



## **The Simonette Report: Surviving the bullies**

By Matt Simonette

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CHICAGO, IL -- Kids who are bullied hear the same excuses over and over. *Kids will be kids. They're blowing off steam. You just need to tough it out.*

But there's now a growing awareness of the bullying epidemic in this country, and many parents and activists are just now realizing that schools and families must do much better to keep young people safe.

Unfortunately, the dialogue is expanding for many of the wrong reasons. The scope of bullying has changed, for example. Youngsters once could find relative peace and refuge in the sanctuary of their own homes. Now, their peers can continue to hurl insults via text messages and Facebook postings. Victims' responses have at the same time become increasingly desperate and violent.

The new film *Bully* which opened this past Friday in Chicago, has recently contributed significantly to the conversation on peer abuse. After premiering at the 2011 Tribeca Film Festival, it then garnered attention earlier this year when the profanities uttered in the film earned it an R-rating by the Motion Picture Association of America, potentially cutting the film off from viewers under 18. *Bully's* distributor, the Weinstein Company, was supposedly prepared to release the film without a rating; that tactic, however, would have substantially impacted its box-office—many theater chains refuse to show unrated films while many media outlets refuse their advertising. In the end, director Lee Hirsch agreed to edits that allowed "Bully" to be released with a PG-13 rating.

The film follows a number of young people who have coped with bullies on a daily basis, among them 13-year-old Alex Libby, who endures daily taunts and physical abuse on his bus ride to and from school. As the violence towards Alex escalated, Hirsch felt he could no longer keep a documentarian's distance between himself and his subject; he turned over footage of the abuse to the youngster's parents and school officials. When Mr. and Mrs. Libby confront an administrator about the abuse, they are assured that the children on Alex's bus route "are as good as gold."

Another of Hirsch's subjects, 16-year-old Kelby Johnson, has endured abuse after coming out as a lesbian in her Oklahoma town. Her parents, who are Evangelical Christians, offer to leave town so she can escape the torments of her peers. She refuses, however, and says that she hopes to be the one who can bring change about to her town. By the film's end, however, she's frustrated and facing another school year of ostracism by her peers, and leaves her school.

The film received criticism in some quarters for its focus on small town schools, but bullying transcends geographical regions and institutional settings, according to Shannon Sullivan of Illinois Safe Schools Alliance, which advocates on behalf of GLBT students. Bullying, Sullivan maintains, is about "othering" someone else, whether it's for their sexual orientation, economic status, skin color, physical challenges or any other factor.

"When we are growing up, we are looking to establish an identity and figure out not only who we are, but, also, who we aren't," Sullivan said, adding, "There is a dynamic there of 'I'm going to give myself more power and take away your power.'"

Not being able to address who is othered, and why, is the ultimate failure of schools, she said. "They can certainly grasp that people are being bullied, but they can't grasp the motivation behind it; that's why the schools are not helping."

That inaction results in enormous physical costs to the students, their families, and their communities. One study finds that about 160,000 kids each day skip school in order to avoid being picked on. Those same kids are more likely to become ill more

frequently; the physical stress caused by the bullying can lead to a weakened immune system that cannot stave off sickness. Similarly, their school performance is often impacted negatively, and can often impede their chances of going on to college. Students doing the bullying are similarly more likely to interact with the criminal justice system at some point in their lives.

For a young person who identifies as gay, or whose peers might suspect is gay, feelings of being different are even more intense.

"In this culture of homophobia we're in, boys and men in particular are forced to stay within a fairly narrow expression of gender," said Dan Maloney, a Chicago psychotherapist who often sees patients dealing with childhood trauma. "I remember from when I was growing up, there was nothing worse than being called a faggot."

*Bully* inspired Channel 7's *Windy City LIVE* to air a program focused on bullying. During the episode, Senior Producer Hank Mendheim, who grew up in New Orleans, discussed being picked on for being gay when he was in grade school.

"The first time I was bullied was in the second grade," Mendheim said. "I remember someone calling me 'gay,' and I had no idea what that word meant, but I knew it meant something negative."

Mendheim went on to discuss being bullied further in the sixth grade. His father attempted to help by going to both the school principal and the bully's father, and got nowhere.

"Kids don't understand how powerful their words are," he added. "I would have much rather taken a punch because you can recover from a punch—that physical pain goes away but that emotional pain sticks with you forever."

"Even at forty years old, I can think back to those times and it was emotional," Mendheim said.

After the program aired, Mendheim said the only reason he saw *Bully* was because of his show. "It was really hard for me to sit through that movie...I understand those kids and I understand what they're going through."

Mendheim's experiences eased as he got older, but for many LGBTs, bullying can resonate as a deep trauma. "There's obviously a huge co-morbidity of substance abuse and depression in the gay community," Maloney said. "So many people are carrying around a feeling that you cannot reveal your true self."

That feeling can go beyond internalized homophobia. Survivors of bullying sometimes have difficulty managing their relationships with partners, family members and co-workers, among others.

"Most of us can fortunately limp along well enough so that we can get jobs and have relationships," Maloney said. "But at the same time, it takes work for some of us to feel comfortable revealing parts of ourselves."

According to Maloney, it's important for adult survivors of bullying to look back on the experience "with the intelligence and experiences of being an adult—sometimes it's difficult to know and remember that those things that happened to you as a child are not going to happen to you again moving forward in life."

Sullivan said she hoped audiences who see *Bully* don't just stop at seeing the movie, and that the film inspires significant action on behalf of targeted youths.

"Parents, of course, are critical in that respect—they can hold parents accountable, especially if they can band together to do it," she said, adding that it's especially important for them to try to avoid what she called the "Not My Kid" syndrome—denial that your child could either be a bully's target, or the bully themselves. "Kids pick up and that denial and learn from it."

Schools have to realize that much of what has been done so far "just isn't working," according to Sullivan. Beyond punishing a bully, they need to address whether he or she has anger management, case management or mental health issues that need to be addressed.

"You need to go past the punishment, suspension, expulsion route, or else there are going to be a lot of people who are going to be affected by this," she said. "But fortunately there is some positive movement afoot in Illinois about that."

In late March, State Rep. Kelly Cassidy (D-Chicago) [advanced legislation](#) in the Illinois House aimed at curbing bullying. Now headed to the State Senate, the measure emphasized "restorative" actions in dealing with bullies, rather than punitive ones, and laid a template for school policies on bullying. Districts will not be penalized should they fail to produce an anti-bullying policy.

In a statement, Cassidy said, "By giving school district the tools to combat bullying and working with the community to offer youth programming and professional development for staff, we can help ensure a safe and healthy learning environment for children and schools."

The legislation will be sponsored in the Senate by State Sen. Heather Steans (D-Chicago).

**Watch Hank Mendheim's appearance on the *Windy City LIVE* bullying special broadcast:**

**Related:** View all segments from the *Windy City LIVE* bullying episode online at [windycitylive.com](http://windycitylive.com)

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