

Bullies: their making & unmaking



**Centre of Excellence for Behaviour
Management**
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an attachment-based explanation

Gordon Neufeld, PhD

- background information -

1. We are all creatures of attachment.
2. Attachment is our preeminent need and the most powerful force in behaviour and personality.
3. Attachment is orchestrated by the limbic system of the brain.

an attachment-based explanation

- *background information* -

4. The **primary purpose of attachment is to facilitate dependence and care-taking.**
Attachment is not about egalitarian relating but about hierarchically arranged interaction.
5. In keeping with the purpose of attachment, there are two basic sets of attachment instincts – ***alpha*** instincts and ***dependent*** instincts, and two basic drives – ***seeking*** and ***providing***.

seeking

dependent instincts

to get one's bearings

to serve and obey

to seek assistance

to look up to

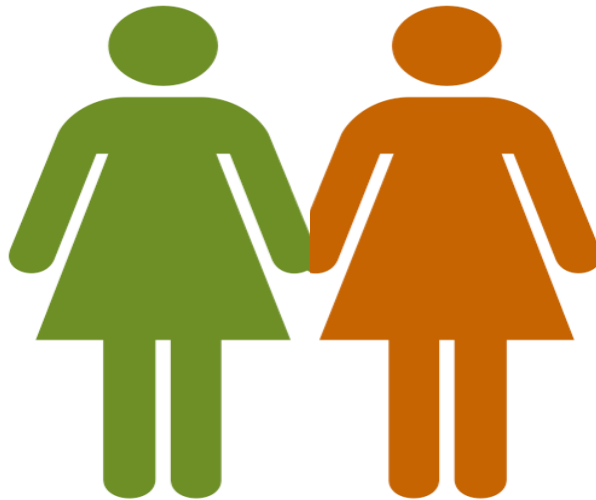
to belong

to follow

to wait for orders

to look for guidance

to comply and conform



providing

alpha instincts

to orient and inform

to protect & defend

to guide and direct

to look out for

to possess

to lead

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to transmit one's values

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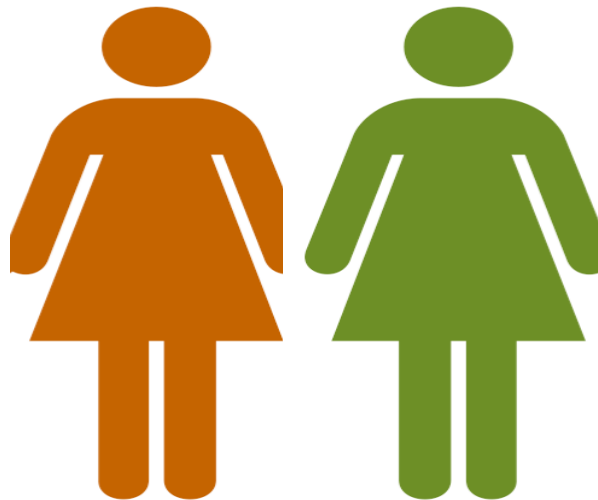
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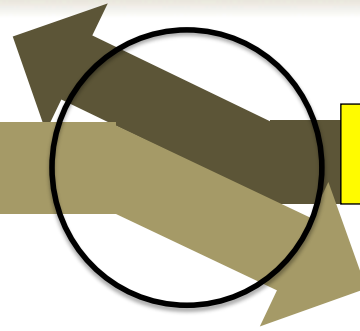
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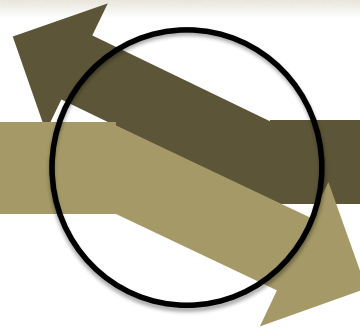
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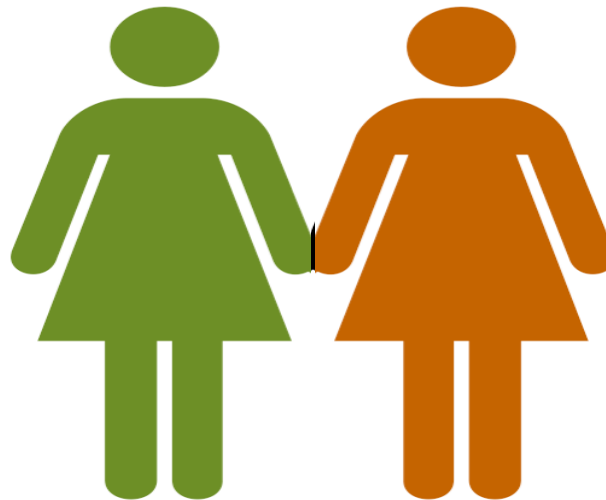
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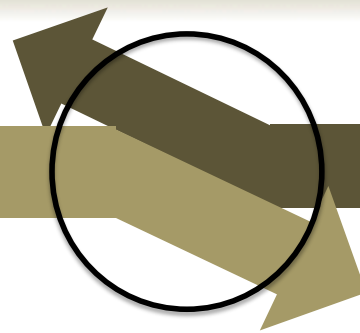
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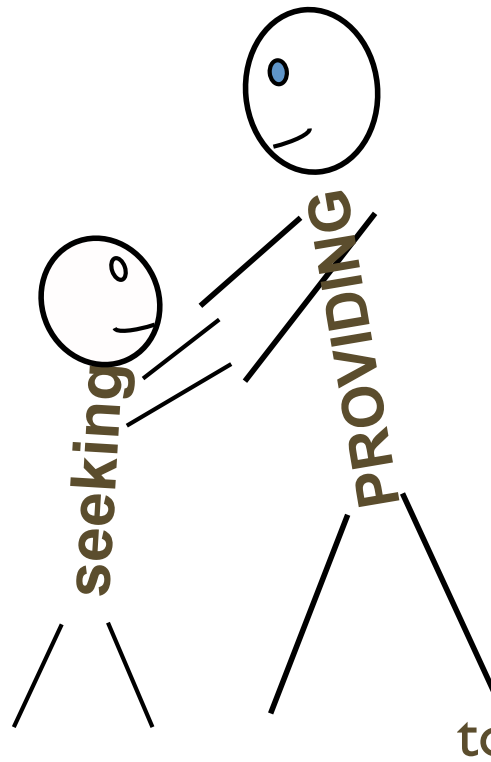
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an attachment-based explanation

- background information -

6. These alpha and dependent drives are **meant to be fluid and responsive to the situation and relationship, but can become stuck**
7. **Alpha Complex** (“stuck in alpha mode”)
 - Bossy, controlling, demanding
 - Seeks to be on top
 - Difficulty taking direction
 - Driven to trump or have the last word
 - Shows superiority – “know it all”

7. To fulfill the 'provider' role, our limbic system must be able to move us to ...

... assert dominance

e.g. to take the lead, to take control, to give orders, to demand deference, to command attention, to get on top of things, to be in the know, to provide answers, to trump interaction, to have the last word

... assume responsibility

e.g. to make things work for, to feel guilty when, to feel badly when, to fix things for, to make things better for, to feel remorse concerning, to make sacrifices for

... care for and to care about

e.g. to be concerned about, to help, to bear the burdens of, to give assistance to, to meet the needs of, to provide what is needed

8. In order to serve the role of 'provider', our **attentional mechanisms are sensitized to:**

**PERCEIVED
VULNERABILITY**

- fear
- upset
- naïveté
- wounds
- confusion
- weakness
- defenseless
- helplessness



**PERCEIVED
ALPHA
CHALLENGES**

- talking back
- lack of respect
- lack of deference
- lack of submission
- lack of compliance
- lack of conforming
- show of superiority

**Moved to
Assert Dominance,
Assume Responsibility,
Care For and Take Care Of**

an attachment-based explanation

- *background information* -

9. **Humans are easily wounded.** If one's vulnerability is too much to bear, defensive filters are activated which **numb out the more vulnerable feelings** and their corresponding impulses.
10. The emotions and impulses associated with **CARING** and **RESPONSIBILITY** are much more vulnerable than those associated with **DOMINANCE**, leading to a situation where **only the QUEST FOR DOMINANCE** remains.

Vulnerable feelings more likely to be defended against

- feelings of shyness and timidity
- feelings of embarrassment including blushing
- feelings of shame (that something is wrong with me)
- feelings of futility (sadness, disappointment, grief, sorrow)
- feelings of fulfillment (joy, delight, enjoyment)
- feelings of dependence (emptiness, neediness, missing, loneliness, insecurity)
- feelings of appreciation (thankful, grateful, indebted)
- feelings of caring (compassion, enthusiasm, devotion, concern, treasure, invested in)
- feelings of alarm (apprehension, anxiety and fear)
- feelings of responsibility (guilt, remorse, to make things better, protective)
- feelings of woundedness (hurt feelings, anguish, pain)

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alpha awry

When the alpha attachment instincts to DOMINATE are no longer TEMPERED by CARING and RESPONSIBILITY, the bully instinct is born.

- the quest for dominance becomes divorced from its intended purpose
- the alpha instincts become perverted as signs of vulnerability now evoke exploitation rather than care-taking

the bully instinct

to assert dominance by exploiting vulnerability

- through fear and intimidation
- through put-downs, shaming & humiliation
- through exposing and embarrassing
- through tricking and conning

But the bully remains highly sensitized to signs of vulnerability and to challenges to the alpha position

PERCEIVED VULNERABILITY

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PERCEIVED ALPHA CHALLENGES

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Moved to
Assert Dominance,
~~Assume Responsibility,~~
~~Care For and Take Care Of~~

AN ATTACHMENT-BASED EXPLANATION

bullying is deeply rooted in natural attachment alpha instincts

... that are perverted by emotional defendedness

alpha awry



... explaining both the bully personality and the current escalation in bullying

...with surprising solutions running counter to most prevailing approaches

The Bully Personality

① **alpha complex** + ② **defended against caring & responsibility** = ③ **bully instinct & syndrome**



- ④ **UNRECEPTIVE** to being parented & taught
- ⑤ **highly RESISTANT** to perceived coercion

The Bully Personality

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⑥ **FEARLESS** with resulting alarm dysfunction

⑦ **TEARLESS** with resulting failure to adapt

⑧ **UNTEMPERED** in experience & expression

Fearless: *highly alarmed but defended against the feelings of alarm*

Why?

Feelings of alarm (e.g. feeling afraid, scared, unsafe, anxious, apprehensive) are highly vulnerable feelings and can be lost when becoming defended against feelings of caring and responsibility.

Fearless: *highly alarmed but defended against the feelings of alarm*

- **agitation without apprehension (less severe)**
 - doesn't talk about being unsafe or afraid, yet is hyper or tense as if highly alarmed
 - is careless and reckless and can't stay out of harm's way
 - attention is scattered and characteristic of a high state of alarm
- **attracted to what alarms (most severe)**
 - less tense and agitated but now engages in alarming behaviour and gets an adrenalin rush from doing alarming things

***BULLIES ESTABLISH DOMINANCE BY,
& GETTING A CHARGE OUT OF, ALARMING OTHERS.***

Tearless: *devoid of the tears of futility as well as the underlying feelings of futility that drive adaptation*

Why?

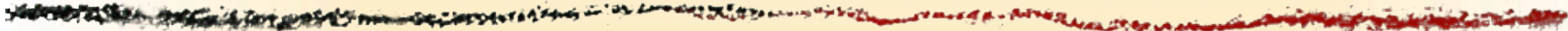
Feelings of futility (e.g. sadness, disappointment, sorrow, grief) are highly vulnerable feelings and are usually lost when becoming defended against feelings of caring and responsibility.

Tearless: *devoid of the tears of futility as well as the underlying feelings of futility that drive adaptation*

- are **unable to adapt** to their circumstances and to what they can't change in their lives
- are **unable to learn from mistakes and failures**, including consequences, which only serve then to harden them further
- the **lack of neural plasticity** renders their brains unable to find work-arounds for any learning disabilities that exist (eg, high illiteracy rates)
- don't get the futility of demanding deference or of possessing someone or of commanding attention or even of 'raping' love

BULLIES ESTABLISH DOMINANCE BY, AS WELL AS GET A CHARGE OUT OF, MAKING OTHERS CRY.

Untempered: *do not feel emotional discord*



Why?

1. Their emotional defendedness has prevented the **prefrontal cortex** – the mixing bowl of the brain - **from developing the capacity for mixed feelings.**
2. They are also **defended against the vulnerable feelings that would normally temper their instincts** and impulses (e.g., caring, alarm, futility, responsibility).

Vulnerable feelings more likely to be defended against

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The Bully Personality

- ⑨ attitude of entitlement
- ⑩ highly sensitized to slight
- ⑪ predisposed to aggression
- ⑫ distorted attachment behaviour

① **alpha complex**



② **defended against caring & responsibility**



③ **bully instinct & syndrome**



④ UNRECEPTIVE to being parented & taught

⑤ highly RESISTANT to perceived coercion

⑥ FEARLESS with resulting alarm dysfunction

⑦ TEARLESS with resulting failure to adapt

⑧ UNTEMPERED in experience & expression

Sensitive to slight



Why?

1. Their alpha instincts sensitize them to any signs of disrespect or lack of deference.
2. Since males in our society show deference with their eyes, failing to avert one's gaze is often taken as an alpha challenge (e.g. 'he looked at me wrong').
3. The more defended a bully is to the rejection from those most important to them, the more sensitized to slight from those who do not matter to them.

Distorted attachment

- intense, superficial, depersonalized and wounding

Why?

1. Attaching is vulnerable business and so the flight from vulnerability greatly affects how the bully attaches - superficial, depersonalized and lacking in emotional or psychological intimacy.
2. Bullies are more likely to **'back' into attachment**, using the negative polarity (i.e. repulsive end) of the attachment magnet to establish connection (e.g. repulsed by differences, creating secrets about, discounting as not mattering).

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the making of bullies

the conditions that can give rise to bullies

alpha complex + defended against caring & responsibility = bully instinct & syndrome



alpha by default
and/or by defense

alpha by default

happens when adults do not assume an alpha posture or convey an alpha presence

- parents reacting to their own backgrounds
- failure of today's culture to script alpha posturing
- weak or inadequate parenting
- parents looking to child to fill needs
- parenting on demand
- egalitarian parenting
- child-led parenting
- parents looking for answers, rather than being their child's answer

alpha by defense

happens when it does not feel safe to depend

- separation too much to bear
- not feeling taken care of
- being bullied by parents, siblings, peers or teachers
- feeling abused or exploited
- extreme vulnerability or overwhelming sensitivity
- parenting practices that exploit a child's state of dependency
- experiencing alarming situations or circumstances

the making of bullies

the conditions that can give rise to bullies



defended due to overwhelming sensitivity

- inheriting sensitive genes
- prenatal stress
- birth trauma

defended due to wounds too much to bear

- facing separation too much to bear
- feeling too alarmed or alarmed for too long
- experiencing being shamed or humiliated or feeling as if something is wrong with one

the making of bullies

the conditions that can give rise to bullies

alpha complex + **defended against caring & responsibility** = **bully instinct & syndrome**

↑
alpha by default
and/or by defense

↑
significant wounding and/or
overwhelming sensitivity



- dependence is an aversive state
- failure of adults to assume alpha roles
- attachments lacking natural hierarchy
- peer orientation

the making of bullies

the conditions that can give rise to bullies

- peer orientation -

1. When peers become attached to each other, the attachment brain must arrange them hierarchically, placing some over others but without a corresponding role of responsibility for care-taking.
2. Peer interaction is the major source of wounding for children, regardless of whether they are peer attached or not. The more peers matter to each other however, the more they can get hurt by each other, often leading to a vulnerability too much to bear.
3. In the peer pop culture, vulnerability is shamed and invulnerability is venerated, even in the early grades.

the making of victims

- peer orientation -

1. Some are predisposed to defer to and to depend upon their peers, rendering them highly vulnerable to the insensitive relating.
2. The highly dependent will be instinctively moved to expose their fears and their vulnerabilities in order to elicit care-taking and protection. This is highly provocative to bullies, creating natural prey.
3. The vulnerability of being peer oriented is typically too much to bear, leading to defenses that create blind spots, either drawing them into harm's way or rendering them unable to stay out of harm's way.
4. The emotional hardening renders them less resilient and adaptive, unable to handle adversity and unable to learn from their failures in keeping clear of the bullies.
5. Their peer orientation cuts them off from adult support, protection and shielding.

the **UN** making of bullies

reversing the conditions that can give rise to bullies

alpha complex + **defended against caring & responsibility** = **bully instinct & syndrome**

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alpha by default
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significant wounding and/or
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- ↙ ↘
- dependence is an aversive state
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 - peer orientation

What doesn't work and why



1. Battling against the bully instinct and the symptom behaviour

conventional discipline →

sensitivity training →

**bully
behaviour**

← standing up & saying 'no'

← conveying hurt feelings

**BULLY
INSTINCT
& SYNDROME**

attachment
problem

+

vulnerability
problem

What doesn't work and why

2. Focusing on the arena between children (trying to make children get along and be nice to each other, focusing on social responsibility, social-emotional learning programs).

Instead put children in the care of Adults



the UNmaking of a bully

a two-pronged approach to the heart of the problem

***EMBED IN NATURAL
ATTACHMENT HIERARCHIES***



the UNmaking of a bully

a two-pronged approach to the heart of the problem

A) embed in natural attachment hierarchies

1. Establish and maintain child-adult relationships through the traditional attachment rituals of 'collecting' and 'bridging'.
2. If necessary in order to establish connection, collect the bully through playing to the alpha instincts.
3. Engage the bully, as well as nurture the relationship, by providing a 'touch of proximity' to hold on to (eg, sameness, loyalty, significance).
4. Foster and cultivate connections with adults who are caring alpha types.

the UNmaking of a bully

a two-pronged approach to the heart of the problem

A) embed in natural attachment hierarchies

5. Foster hierarchical caring relationships between children (also between siblings) of different ages.
6. Match-make the reachable bully with those in need, in order to elicit care-taking instincts.
7. Give the alpha instincts some room for legitimate expression (eg, in charge of something, acting as a resource to others, feeding others).
8. Establish a caring dominance.

the UNmaking of a bully

a two-pronged approach to the heart of the problem

- establish a caring dominance -

1. Convey a strong alpha presence by taking charge and inviting the inevitable.
2. Read the bully's needs and take the lead in being their 'answer'.
3. Assume the alpha roles in the bully's life: *home base, compass point, provider, advocate, protector, defender, comforter, one-to-hold-on.*
4. Win the alpha challenges you can without being a bully yourself. Avoid or escape the alpha challenges you are not sure of winning.
5. Set the stage for being the bully's answer (eg, arrange scenarios where the bully must depend upon you).

the UNmaking of a bully

a two-pronged approach to the heart of the problem

B) soften the bully's heart

- REDUCE wounding and thus the need for defenses if possible (e.g. peer interaction, separation-based discipline, shaming and put-downs, harsh criticism, character judgments, etc)
- SHIELD the bully with a safe emotional connection

Keeping Children Safe



Safe emotional connections with caring adults are the single most important factor in keeping children safe.

- not anti-bullying programs
- not social responsibility programs
- not social & emotional learning programs

**Child-adult relationships
should therefore be our first priority.**

Bully Birth Control

preventing the birth of the bully instinct

- *make it safe to depend*
- *maintain adult orientation*



- *assume the alpha roles*
- *draw out the tears of futility*

Consequences: a dilemma

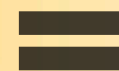
*imposing consequences
can fuel the bully problem*



**alpha
complex**



**defended
against caring
& responsibility**



**bully
instinct
& syndrome**

Not imposing consequences can sabotage social justice, erode social values, undermine alpha posture, and inadvertently convey a lack of support for the violated.

the UNmaking of a bully

- ***RIGHT RELATIONSHIPS***

- ***SOFT HEARTS***

Dr. Gordon Neufeld “*Hold on to your Kids*”
www.neufeldinstitute.com