

## **The Bully Blight**

### **Scientists find that getting picked on is more harmful than anyone knew**

**By MICHAEL D. LEMONICK**

Like most of her classmates at Washington High School in Milwaukee, Wis., La Shanda Trimble, 18, is attentive to fashion trends; it's the particular trend she chooses that sets her apart. She's a Goth, wearing black lipstick and nail polish, listening to bands like Linkin Park and Rob Zombie rather than rapper Nelly or R&B star Ciara. She likes to wear her hair in pigtails instead of the more popularly accepted braids. The other kids don't approve. "They think I should act like them," says the 11th-grader. "They like me to listen to rap and pop and wear, like, brand-new shoes."

For these stylistic transgressions, Trimble is routinely punished. "I'd be walking down to a class, and I'd hear murmuring, and somebody would say, 'She's going to put a spell on you.'" One boy rode a broom into class to mock her; another called her ugly and crazy. Finally, one day last month, she couldn't take it anymore. "I started crying uncontrollably," she says. She's behind in her classwork now because she avoids going to school whenever she can.

Bullies have lurked in hallways and on playgrounds ever since history's first day of school, and until recently, dealing with them was considered just another painfully useful life lesson. But that attitude is changing. In 2002 the American Medical Association warned that bullying is a public-health issue with long-term mental-health consequences for both bullies and their victims. Just last month UCLA researchers published two new studies showing that bullying is much more widespread and harmful than anyone knew.

During a two-week period at two ethnically diverse Los Angeles middle schools, says Adrienne Nishina, a post-doctoral scholar at the UCLA Graduate School of Education and Information Studies, nearly half the 192 kids she interviewed reported being bullied at least once; even more said they had seen others targeted. Also important, says Nishina: kids are frequently as distressed by witnessing bullying as by being bullied.

Why bullying exists isn't entirely clear, but another study published last week in the Archives of Pediatric and Adolescent Medicine attributes it at least in part to excessive television viewing. (Perhaps time spent in front of the tube is time spent not learning social skills.) But bullying existed long before TV, and while this may help explain the persistence of the problem, it doesn't do much more.

Whatever the reason for bullying, the consequences are clear. Nishina found that victims feel sick more often than their classmates do, are absent more often and tend to have lower grades. They are also more depressed and withdrawn--a natural reaction, says Nishina, but one that "can subsequently lead to more victimization." The studies also indicate that schools take too narrow a view of what constitutes bullying. Physical aggression is forbidden, as are such forms of verbal bullying as sexual harassment and racial slurs. But the rules are generally silent about less incendiary name calling. "You're probably not going to get into trouble if you call someone fat or stupid," Nishina says. "But our research suggests victimized students felt equally bad."

She also classifies nonphysical, nonverbal behaviors, including gestures and making faces, as bullying. "They happen quite a bit and can have an effect as well," Nishina says. "But they're very subtle and very difficult for us to capture and assess well." Even tougher to assess is the growing phenomenon of cyberbullying--vicious text messages or e-mails, or websites on which kids post degrading rumors. A recent survey of more than 5,500 teens found that 72% of them said online bullying was just as distressing as the face-to-face kind.

The damage from bullying doesn't stop after graduation. According to Dr. William Coleman, professor of pediatrics at the University of North Carolina School of Medicine, bullies are four times as likely as the average child to have engaged in criminal behavior by age 24; they also grow up deficient in social, coping and negotiating skills and are more likely to engage in substance abuse. Victims have similar problems; they also have fewer friends and are more likely to be depressed.

Since most bullying takes place furtively--in hallways, bathrooms, the back of the school bus--teachers have a hard time controlling it. It's not impossible, though: with the help of Nishina's UCLA adviser and study co-author, Jaana Juvonen, a local elementary school put together a program in which teachers, parents and students review antibullying rules at the start of each year. The students do role-playing exercises and sign contracts promising not to bully. Teachers incorporate lessons about bullying and coping strategies into classwork. The school has also hired extra staff to monitor places like lunchrooms and playgrounds.

A program like that might have saved a lot of trouble for the Darien, Ill., public-school system. Last October an eighth-grader who was allegedly harassing Joey Urban, now 14, wound up rupturing Joey's eardrum with a poke from a lollipop stick. The Urbans are suing, complaining that the attacker received only a three-day suspension. The school district says that the boys were friends and that the injury was an accident that occurred while they were roughhousing.

La Shanda Trimble won't have to resort to the courts. Next year she'll be attending the Alliance School, founded to create a safe atmosphere for students who feel unwelcome in traditional settings. Says co-founder Tina Owen, an English teacher: "A lot of adults think 'Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me.' But these students seemed to be hurting really bad." --Reported by Elizabeth Coady/ Chicago, Avery Holton/Austin, Sora Song/New York and Sonja Steptoe/Los Angeles