence and abuse has long been linked to the occurrence of behaviors such as aggression and bullying. What has not been explored until recently is the impact that this exposure has on brain development. By understanding what happens in the brain and why, educators can take steps to prevent bullying and assist the bully in more socially acceptable behavior.

The amygdala, an important part of the limbic system in the brain, is in charge of **personal** behavioral responses. Any stimulus encountered by an individual is filtered through the amygdala in order for it to assess if the stimulus is a threat. When the amygdala perceives danger, it will configure a chemical response designed to respond to the situation and release the necessary chemicals into the blood stream. By releasing the response through the circulatory system, the amygdala seizes control of the body in order to ensure immediate response. The amygdala reduces input from the cortex, which is in charge of reasoning and planning, in direct proportion to the level of the perceived danger. A primary function of the cortex is to provide related data to the amygdala in order to produce a more thoughtful, rational response. However, since the amygdala's role is to ensure survival, if the threat is perceived to be immediate, it will block input from the cortex in order to expedite the "survival" response. Simply put, the more immediate and severe the threat, the lower the percentage of input from the cortex.

The types of personal behavioral responses produced are directly correlated to the past emotional experiences to which an individual has been exposed. The chemical configurations designed by the amygdala to deal with these responses are then stored for faster response if the individual encounters a similar threat in the future. In cases of repetitive trauma, the response of the amygdala will become quicker each time. Repetitive trauma can result in a **hypersensitive limbic system**. A hypersensitive limbic response occurs when the response designed and stored by the amygdala is so repeatedly produced that it can be prematurely released in times of *perceived* stress, without the related trigger actually being present.

Therefore, it is logical that the profile of a bully is that of an individual who has been exposed to violence and has been a victim of systematic physical abuse. The aggression toward others initiates whenever he or she experiences stress.

In this context, stress is defined as any stimulus that causes dramatic chemical shifts in the brain. Each individual's emotional health, then, determines how the individual will interpret and react to stress. Victims of systematic abuse often misperceive common everyday occurrences as threatening whenever they become over stimulated.

The arousal level of the amygdala is lowered in situations in which there exists a perception of being wanted, safe, and successful. When experiencing these types of emotions, the amygdala perceives stimuli accurately and continues to receive input from the cortex. Since many bullies suffer from poor self-esteem and poor social skills, when in group settings their level of anxiety often elevates. In settings like school, bullies experience failure, don't feel wanted, and don't feel safe. Their perceptions lead to a classic "catch 22" cycle of aggression: the bully seeks acceptance; earlier life traumas have created atypical response patterns; feeling different from the other students, he or she becomes anxious, leading to acts of aggression; this cycle continues, increasing feelings of isolation and leading to repetitive acts of aggression. Since at the core, bullies are anxious and insecure individuals, it will be natural for them to select victims that they perceive as weaker than themselves.

Once the pattern of school failure is established, school itself will produce increased anxiety and lead to aggressive behaviors. It is not surprising that bullying usually occurs in the least structured parts of the school day. The increased stimuli experienced during all the major transitions become consistent times for these threatening behaviors to escalate: admission to school in the morning, transitions between classes, lunchtime, and dismissal.

To break the cycle of bullying, schools need to establish predictable routines and rituals that aid in lowering the bully's level of anxiety. In addition, schools that help students feel successful and wanted; will lower the arousal level of the amygdala, thereby reducing impulsivity. The old adage that bullies are the individuals who are afraid is clinically true. To learn more about the science of preventing bullying, contact Resiliency Inc., at 919-544-0616 or visit our web site at [resiliencyinc.com](http://resiliencyinc.com).

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