



## 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

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 two families who are trying to recover from the shock, pain, 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.

On the bus, in the schoolyard, between classes, and now online, bullying controls and overpowers the lives of some children. 14-year old Ja'meya, an honour student and star basketball player, was so ragged by the bullying she endured that she took her mother's gun on the school bus. With 45 felony charges brought against her, Ja'meya's family felt no hope until the charges were finally dropped. Not the same light reached the Johnson family, who lovingly supported their 16-year-old daughter Kelby through years of bullying on the grounds of her being transgender. Even teachers told her that fags burn in hell. Eventually, Kelby was removed from her school. Then we meet Alex Libby, a friendless, beaten-down 12-year old. When the filmmakers revealed footage of Alex's physical torture to his parents, they were shocked. Ignored, overlooked, scoffed at and disregarded, bullied children learn to keep their pains to themselves. The price of that sometimes becomes fatal.

Where should the blame be cast? At parents who ignore their bullied children or those who allow theirs to bully? At 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 bullied who allow themselves to be victimized? 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 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.

### THE ROLE OF SOCIALIZATION

The five leading characters in BULLY are a bit “different.” They fall outside of societal norms, at least as defined in their home communities. Ja’meya is smart but grows up in a community that arguably values brawn over brains. Kelby is transgender, which shakes her Bible-centric community to its core. Alex is awkward and weak, 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. Anyone challenging the norm potentially stands in the line of bullying fire, which puts our entire society into question when it forces everyone to become relatively the same.

### 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” requires a shift in consciousness, a rising awareness in all parties involved, i.e. all of us.

### BULLYING AND SUICIDE

Although BULLY zooms in on the tragic aftermath of the families of Tyler Lee Long and Ty Smalley, who both committed suicide because of the apparent stress and pain they endured through bullying, the events leading up to their premature deaths are not discussed. With suicide being the third leading cause of death amongst young people, there are at least 100 suicide attempts for every actual suicide. The question remains: can bullying truly lead to suicide? The movie shows children in their vulnerability, traversing the tough terrain between childhood and young adulthood, full of awkward body changes, newly discovered thoughts, and personal reflections of an entirely new magnitude. These delicate days arguably make young people most prone to doubting the reason for existence, and one push too many proves to be that push to death for some children. BULLY closes its tale with brutal images of hope, of people banding together across the U.S. to put an end to the premature deaths of children exposed to prolonged bullying.

**“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. Is bullying just a rite of passage that each and every one of us must endure on our journey to adulthood? Is bullying nothing more than "kids being kids"? Are we becoming too soft in our dealing with children's emotions, not allowing them to enact their situations on the playing field of life?
3. 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?
4. 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. Could Alex have avoided the brunt of bullying had he found the support at home to cope? What is the role of parents in these situations?
5. Do you feel that bullying has increased over the past few generations, especially with the advent of technology that offers another avenue of harassment? Or are we just more aware of and forthright in addressing the issue?
6. Have you ever been the victim of bullying? If so, what were the motivating factors for your being bullied? Did you have someone you could turn to for help, a person or place of trust?
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 or a workplace or even at home?
8. How should the following people take responsibility for bullying: parents, school administrators, the bullies, or the bullied?
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 for a bullied child to respond to bullying? Do we encourage 'turning the other cheek' or confronting the bully head on? What is the best way to address and overcome bullying in our schools?

## 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 sixth-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. Connect with Stand For The Silent, a network for youth by youth to fight bullying.
2. If you find yourself a victim of cyber bullying, do not respond. Report the attack to the service provider.
3. Visit [TheBullyProject.com](http://TheBullyProject.com), which offers plenty of useful information and links for everyone affected by bullying: children, parents, educators, and advocates.
4. 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).