

## ARTICLE

# Witnesses to Bullying - Victims of Circumstances

We are convinced that people are good or bad at heart, that they have one of these features permanently retained somewhere within them. However, this kind of thinking is a mistake. And just as it applies to adults, similarly no child is either “good” or “bad”. He/she may be antisocial, impolite, or even dangerous to others –this is usually a result of the socializing process, upbringing, and problems. Hardly ever can we describe someone as being simply bad.

You may be familiar with something known as Stanford’s Prison Experiment. It was aimed at studying a simulation of life in prison. This task was undertaken in 1971 by a group of psychologists from Stanford University, led by Philip Zimbardo. Twenty-four students with no criminal record were selected. They were randomly divided into prisoners and guards of the experimental prison constructed in the basement of the Department of Psychology at Stanford.

During the experiment, healthy, mentally stable students started to behave as harassers (the guards) and victims (the prisoners). Aggression, abuse, and other hazardous behavior were only triggered by the situations in which they found themselves – nobody expected such behavior from them, no one suggested anything to them.

Simply talking, Zimbardo proved that mentally stable people when put in some specific conditions are able to inhabit the roles of aggressors and victims. He believes the reasons for such behavior is not connected to the human’s psyche disorders but instead are related to the influences of the surroundings on an individual. The participants of the experiment were observed for a few years after the research and, as it turned out, it did not have any negative effects on their lives! This was a result of therapy during which it was accurately explained to them what they had taken part in and what they had witnessed. Due to the fact that the experiment took place in a specific place and under particular circumstances, the participants came out of their roles, took off their guards or prisoners’ uniforms, and went back to their normal lives.

This experiment shows that even “those good children” whom we are sure behave properly, may adapt to the role of an aggressor or a silent witness if the surroundings push them to do so. This tacit permission – or its lack – may lead to or block the act of aggression. This conclusion seems to be the answer to the question: “How could this have possibly happened?” If that is how a situation shapes behavior, then in a situation of group violence it will be extremely difficult for an individual to oppose it. What is more, there is a great chance that he/she will become an aggressor him/herself!

Surveys and interviews have shown that at the school that Adam attended, 85% of children were against violence. Though almost the entire school joined in when it came to the boy’s harassment. The reason for this is that in cases of bullying and cyberbullying the pressure from even a small peer group causes other children “enjoyment” in insulting comments, provoking, spitting, jerking, and beating when they find themselves in a situation in which the group demands it.

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This explanation is not, and may not be, a justification! We do recall this research in the chapter on witnesses to show you how significant the influence of group, situation, and social expectations on other people is. Becoming familiar with the mechanism of indifference or joining group violence cannot justify it! Especially when you consider that these are the observers that may have the greatest influence on ceasing the harassment of peers. The way the environment (home, school, sport clubs) react to bullying may develop or restrain the behavior that can lead to violence! Forming an open environment, with strong standards and with no consent to violence will greatly limit the occurrences of bullying!