

# The Problem of Sexual Bullying: A Faithful Response for Parents and Church Leaders

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*Sexual bullying, like sexual harassment, is unwanted or unwarranted attention of a sexual nature that makes a person feel uncomfortable. "Sexual bullying involves comments, gestures, actions, or attention that is intended to hurt, offend, or intimidate another person. With sexual bullying, the focus is on things like a person's appearance, body parts, or sexual orientation."<sup>1</sup> The intended target of the bullying can feel uncomfortable, fearful, put down, and ashamed.*

Sexual bullying can be physical, verbal, or emotional. Physical sexual bullying includes unwanted touching of a sexual nature. It can be rubbing up against someone or grabbing someone in a sexual way. Verbal sexual bullying uses name calling to put someone down using terms such as *ho*, *whore*, or *slut*. Verbal sexual bullying sometimes refers to someone's sexuality in a demeaning way; for example, calling someone gay when gay is considered bad. Dr. Dorothy Espelage, a professor at the University of Illinois, says half of all bullying in elementary and middle schools involves the use of gay slurs.<sup>2</sup> Teasing someone about his or her body, such as making comments about breast size or having "man boobs," is also verbal sexual bullying.

Emotional sexual bullying is an action taken to shame, humiliate, or embarrass someone. Spreading rumors, making inappropriate posts on social media sites, or sending unwanted sexual text messages (known as *sexts*) are considered sexual bullying.

Three influences contribute to sexual bullying. First, the increasing sexualization of culture makes it appear that teasing someone in a sexual way is no different from teasing someone about something that is harmless. Second, like all bullying, sexual bullying is a form of aggression used from a position of power. The power may be size, age, status, or being a member of a dominant group. It often is an attempt to dominate others and to prove one's superiority to oneself or others. In adolescence, peer groups and a sense of belonging take on great importance. One of the most harmful things anyone can say is that you are so different you don't belong. As a result, adolescents reach for the greatest insult of difference they can imagine and end up calling someone *fag* or *whore*. Finally, sexual bullying is often an attempt to overcompensate for one's own sense of inadequacy.

Sexual bullying is fear based with the object of raising one's stature by lowering the stature of others. Discovering and understanding individual power, sexuality, belonging, and self-worth are all tasks first undertaken in adolescence. These, combined with the lack of maturity due to inexperience in adolescence, make it a time in which sexual bullying is likely to occur.

1. [kidshealth.org/teen/stress\\_coping\\_center/stress\\_situations/harassment.html](http://kidshealth.org/teen/stress_coping_center/stress_situations/harassment.html)
2. [oprah.com/relationships/School-Bullying/8#ixzz2Js7BQoZb](http://oprah.com/relationships/School-Bullying/8#ixzz2Js7BQoZb)

Just because sexual bullying can be explained in terms of adolescent development, that does not mean it is harmless. Sexual bullying can have harmful emotional outcomes for those who are targeted. It can lead to self-injury and suicide among those who are bullied.

Sexual bullying also runs counter to the way Christ calls us to treat one another. As disciples of Christ and followers of the Reformed tradition, ostracism, judgment, diminishment, or domination of another human is unacceptable. As followers of Christ, we are called to live in faith of God's providence and not in the fears of self-doubt and inadequacy.

The Reformed tradition holds that God calls us in our diversity to live together in community. The objective of sexual bullying (particularly when it is done around gender or sexual identity) is to ostracize or separate. The fear of difference is particularly strong at a time when the importance of peer relationships is heightened. As a result, young people use verbal attacks on those who may appear different despite their being children of God like all of us. The names people are called in sexual bullying are used to isolate and separate. Alienation and separation of our brothers and sisters in Christ run counter to the Reformed tradition. The gospel is for Jews and Gentiles. We are to welcome one another, just as Christ has welcomed us, for the glory of God. God sends Philip to welcome the Ethiopian eunuch (Acts 8:26–40). Paul makes the nature of community and its inclusiveness clear: "There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus. And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to the promise" (Galatians 3:28–29). Bullying designed to ostracize out of fear simply has no place in the body of Christ.

The Reformed tradition also holds that the law is God's gift to provide an orderly means to live together as the body of Christ. The summary of the law, found in Mark, tells us we are to love our neighbor as ourselves.

*"One of the scribes came near and heard them [the Sadducees] disputing with one another, and seeing that he [Jesus] answered them well, he asked him [Jesus], 'Which commandment is the first of all?' Jesus answered, 'The first is, Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength. The second is this, You shall love your neighbor as yourself. There is no other commandment greater than these'" (Mark 12:28–31).*

Bullying is an activity that is in direct contradiction to the law God has given us. It is not loving to embarrass, or harass, or inappropriately tease or touch another individual. It is hurtful and anything but the building up of the body of Christ. The Greek word used for sin in the New Testament is *hamartia*, which is a term borrowed from archery. It literally means missing the mark or missing the bull's eye. Sexual bullying, in clear contrast to loving our neighbor as we love ourselves, misses God's intended mark for us as God's children. Instead of building up the body of Christ, it has been used to demean and destroy individuals.

Sexual bullying holds within it an overt or covert act of judgment. Those who bully do not treat their targets as equal but as less than themselves. Likewise, those who bully often do so out of the feeling of inadequacy and thus have made a judgment about themselves and their own worth. The sovereignty of God is one of the most important and distinctive doctrines for the Reformed tradition. We believe that God freely chose to create the world. We also hold that God out of love chose to create us and be in a covenantal relationship with us. Because God is sovereign, we never speak for God but as God's servants seeking to be faithful. Whenever we place ourselves in the position of judgment on another human being's worth or behavior, our words and actions become idolatrous and we become the idol. We have taken God's place when we attempt to determine the worthiness of another human or ourselves.

Christ is clear about human judgment:

*"Do not judge, so that you may not be judged. For with the judgment you make you will be judged, and the measure you give will be the measure you get. Why do you see the speck in your neighbor's eye, but do not notice the log in your own eye? Or how can you say to your neighbor, 'Let me take the speck out of your eye,' while the log is in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your neighbor's eye." (Matthew 7:1-5)*

When we talk about or treat another in a demeaning way, we have made a judgment. Rather than judgment, our calling and our commitment as followers of Christ are in gratitude to share the love we have been given.

Sexual bullying sometimes may be hard to recognize. Innuendo, humor, and even flirting blur the line between harmful and hurtful behavior. Innuendo happens when something is said or done that has a double meaning. The person who has spoken or acted can deny the interpretation made by the targeted individual and say that he or she is overreacting. Young people sometimes say that they were just joking, being funny, or that something was humorous as a way of justifying behavior. Humor, like beauty, is often only in the eye of the beholder. The distinction between flirting and sexual bullying can be even more difficult. The comment "You look hot!" can be taken in several ways with different shades of meaning. It can be a genuine compliment or a sexual comment. "You look great in that top" is one type of comment. "That top makes your boobs look great" means something else entirely.

Educators, parents, and pastors have a responsibility to help adolescents develop and live their faith. Fulfilling this responsibility with regard to sexual bullying means several things.

**Teach.** Young people need to be taught sensitivity to others and to realize the power their words and actions have to heal or hurt others. Reminding adolescents they have the power of choice affirms their sense of self and increases self-worth. The results of empowering youth in this way are often remarkable.

Young people also need to have an awareness of self to recognize what may be sexual bullying. Two good questions serve as a place to start: How does this make me feel? Do I like what is happening and would I want it to continue?<sup>3</sup> These questions can provide clarity about what is and isn't sexual bullying.

**Tell.** When teens witness or experience sexual bullying, they can tell the tormenter to stop. It may or may not work but it is worth a try. When someone else is being bullied, the pressure of peer disapproval may be enough to stop the bullying. Since bullies are often motivated out of fear, confronting them and refusing to be intimidated may also stop the inappropriate behavior.

**Talk.** When sexual bullying or harassment occurs, it is important to talk to an adult. Many schools and organizations have policies against sexual bullying. While it may be embarrassing to talk to an adult about something of a sexual nature, an adult who cares about young people will respond in a positive way.

As followers of Christ and bearers of the good news, pastors, educators, parents, and young people have a calling to make a better world for all God's children. Ending sexual bullying provides an opportunity to do so.

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3. [kidshealth.org/teen/stress\\_coping\\_center/stress\\_situations/harassment.html](http://kidshealth.org/teen/stress_coping_center/stress_situations/harassment.html)

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