

BULLY, TO TOUGHEN YOU UP OR BEAT YOU DOWN

by Robert Watt



No bully, just talk!

Liu Lizhu was not aware her shy, 15-year-old son had been bullied at school until he ended up in hospital with a ruptured spleen.

So begins another article in a series of news stories that have reported beatings, burnings and forced strippings in what CNN described as 'an epidemic of bullying in China.'

The term 'epidemic' suggests that bullying is something new and these horrific examples are a frequent occurrence. 'nobullying.com' an online forum for helping stop bullying, shows that it is a worldwide problem as ancient as society itself. Moreover, examples that result in assault are thankfully rare, more typically, the bullying behaviour goes unnoticed and unreported. What is new, is the open discussion of the issue in Chinese news and particularly on social media.

Discussion changes attitudes

In the west, bullying has been a recurring media topic for decades. Over time its definition and scope has grown, it is no longer confined to playground and classroom

behaviour, it is now recognised to exist on line, in the workplace and between corporations and countries. Recently, a popular soap opera in the UK ran a story about bullying behaviour within a marriage.

The gradual change in its recognition as a type of behaviour has been accompanied by a shift in attitudes and response. High profile stories, like those emerging in China, campaigns by concerned relatives and friends of victims, realistic story lines on children's TV programs and popular celebrities revealing their own bullying experiences, have helped educate and to change the image of those involved. The debating of the issues involved have created an increasing awareness of the harm it causes and slowly lead to changes in attitudes and the law. Today, there is a generation of young people who are more able to admit to being bullied and a society that has a better awareness and tools in place to deal with it.

Certainly attitudes in the west have changed. As a boy, repeated name calling and

intimidation were considered part of growing up. They toughened you up for the hard life ahead. Wearing glasses, being fat, short or poor, or in any other way different, prompted taunts, exclusion from friendship groups and a reason for being picked out and picked upon. Books and movies were replete with the casual bullying by peers that made the behaviour a societal norm. A teacher or parent's response was typically the children's rhyme 'Sticks and stones may break your bones, but names will never harm you.'

Denial and trivialising

China has just begun this process of discussion. I asked some young people about the topic, hoping to get some opinion of how common it is. But they all told me it doesn't happen. Their notion of bullying is still like the extreme examples they've read on line rather than 'repeated harassment or intimidation' as it's defined in the UK. The common response to name calling and habitual teasing is still to grin and bear it, to keep their heads down and be part of the crowd. That it's an unavoidable

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or essential part of growing up. Possibly for many parents and teachers, being a child in China during the 1980s and 90s presented other concerns, name calling may seem comparatively trivial.

Likewise, nuisance calls and more recently on-line bullying, provoked the same dismissive response by those brought up without telephones or social networking. The early advice was blow a whistle into the receiver, ignore the messages, leave the social group, delete or un-friend someone. The initial reaction to bullying is to expect the victim to deal with the problem themselves.

Actions and reactions

At present, most of the action against bullying is coming from the family members of the victims. For Lizhu's son, it was his angry cousin who took to social media, posting graphic images of the injuries. The result received much public attention, prompting other cases to come forward and sparked heated discussions about the lack of legal protection for victims. Schools responded to most of these incidents by penalizing perpetrators with a mark on their school records. The most serious, including Lizhu's son, have been settled by compensation to the family of the bullied child. The apparent lack of punishment of the bully has caused the Chinese public to demand the government reform Child Protection Laws because under the age of 14 a child cannot be charged with a crime.

In the west, although bullying is a crime, the police aren't contacted where children are concerned, unless it involves physical assault. Typically, the school is involved because they

are required by law to have in place policies that includes measures to prevent bullying among pupils. Schools are legally responsible to do all they reasonably can to stop and prevent bullying it knows (or should have known) about. Policies include training teachers to identify signs of bullying and producing procedures for dealing with it. Punishment such as detention and exclusion from activities and classes are possible, but the primary interventions are counselling and education. The approach is less about punishment and more about understanding and addressing the reasons behind the bully's behaviour.

Reasons to solutions.

Addressing the causes of bullying is difficult as it requires the behaviour to be first identified. Chinese people don't share the same view of society we have in the west. You won't hear someone being challenged by a stranger about dropping litter, or spitting, nor complaining about the neighbours BBQ smoke because, as I've heard said, 'they have no relationship with them'. Equally, China is a society where people are less forward about discussing their problems with strangers. Consequently, the victim is reluctant to come forward with the problem and bystanders are less likely to intervene.

Some research suggests that many of the perpetrators are part of the "left behind generation." Children who barely see their parents because they are working far from home in China's factory boomtowns. Or have been sent away to school – so called parachute kids.

In response to the online pressure, the Chinese government launched an anti-bullying campaign for schools last May. The approach was to put requirements on Education departments and schools to create policies and procedures along similar lines to the legal obligations in the west.

However, the campaign only lasted until the end of 2016. It takes many years of continuous effort to change the beliefs and attitudes that prevent us from recognising and addressing bullying. If contemporary stories are a barometer of current attitudes then this year's Hollywood movie 'Hacksaw ridge' shows there is still progress to be made. The 'funny' name calling, routine ridiculing and belittling of army cadets illustrated the archaic notion

that it was a necessary part of the toughening up required. - We should have been appalled instead of amused.

So long as bystanders do nothing, in the belief that it's harmless, or character building, or think that we have no relationship to those involved then bullying will continue. It starts in playgrounds, but such habits persist into the workplace and into relationships. We stop it by taking the issue seriously, by recognising the signs, by reporting and openly disapproving of the behaviour; especially when we're not the target of the bully.

别再对暴力袖手旁观

如果不是儿子脾破裂躺在医院里，刘女士怎么也不会想到自己15岁的儿子一直在学校忍受着校园暴力。在中国，校园暴力的新闻屡见不鲜，除了日常的辱骂、恐吓等行为，造成受害人严重人身和精神伤害的例子屡见不鲜。其实，校园暴力并不是近几年才有，从人类社会形成开始，强大的一方就会欺凌弱小的一方。不同的是，人们开始公开讨论这一现象并寻求解决方法。

欺凌的范围不仅限于学校，网络暴力、办公室暴力以及家庭暴力也逐渐被人重视。人们对欺凌不再保持沉默，而是通过媒体让更多的人知道，向司法和社会寻求正义。

在中国，人们刚刚开始把这个问题放到公开的层面讨论。我问一些年轻人，他们都认为辱骂和威胁算不上暴力，媒体上报道的极端案例在他们周围并没有发生过。对于辱骂威胁这样的“小打小闹”，人们大多选择默默忍受，这似乎是成长必经的过程，和其他事情比起来简直不值一提。

近年来新出现的骚扰电话和网络暴力也并没有得到足够的重视，人们会说：别理这些无聊的人，拉黑不就完了。

目前，对校园暴力的斗争主要是受害人和家属在战斗。刘女士的表弟把外甥受到欺凌的事情和受伤的照片曝光到社交媒体，引来社会的关注。针对校园暴力的法律空白是人们讨论的热点。学校通常的做法是给施暴者记过，过错方对受害方给予经济赔偿。根据现行的《未成年人保护法》，未满14岁的未成年人并不能被定罪，所以民众希望能对现在的法律条文进行修改。

在西方，学校在防止校园暴力方面负有主要责任，包括培训教师及时发现暴力事件的苗头，并做出恰当的处理。留校或禁课只是辅助处罚措施，学校最主要的工作是辅导和教育，目的是了解暴力行为背后的原因。

了解暴力的根源首先要发现暴力行为，但这在中国有点难。首先，人们总是抱着“多一事不如少一事”的心态，即使发现有暴力事件发生，也可能选择默默走开。其次，受害者也不愿意把自己的遭遇告诉陌生人，所以别人也无从干预。

要全面预防暴力事件不只是一次行动就能解决的，而是需要常年的工作和努力，改变人们的态度。如果你对那些看似无害的起外号、冷嘲热讽置之不理，认为那些是成长必修课或与我何干，那这些行为就不会停止并且愈演愈烈，从校园蔓延到工作场所和家庭关系中。对任何暴力信号加以重视，及时报告或制止，哪怕我们并不是暴力行为的受害者，你能做到吗？