

The New York Times

March 11, 2013

Defining Bullying Down

By EMILY BAZELON

NEW HAVEN

THE March 3 death of [Bailey O’Neill](#), a 12-year-old boy in Upper Darby, Pa., was widely attributed to bullying, based on allegations that a classmate hit the boy in the face in January. He suffered a concussion, his family said, and eventually seizures.

Bullying was also the headline in the death of [Amanda Todd](#), a 15-year-old Canadian girl who committed suicide after making a viral video in which she described being seduced, stalked and blackmailed online, probably by an adult.

Were these instances of actual bullying? It’s hard to say. But what’s notable is that observers automatically assumed they were, even though we know that “bullying” isn’t the same as garden-variety teasing or a two-way conflict. The word is being overused — expanding, accordionlike, to encompass both appalling violence or harassment and a few mean words. State laws don’t help: a wave of recent anti-bullying legislation includes at least 10 different definitions, sowing confusion among parents and educators.

All the misdiagnosis of bullying is making the real but limited problem seem impossible to solve. If every act of aggression counts as bullying, how can we stop it? Down this road lies the old assumption that bullying is a rite of childhood passage. But that’s wrong.

Bullying is a particular form of harmful aggression, linked to real psychological damage, both [short and long term](#). There are concrete strategies that can succeed in addressing it — and they all begin with shifting the social norm so that bullying moves from being shrugged off to being treated as unacceptable. But we can’t do that if we believe, and tell our children, that it’s everywhere.

The definition of bullying adopted by psychologists is physical or verbal abuse, repeated over time, and involving a power imbalance. In other words, it’s about one person with more social status lording it over another person, over and over again, to make him miserable.

But when every bad thing that happens to children gets called bullying, we end up with misleading narratives that obscure other distinct forms of harm. In the case of a district attorney has said he has found no evidence of bullying as he properly d



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history of intimidation over time. It's a tragedy if the evidence ends up showing that he died from head injuries caused by another child's punches, but it's a different kind of tragedy if that child was known for bullying, and that his parents and his school failed to stop him.

In the video Amanda Todd made before her death, her account of online seduction, stalking and blackmail cries out for condemnation and police investigation. Yet because she also reported conflicts with kids at her school, her death was mostly ascribed simply to bullying.

On the other extreme of the spectrum, overly broad legal definitions of bullying — for example, ones that leave out the factors of repetition or power imbalance — can lead parents to cry bully whenever their child has a conflict with another child.

Sorting through the accusations is a burden for schools, especially when state laws straitjacket their response to a bullying accusation, rather than allowing them to use their judgment and take account of context. And the “bully” label carries a stigma that's hard for a child to escape. It makes a child seem permanently heartless, rather than capable of feeling empathy, which almost all are.

Crying wolf about bullying isn't good for the children who play the victim, either. Those who hold onto that identity are less likely to recover from adversity. Bullying victims need sympathy; they also need help learning to be resilient.

One way to better identify real bullying is to listen to how teenagers themselves describe their interpersonal conflicts. Most teenagers can identify bullying, but they can also distinguish it from what they often call “drama,” which, the researchers [Danah Boyd and Alice Marwick](#) have [shown](#), is an accurate and common name for the ordinary skirmishes that mark most children's lives. In fact, it's drama that's common, and bullying, properly defined, that's less so.

Understanding what bullying means to children is integral to the success of every smart bullying prevention effort, because it harnesses the power of the majority. One effective strategy is for schools to survey their own students about bullying, and then broadcast the results to students. When they see evidence of what most of them know intuitively — that bullying is outlier behavior — they're even less likely to engage in it.

It's also crucial for the adults in the school to set the tone. They have to understand what bullying is and what it's not, respond when they see a domineering child going after a victim, and foster the strong ties with students that make all the difference for children's sense of belonging and decisions about where to turn when they need help.

Adults can also often do more good by asking questions that push children to come up with their

own strategies than by dictating solutions themselves. By many measures, teenagers today are faring better than they were a generation ago. The rates of teenage pregnancy, binge drinking and drunken driving are down. So is violent juvenile crime and even fighting on school property.

Those heartening developments help explain why bullying is holding our national attention: as a society, we have the wherewithal now to attend to a psychological harm that has long deeply affected kids, but which adults used to mostly ignore. Bullying is a problem we can and should address. But not if we're wrongly led to believe that it's everything and everywhere.

Emily Bazelon is a senior editor at Slate and the author of "Sticks and Stones: Defeating the Culture of Bullying and Rediscovering the Power of Character and Empathy."