



Bully Discussion Guide

Director: Lee Hirsch

Year: 2011

Time: 98 min

You might know this director from:

Next World (2008)

Act of Honor (2007)

FILM SUMMARY

On the bus, in the schoolyard, between classes, and now online, bullying controls and overpowers the lives of some children. Intimate and poignant, **BULLY** offers a look at five families who have experienced bullying, filmed in the U.S. during the 2009–10 school year.

We meet Johnson family, who lovingly support their 16-year-old daughter Kelby through years of bullying because she is openly gay. Even teachers tell her that she will burn in hell. Eventually, Kelby is removed from school. Then, there is 14-year old Ja'meya, an honor student and star basketball player, who is so worn down by bullying that she, to the shock of her family, takes her mother's gun on the school bus, resulting in 45 felony charges being brought against her. Then we meet Alex, a lonely 12-year old in search of someone to call a friend. When the filmmakers reveal footage of Alex being bullied physically and mentally to his parents, they were shocked. Ignored, scoffed at and disregarded, bullied children learn to keep their pains to themselves. The price of that sometimes becomes fatal. Two families that we are introduced to are trying to recover from the shock and heartache of having lost their children to bully-induced suicide. Both Ty Smalley, age 11, and Tyler Lee Long, age 17, chose to take their lives after constant victimization through their schooldays.

Where should the blame be cast? At parents who ignore their bullied children or those who allow their's to bully? School administrators who shrug off this fatal epidemic as "kids being kids"? At bus drivers who allow such abuse on daily routes? At the bullies who cause such detrimental damage, or the society that accepts and sometimes even encourages such inexcusable behavior? A distressing but important film, **BULLY** shows us all sides of a many-bladed knife.

FILM THEMES

The far-reaching, detrimental effects of bullying are explored through the personal stories of five U.S. families. With two of the families losing children to suicide and another two having to pull their children out of school, *BULLY* examines this problem of “epidemic” status.

A RICH AND VARIED SOCIETY

The five leading characters in *BULLY* are classified as being a bit “different.” But what defines normal within society? Where is the rulebook of fitting in? Especially in America, which has always prided itself on being a richly potent and diversified society. Ja’meya is smart, growing up in a community that arguably values brawn over brains. Kelby is gay, and later comes out as transgender, which shakes her Bible-centric community to its core. Alex is gentle and a bit awkward, characteristics shunned in the tough-guy atmosphere of his hometown. Tyler and Ty, who both committed suicide, had their own “outsider status” which we only witness at a distance. Without the wealth of diversity these individuals have to offer, the United States will become exactly what it shuns: a nation of closed doors, sameness and conformity. If we encourage rather than frighten away the inner core of who we are the world will be enriched. Being a melting pot of cultures and ideas and celebrating our differences is something to be proud of.

WHO IS TO BLAME?

BULLY makes it starkly clear that no one in these communities is properly equipped, nor sufficiently competent, to address the bigger issue of bullying or tackle the everyday occurrences. Parents are saddened and crippled. School administrators are overwhelmed. Bus drivers turn a blind eye, intent on completing their daily routes. Bullied kids buckle under the pressure. And the bullies, we can only assume, feel free to continue in their primarily unobstructed hunt to attack and belittle. At the film’s end, rainbow balloons fly at an anti-bullying rally, and we get the sense that this is a much broader issue, one that cannot be quickly simplified and summed up. Ending the epidemic of bullying requires leadership, bravery, and shift in consciousness which will only happen as a result of active awareness.

A STRONG NETWORK

In order to diminish and hopefully banish bullying from our communities once and for all, a strong network must be put into place. There can be no tolerance for the abuses youngsters are faced to endure – either from their peers or society at large. As long as one bully is able to get away with bullying, we are all guilty, with silence serving as a practical application of passive acceptance in the long run. We are stronger in numbers and must act accordingly, embracing and encouraging each and every member of the communities we have built up and live within. At school, at public events, on the street and in parks, we must all bind together to relegate bullying to the past, never turning a blind eye to someone else’s suffering, and certainly not participating, however pressured we may feel. One person’s suffering belongs to us all.

“If it was up to me, if I was the king of the United States, I’d make it to where there was no popularity, everyone was equal. That’s how it should be.”

Trey Wallace, age 12

“Maybe all it takes is for one person to stand up. You’re standing up for all the kids that go through this every single day.”

Kelby Johnson, age 16

FURTHER DISCUSSIONS:

1. How prevalent was bullying within your school and/or community when you were growing up? What was your family’s personal approach to bullying?
2. What do you believe are the roots of bullying? Do children learn to bully at home, at school, or is it a characteristic they are born with, something stamped into their DNA?
3. Surrounded by a supportive group of friends and a loving family, Kelby appeared to manage the bullying thrown her way with courage and hope. Alex, on the other hand, seemed bewildered and lost, strikingly similar reflections seen on his parents’ faces. What is the role of parents and support networks in these situations?
4. Do you feel that bullying has increased over the past few generations, especially with the advent of technology that offers another avenue of harassment? Why or why not?
5. Have you ever witnessed bullying? What was your response? Did you feel brave or afraid? Why?
6. Have you ever been the victim of bullying? Did you have someone you could turn to for help, a person or place of trust? Was there anything that helped, or could have helped, in making you feel safe to speak up?
7. Perhaps a more difficult question to be honest about: Have you ever been a bully or been involved with a group who utilized the currency of bullying, either in school, a workplace or online? Have you changed? If so, what contributed to this change?
8. How should the following people take responsibility when witnessing a bully: peers, parents, school administrators, community leaders. What can we do to hold bullies accountable?
9. Do you feel that bullying is more prevalent in certain settings or locations? If so, where and why?
10. What is the best way to address and overcome bullying in our schools? In our communities? Online?

NOTES:

FILM FACTS:

- Sundance and Emmy Award-winning filmmaker Lee Hirsch, a Jewish native of New York, claims that his own personal experience of being bullied as a child led to his making this movie. "I felt that the hardest part of being bullied was communicating and getting help," Hirsch said.
- BULLY won eight film awards and was nominated for an additional ten.
- There are four types of bullying. Verbal, the most common form of bullying, includes name-calling and making offensive remarks. Physical bullying includes damaging a person or their belongings. Emotional or passive bullying involves spreading rumors or lies about someone. The most recent form, cyber bullying, is carried out electronically by emails, text messages, or websites.
- BULLY was originally rated R, which meant that the film could not be viewed by its target audience: high-schoolers. The filmmakers agreed to cut some of the language from the movie to give it a PG-13 rating.
- 85% of bullying takes place in the presence of peers, while only 10% of those peers intervene.
- Throughout most of the world, girls are more often the victims of psychological bullying than boys. In the Americas, for example, 57% are girls and 43% boys. The only exception is in the Middle East and North Africa, where 67% of bullying victims are boys, with the remaining 33% girls.
- Although there is no federal law that specifically applies to bullying, 47 U.S. states have passed anti-bullying legislation, and the White House has an anti-bullying initiative, making it against the law to bully or harass an individual at school or in the workplace.
- Turkey, Lithuania, and Greenland feature high on the list of bully-prone nations, with Spain and Sweden seeing very little bullying. India, Indonesia, and Australia are the nations with the most occurrences of cyber-bullying.
- After watching their son Alex, the seventh-grade star of BULLY, endure more than his fair share of abuse, the Libby family chose to move from Iowa south to Oklahoma to make a fresh start. Alex's journey went from dark to light. He now boasts many friendships, enjoys high school and has even worked as an intern at the BULLY Project offices in New York City.
- The most common reasons students say they are bullied is due to looks (55%), body shape (37%) and race (17%). Sexual orientation and religious preference are also bullying motivators.
- 78% of gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, or questioning students (or those perceived as such) are bullied and harassed in their schools or communities, a percentage slightly higher than for heterosexual youths. Approximately 5-9% of youth are gay, lesbian, or uncertain of their sexual preference.

WAYS TO INFLUENCE

1. Do not remain silent when you witness bullying. Reach out to those around you, either by intervening if the situation allows or contacting the relevant authority (school, parent, or law enforcement agent).
2. Contribute to a safe online community. Do not tolerate cyber-bullying. Rather than engaging in an argument, report their behavior to the page administrator. If you are a page administrator make it clear that you will actively moderate your page to keep it safe.
3. Visit TheBullyProject.com, which offers plenty of useful information and links for everyone affected by bullying: children, parents, educators, and advocates.
4. Keep BULLY relevant. Urge teachers and community leaders in your area to have screenings of BULLY in order to help maintain an educated and informed generation.

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