

Bullies among us: Consequences of cruelty

by [William L. Hawkins](#) in the [May 29, 2007](#) issue

The massacre that took place at Virginia Tech last month can be only partially explained. We can criticize privacy regulations that allowed Cho Seung-Hui to move freely about in spite of his desperate mental condition. We can point to federal and state gun control laws that allowed him to secure his weaponry.

But one key issue has scarcely been mentioned: the source of Cho's resentment. In "The Making of a Massacre" (*Newsweek*, April 30), Evan Thomas reports, "His parents turned to the church for help with his emotional problems, but he was bullied in his Christian youth group, especially by rich kids. 'Cho was a smart student who could understand the meaning of the Bible,' recalled his boyhood pastor at Centreville (Va.) Korean Presbyterian Church."

Is it possible that the horrifying acts of last month can be explained, at least in part, as the result of bullying behavior in middle and high school? Does bullying have the ability to isolate an individual so completely that attempts to befriend him, such as those made by Cho's college roommates and classmates, can be too little, too late? We must at least ask ourselves these questions. We dare not assume that everyone else is innocent and that Cho is the only one who is guilty.

On the first day of vacation Bible school in the small, rural congregation I served when I was just out of seminary, a little boy appeared. Although he had walked to the church, it was clear that someone had helped smooth down his cowlicks and seen to it that he was clean and neatly dressed. That he was poor was made especially obvious by the row of safety pins down the front of his shirt in place of the missing buttons. The ridicule this set him up for was crushing to witness.

This occasion and what stemmed from it led me to want to leave the ministry. There, in God's sanctuary, I watched children torment a little boy who was with us to learn about Jesus. His only mistake was thinking he had come to a place where Christ was worshiped and adored. When later I attempted to speak to the children's parents, I

came up against a harsh realization: the children were only acting out behavior modeled and condoned by their parents. Ask any teacher what it is like to tell parents the truth about their child's hurtful behavior and you know why I soon moved on to another church.

In time I observed this behavior when leading middle and senior high fellowship; I even learned what my own daughters could be capable of when we parents looked the other way. Teens can ostracize, physically abuse and fire withering verbal attacks at anyone whom they judge to be uncool or different, the criterion sometimes being someone's ignorance of the latest standards of what is "in" and what is "out."

The child being picked on or excluded is "made stronger and wiser to the ways of the world," or so goes the excuse of those covering for the guilty. But how can strength and wisdom be instilled in someone who is only trying to survive poison? When will we adults be honest enough to acknowledge that trampling on the sheer humanity of another person does only one thing: it breeds more of the same envy and hatred, sowing in their victims seeds of self-loathing. The number of children and youth who die little deaths of torment every day by such treatment is a tragedy compounded by adults who dismiss it as just a part of growing up.

We dare not glibly write off the horrific events of last month as acts committed by a "madman," some "crazed nut," by allowing nature to trump nurture. We must not use these labels to rob another person of his humanity and excuse ourselves from looking more closely and carefully at what made him "mad" and "crazed." Cho's video tirade, with his own revengeful, hate-spewed name-calling, suggests that he learned well from his childhood detractors. Yes, this is only one of many factors contributing to Cho's angry act, but I have no doubt that his isolation and misdirected vengeance were due in part to his hurt and isolation that began when he was bullied as a child.