Teasing and Bullying

Bullying consists of a variety of harmful acts directed at some students repeatedly. A real or perceived difference in power is the root, with the stronger group or child attacking those perceived to be weaker. It takes three different forms. Physical bullying encompasses kicking, hitting, taking personal items, pushing, and spitting. Verbal bullying includes malicious teasing, name calling, taunting, and making threats. Psychological bullying manifests as social exclusion, spreading rumors, intimidation, and extortion. The difference between bullying and teasing is that whereas in teasing the participants have an equal chance of responding to the abuse, in bullying only one party holds the power while the other party is helpless. Bullying and teasing are more common in schools, with negative impacts on the victims that sometimes refuse going back to the same school. Although cases of bullying in the United Arab Emirates have not reached the level of causing suicides like in the United States, there is a need to explore this vice. Bullying and teasing are on the rise in the UAE. Understanding the extent of the problem and how to combat it early on is the best remedy.

The rising cases of bullying and teasing the UAE are attributed to the diversity of cultures in this region. The culture is very transient owing to a large number of people who come into and leave UAE. It is, therefore, a home to many cultures from different parts of the world. The children who are mostly
affected by bullying are those recently arrived. Such children struggle to adjust to their new environment, culture shock, language barriers, homesickness, and a general sense of not belonging. It makes them emotionally labile, thus become easy targets to those bullies who target weaker children. Bullies also target some of the indigenous children who are weaker or with small bodies.

Despite bullying being a problem, both at school and out of school, there has been little effort from the side of the parents, community, and even educators to curb it. It is partly because the vice is seen as a common occurrence in school as part of the children growing up and becoming strong. At least fifty percent of the children in schools in the UAE have observed bullying in school, whether as victims or as bystanders. Such an occurrence can make the children believe that being in school means you have to experience bullying and also bully somebody as a rite of passage. The contribution of parents towards stopping this vice has been wanting, perhaps because of the general belief that bullying has to occur at a certain age for children. The responses by parents when their children report cases of being bullied only serve to make the children feel that it is a necessary experience for them. For instance, adults tell the bullied children that bullying toughens them up, or that when they encounter bullies they should learn how to defend themselves. Another common advice to the victims is to learn to stand up for themselves since they will not have somebody around to protect them all the time. Those who suffer verbal abuse
are told that words will not hurt them like stones and sticks that can break bones. Using their bullying experiences while they were in school, some adults tell children that they will survive the bullying just like the adults did. The advice offered does not help in eradicating the vice of bullying, but rather provides a fix for the problem. It encourages children to ignore or persevere bullying for the short time until they are big enough to defend themselves. The result is that the problem is left to fester and manifest itself in the subsequent generation.

The consequence of bullying on young children vary depending on whether the child is the victim, an observer of a bullying action, or a member of the school or community where bullying happens. Students who are bullied at school develop a negative attitude towards the school environment and may start avoiding going to school. They exhibit depression, poor academic grades, have low self-esteem, health problems related to the bullying, especially physical injuries, and tend to have suicidal ideations as the solution to their problems. They may carry this effects into their adulthood, where the person is antisocial, depressed, with low self-esteem, and likely to have poor interpersonal skills. Students who observe acts of bullying develop feelings of insecurity when in school. They undergo psychological trauma that includes perpetual fear, feeling powerless to act when faced with a problem, feeling guilty that they did not act to help their colleague, and even getting tempted to
participate in the bullying. Indeed, frequently observing bullying can lead one to become a bully by considering the actions normal. The bullies, on the other hand, are more likely to be involved in frequent fights, theft and vandalism, drug abuse and smoking, and attaining poor academic grades. The school environment is also adversely affected, with many children experiencing learning difficulties, disliking school, feeling insecure in school and feelings of lack of care from the teachers and staff. The overall result is a disrupted learning process in the school and a sense of distrust by the students on the ability of the school and their teachers to protect them. Of late, many parents are keen to take their children to school that deal with bullying and protect weaker students from being hurt. Teachers have also been urged to promote co-existence and stamp out bullying by using slogans like ‘it is not kidding around, it is hurting’ to star loathing for the activity among students. Some of the educators employ punitive measures for the bullies, but it has shown little effect given the ever rising cases of bullying. Some of the schools have strict rules that include suspension or expulsion for any students found bullying or teasing another student with the school compound. Parents have also responded by being more vigilant to observe signs of bullying of their child so that they can report immediately to the school management for disciplinary action.

Parents, teachers, administrators and the community must unite in the fight against bullying schools if it to be stamped out. The curriculum should
include modules of building interpersonal skills that include empathy, self-awareness, and perspective taking. An item on good social behavior can also be added to the grading system to encourage students to behave well to others in order to get a good grade. The school administration can also make the behavior unacceptable by using such slogans as ‘it is not funny, it is mean’ to foster a negative attitude towards bullying. This method can reduce the use of punitive measures to deal with the problem. An awareness campaign to educate students, parents, teachers, and counselors on how to identify signs of bullying is also a good approach in dealing with the problem. At the classroom level, encouraging integration and co-operation among students can enable them to appreciate each other instead of viewing themselves as different which results in bullying.

Bullying and teasing are observed in schools in the UAE, and the reported cases are on the rise. It takes the form of physical, verbal and psychological bullying. Most cases are reported in schools. The effects of bullying on the wellbeing of the student are long term, sometimes going into adulthood. Compared to the United States, the reported cases are not very extreme as to result in suicide but there is a need for early intervention. Parents, children, educators, the community, and counselors should be involved in coming up with a lasting solution to the problem. The solutions include the inclusion of modules in the curriculum on good conduct, strict rules, and promoting a spirit of oneness among the students.