

## Body Language 43

### The Bully

by Bob Whipple, MBA, CPLP



The body language for a bully is usually rather extreme and often unmistakable.

Keep in mind that the definition of bully behavior exists first in the mind of the person being bullied. The person who is being aggressive often does not even realize how gestures might be interpreted.

In this article, I will use the male pronoun when describing bully behaviors and a female pronoun to indicate a person who feels threatened by the bully. I do this to simplify the writing format to prevent using the he or she format all the time. Just recognize that bully behavior in the real world exists with both genders.

Bullying has become a key concept in our society. We see forms of it in every area from kids on the bus to Congress, from the boardroom to the barroom. We universally abhor the behavior in school kids, yet we often see it practiced every day as adults.

Body language can contribute to bullying for several reasons. Here are some signs to watch out for:

**Pointing** (as shown in the picture) is usually a hostile gesture. Whenever you point a finger at another person, recognize that you are putting her on notice that she had better listen.

**Your jaw** is simply another way to point. As the man in the picture juts his jaw forward, he greatly increases the hostility of his action.

**Size** is important in bully body language. You can see a bully on the playground puff himself up to appear larger than the other kids as he seeks to gain advantage. The same behavior can be seen in animals. Chickens and birds of all kinds will puff out their feathers as an aggressive move warning the other birds to back off.

**Facial color** is another key factor in bully body language. As the bully becomes intense, his face is going to flush and show all kinds of signs of agitation. All of this is intended to diminish the power of the person being bullied.

**Tone of voice** is huge for the bully. His words are anything but soothing. They become acerbic and short. He may become bellicose or inflamed. All of these things are aimed at making the other person feel inferior.

**Hair standing out** is another telltale sign of aggression. It is the same with animals of all species. To gain advantage, animals try to look bigger and puff out their fur.

**Virtual bullying** is becoming much more common as electronic communication has become ubiquitous. This is especially true for younger people who communicate a larger portion of the time online.

Cyber bullying has become a huge problem in our youth, but it really occurs at all ages. One of the reasons it is so prevalent is because the bully is not facing the other person directly; the input is given remotely.

We know the incredible destructive nature of bullying because all of us have been bullied at some point in our lives, and we know it does not feel good.

We know bullying leads to suicide in rare cases, especially in children, because they do not know how to cope with the powerless feeling of being bullied. They would simply rather die.

Parents can bully children, and that makes it even worse. People who were bullied as children can be triggered when bullied as adults by authority figures.

It is also true that each one of us has been guilty of bullying another person at some point. If you wish to deny that, you need to think harder. Some of us have played the role of the bully more than others. Some people have it down to a fine art.

Organizational bullying is not confined to verbal abuse or strong body language. It also occurs when headstrong managers or supervisors become so fixated on their own agenda that it renders them effectively deaf to the ideas or concerns of others.

They become like a steamroller and push their agenda with little regard for what others think. In this area, there is a fine line between being a passionate, driving leader who strongly pushes his agenda versus one who is willing to hear and consider alternate points of view.

The key to reducing bully behavior in yourself is to recognize when you are doing it. For many people, it is just a habit they are unaware of. Catch yourself in the act of bullying another person and soften your tone toward caring and appreciation. You will see a much more cooperative response to your input and build higher trust with other people.

It takes practice, but we all can learn to reduce the tendency to bully other people.

*This is a part in a series of articles on “Body Language.” The entire series can be viewed on <https://www.leadergrow.com/articles/categories/35-body-language> or on this blog.*

*Bob Whipple, MBA, CPLP, is a consultant, trainer, speaker, and author in the areas of leadership and trust. He is the author of four books: 1. *The Trust Factor: Advanced Leadership for Professionals* (2003), 2. *Understanding E-Body Language: Building Trust Online* (2006), 3. *Leading with Trust is Like Sailing Downwind* (2009), and 4. *Trust in Transition: Navigating Organizational Change* (2014). In addition, he has authored over 600 articles and videos on various topics in leadership and trust. Bob has many years as a senior executive with a Fortune 500 Company and with non-profit organizations.*