

Keeping the Bullies at Bay

Children will identify with the aggressor to hide their fear

I remember a friend telling me about his granddaughter who was afraid of starting school. Every morning she'd get scared on the journey, complaining and crying and then refusing to leave the car once they'd arrived at the school gates. She wanted to be a good girl, wanted to be like other children, but couldn't help getting scared.

In the evenings my friend and his granddaughter – quite spontaneously - started playing a game they called Driving To School whereby my friend played the part of a frightened child while his granddaughter gleefully played the part of a car driver, confident and encouraging, turning round and assuring the frightened child in the back seat that everything would be all right, "It really will! Stop worrying! You'll like it when you get there!" After playing the game over and over again in the evenings, his granddaughter was eventually able to start going to school in the mornings calmly and fearlessly.

My guess is that this happened because the little girl was able gradually to internalize the role of person-in-charge, person-with-confidence, until this confident part of herself could start talking to her frightened self, an adult voice reassuring a frightened child, no longer needing an actual grandfather to be there to do the reassuring.

One way of dealing with a frightening situation or person is to identify with that person, to become like that person. If a dictator tells us that the world is simple and that our fears are groundless, we might try to adopt the dictator's view of the world, hoping that it'll make our fears go away. We might then go on to attack and persecute apparently fearful people if they remind us of our own hidden fears.

Anna Freud (2015) notes that, feeling anxious and afraid of another person's aggression, children sometimes defend themselves by imitating the aggressive person, thereby becoming aggressive and powerful themselves rather than anxious and afraid. A child might defend him or herself against feeling powerless by joining the gang and becoming one of the powerful ones, or might defend against feeling exploited by becoming exploitative. A child might unconsciously reason that "If I collude with what the other person wants, if I convince myself that I want it as well, then I won't have to feel helpless or exploited or powerless. I'll be the person in control rather than the person being controlled".

In this way, children's behaviour might sometimes appear to be enthusiastic or assertive while actually being defensive. This might apply to their most anti-social, destructive behaviours, behaviours that might really be ways of dealing with anxieties and fears too difficult to acknowledge – the fear of being invisible, or the fear of failing, or of being unloved, or unpopular, or humiliated, or weak in some way.

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Similarly, some children's most obedient, most socially acceptable behaviours might simply be ways of adapting, of dealing with frightening people and situations. They might not be freely chosen behaviours at all, but learned to serve a purpose, to fit in, to keep the potential bullies, the scary situations at bay.

Some children deal with fear by fighting it, by opposing and challenging the aggressor. Others collude with the aggressor because it's safer that way. The challenge for parents and for professionals who are trying to understand and support children and young people is working out what's real and heartfelt rather than just another very sophisticated, very convincing adaptation.

Some adaptations serve a useful purpose, like the little girl pretending to be adult on her way to school. Other adaptations are pernicious.

REFERENCE

Freud, A. (2015) 'Identification with the Aggressor' in *Selected Writings*. London: Penguin Books.