

EDUCATION

The Bully Business

An entire industry is profiting off of tactics used to punish mean children at school.

By Cevin Soling



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According to a number of [studies](#), many boxers suffer from brain injuries. This may be so for a number of reasons. It is possible that boxers might tend to have poor diets or come from cities with a great deal of air pollution. They may experience a high degree of stress or sleep deprivation, or perhaps many boxers take drugs that are conducive to brain damage. One symptom that can accompany brain injury is difficulty with speech. Now, imagine that in response to this condition, various entities that profit from treatments for this symptom proposed intervention programs involving speech therapists. Imagine that they advocated for a supportive community so that these boxers would not feel self-conscious.

This approach is, of course, comically absurd. First, it treats a symptom as opposed to the disease, and second, while all of the factors listed can contribute to killing brain cells, the most obvious cause is not listed: the fact that, when a person is pummeled repeatedly in the head with 50 times the force of gravity, brain damage can result. How does this all relate to bullying? Profiteers who masquerade as though they are performing public services champion these very same inane tactics to combat bullying.

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An entire industry has recently emerged to exploit bullying. Filmmakers, politicians, lobbyists, corporations that sell in-school programs, authors, social media marketers, and others, hawk their wares—they all promote themselves under the guise of fighting the problem. In New Jersey, for example, anti-bullying policies cost school districts [more than \\$2 million](#) in 2012 just to implement a law that involved little more than extra staff. One consistent element is that "solutions" such as this one never explicitly regard bullying as a symptom. As such, when causes are discussed, they are couched in terms of character defects. They insist that bullies [feel bad about themselves](#), have [deep insecurities](#), and [crave attention](#). In some instances, the culture of the school is said to play a role, but only to the degree that it allows for bullying to thrive as opposed to contributing to its creation.

Just like failing to acknowledge that boxers are frequently punched in the head, the dominant cause of bullying is the elephant in the room. Children are confined in schools, often against their will, and deprived the capacity to make choices that affect their lives, yet policymakers ignore these conditions when analyzing their behavior. Responsible scientists who study animals are keenly aware of the possible impact of the captive laboratory environment on their subjects, which includes the [capacity to foment violence](#). Yet,

inconceivably, the captive environment of school is rarely, if ever, taken into account by researchers or faculty when assessing the behavior of students.

The most widespread [catalyst for bullying](#) is when adults render children powerless and [subject](#) them to an environment from which they cannot escape. As much as [some people might try to deny](#) this blatant reality, many students have absolutely no power in schools. The law requires children to be in a place many of them do not want to be, where they must associate with people they do not like, and where they must take arbitrary orders in a docile manner.

People have a fundamental [need for a sense of power](#) over their lives and a [need for self-determination](#). Deprived of agency, many will bully others to attain some feeling of control over their lives. This basic understanding of human nature is scandalously absent not just from a bulk of the books and research on bullying, but also from intervention programs, media coverage, and classroom discussions.

Policies and solutions designed to deal with bullying have drawn from this outrageously distorted conception. Legislators typically favor creating a [climate of intolerance](#). In this framework, efforts to define the problem are so off-base that even playful derogatory banter among friends has been [regarded](#) as bullying. Another approach involves the creation of a ["snitch" culture](#) in which everyone is encouraged to report incidents they witness. This breeds anxiety and paranoia because every observation is subjective. The remaining rhetoric is deceptive and misguided in that it ultimately forces the children to find [peaceful solutions](#) in an environment where ["nobody should be mean to others."](#)

[The Bully Project](#) has advocated for a variant of this last proposal, as have a number of city mayors. The Bully Project's mission is, according to its website, to change ["a culture of bullying into one of empathy and action...to create safe, caring, and respectful schools and communities."](#) While this may sound nice, this vision is especially despicable. It treats bullying as if it were an artifact of culture rather than a consequence of being in an oppressive environment. Instead of empowering youth, the plan aims to to change how children react when they feel powerless. In the antebellum South, people in power sought to portray slaves as people who sung, danced, and willingly served their masters. Likewise, today's anti-bullying programs train children to accept helplessness under the ruse that they have the "power" to change their emotical response to their captive state. [Research](#) already shows how the autocratic model of schooling teaches children to value obedience over empathy; this approach goes a step further by purposely conditioning children to cheerfully embrace subjugation.

The appeals by these anti-bullying hucksters are also profoundly dishonest. First, the bulk of the studies they promote, including a meta-analysis, show that anti-bullying programs produce [no meaningful results](#), or even [increase](#) bullying. While some research may suggest a marginal positive impact, these studies define "success" perversely by measuring how the symptoms are suppressed as opposed to addressing underlying problems. This would be akin to evaluating an aspirin's "success" at curing a brain tumor based on its capacity to make the pain more tolerable.

The only way to constructively deal with bullying is to give students appropriate degrees of autonomy and not compel them to be in oppressive environments where they are subjected to people they despise and deprived of any control over their lives. This response is free of ulterior political motives; in fact, it proactively dismisses the very utterance of such a proposition. But instead, policymakers invite the racketeers to control the dialogue—the exploiters of children who sell easy but costly fixes.

Cevin Soling is the author of *The Student Resistance Handbook* and the director of the documentary *The War on Kids*. His films have been featured on the BBC, HBO, The Sundance Channel, and MTV.

RECOMMENDED READING



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JENNIFER SENIOR



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M. NOLAN GRAY

