

**The Cruelty Crisis:  
Bullying isn't a School Problem; it's a National Pastime  
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Exclusion, humiliation, gossiping, name-calling, and cutthroat alliances – we can't get enough! We panic when these behaviors are directed at our own children and we express outrage when the consequences turn deadly, but over the past few years we, *the adults*, have turned cruelty into entertainment and sport.

According to the Nielsen ratings, reality television topped the “most watched TV” list in 2009 and analysts expect the trend to continue through 2010. From the *Real Housewives of Orange County* to the *Jersey Shore*, reality TV draws audiences by delivering performances that mirror the exact behaviors that we define as bullying. We tune in to watch hostile confrontations, belittling, collusion, backstabbing, and public ridicule. We're drawn in by the promise of mean-spiritedness and we're seduced by the idea that we get to watch people's most intimate and private moments made public. *Sound painfully familiar?*

Gossiping, one of the most glamorized behaviors on TV and a popular weapon in the bully arsenal, is another behavior that falls into the “do as we say, not as we do” category. As adults, how many times have we stood around with a group of friends or colleagues and criticized or made fun of someone? It happens every day in carpool lines, in the back of churches, in front yards, and around the water cooler. We wonder why the awkward first grader is being excluded from birthday parties when our PTO clique is constantly whispering about his weird mother and would never consider inviting her to coffee.

When it comes to managing conflict and difference, we're not exactly modeling the behaviors that we want to see in our children. Whether it's politics, religion, or social issues, the more uncertain we feel, the more certain we act. Finger pointing, screaming, and in-your-face personal attacks have replaced respectful and necessary debate and discourse. We see this everywhere from political talk shows and school meetings, to the sidelines of kids' soccer games. I've heard people define bullying as “angry, aggressive acting out in children.” I would argue that a lot of bullying is simply kids acting like aggressive parents acting out and behaving like angry children.

I've spent the past decade studying vulnerability, shame, authenticity, and belonging. I've interviewed research participants and collected thousands of stories about how we live, love, parent, work, and navigate our increasingly

anxious world. Over the past ten years I've witnessed a profoundly dangerous pattern of behavior emerge in our culture:

As our fear, uncertainty, and feelings of vulnerability increase, cruelty becomes an acceptable way for us to discharge our pain and discomfort. Rather than doing the difficult work of embracing our own vulnerabilities and imperfections, we expose, attack, or ridicule what is vulnerable and imperfect about others.

In our culture, vulnerability is synonymous with weakness, and imperfect means inadequate. Rather than acknowledging that we are all vulnerable and imperfect, we buy into the painful idea that we are *less than*; that we aren't worthy of belonging. It is the struggle for worthiness and belonging that leads to bullying.

Belonging is the innate human need to be a part of something larger than us; we are hardwired for it. Cruelty is a predictable outcome in a culture that tells us that invulnerability and perfection are prerequisites for belonging. We are never more dangerous than when we are backed into a corner of never \_\_\_\_\_ enough (*good/ rich/ thin /successful/ admired/ certain/ extraordinary/ safe/ in control/ powerful/ etc.*).

In a world that is plagued by war, economic hardship, and pervasive self-doubt, we rage and humiliate to alleviate our own misery. It's simply easier to attack and berate others or watch it happen on TV, than it is to risk having honest conversations about our struggles with worthiness. Why lean into our own feelings of scarcity and shame, when we can watch strangers get booed off stage or voted off the island? *It feels good to watch others suffer.*

If we want to reclaim courage and compassion in our families, schools, organizations, and communities, we must open our hearts and minds to a new way of thinking about vulnerability and imperfection. Our imperfections are not flaws; they are what connect us to each other and to our humanity. Vulnerability may be at the core of fear and uncertainty, but it is also the birthplace of courage and compassion – exactly what we need to help us stop lashing out and start engaging with the world from a place of worthiness; a place where empathy and kindness matter.

Whether we are a sweaty-palmed 7<sup>th</sup> grader navigating a hostile cafeteria, or a laid-off worker trying to make a mortgage payment, or a young mother waiting for mammogram results, feeling vulnerable, imperfect and afraid is human. It is when we lose our capacity to hold space for these struggles that we become dangerous. We can legislate behavior all day long, but true compassion comes from a tender and vulnerable place where we understand how inextricably connected we are.

Courage and compassion are not ideals; they are daily practices. The TV shows that we allow in our homes, the way we discuss politics and social issues, the way we handle altercations at the grocery store – these are choices with real consequences. Bullying is a serious problem in schools, but we are all accountable for the cruelty crisis that is fueling these behaviors. The answer to the bullying problem starts with this question: Do we have the courage to be the adults that our children need us to be?

Brené Brown, Ph.D., LMSW, is a research professor at The University of Houston Graduate College of Social Work. Her research on vulnerability, shame and authenticity has been featured on PBS, CNN, NPR, and was the topic of two recent TEDx talks. She is the author of *The Gifts of Imperfection* (Hazelden, 2010) and *I Thought It Was Just Me* (Penguin, 2007).