

The Bullies Among Us

As a teacher and counselor in the public school system for the last 14 years, I have witnessed the tears, suicide notes, gripping fear and rage that are only part of the damage done when children and teenagers' lives are infected by bullies. One of my most terrible memories is speaking at the funeral of one teenager on whom bullying took its final toll.

Bullying is a form of behavior used to negatively affect others where there is an "imbalance of power." This "imbalance" may be perceived social or physical power and may be based on the grounds of race, gender, sexuality, religion or other perceived positions.

Bullies like to dominate others and are very "self" focused. While some bullies believe they have the right to treat others as they choose, many bullies are simply insecure. Some bullies are victims of bullying themselves and others suffer from mental disorders and need psychiatric attention.

It is estimated that one out of every four bullies will have a criminal record by the time they are 30 years old. Regardless of the reason, one thing stands true: Bullying hurts. I know that to be true, firsthand.

Growing up, I was slightly overweight and the children in my neighborhood consistently reminded me that I was inadequate. I cried myself to sleep many nights, wondering how I could be so ugly. Fortunately, I grew six inches the summer I turned 13 and when I returned to school for the fall, I was not only one of the tallest girls in the school, but also, the *thinnest*. This change brought the popularity and acceptance I had so desperately wanted. Unfortunately, it did not bring the same change on the inside. I repeatedly heard one message in my own head: *You are unacceptable*. I achieved awards, high honors and was even a finalist in beauty pageants, but the damage done by

those neighborhood bullies was so deeply ingrained, I struggled to believe the truth.

Fortunately, I had parents and friends who encouraged me and helped me deal with the horrible results of being bullied. I learned to combat my insecurities and eventually, I was able to move past those haunting messages. As a result of my experience, I have a passion for reaching students and parents with practical solutions for dealing with bullying and its devastating effects.

Today, a whole new level of pain and embarrassment is used on kids and adults via "cyberbullying." Cyberbullying is the use of technology to harass, threaten, embarrass or target another person. It can involve emails, texts, Facebook postings, photos or any other media posted that is intended to intentionally harm another person.

In many states, arrests have been made when cyberbullying is used as a tool of discrimination against someone regarding religion, race or other differences. Cyberbullying is particularly damaging because the victim can be harassed 24/7 and the source is hard to trace. Cyber bullies know they may not have to confront their victims if they can stay anonymous.

While it is important not to respond to a cyberbully, it is necessary to save evidence of the bullying. Place the evidence on a flash drive so that you don't have to see the continual reminders of the bully's remarks. Report bullying to your service provider, or block the bully from sending texts, notes or emails. Most of all, password protect your cellphone and online sites, changing your passwords often.

There are many steps that parents can take as preventative measures for bullying and should be taught in the home to their children:

- Teach zero tolerance for any type of bullying behavior.

- Show positive examples of acceptance of others via family time, the newspaper, magazines, TV, etc.
- Discuss appropriate ways to handle/display anger.
- Teach words of reconciliation and empathy such as “I’m sorry, please forgive me.”
- Discuss movie scenes that involve bullying. As a family, discuss the appropriate behavior that should have taken place in bullying situations.

Parents, if you are made aware that your child is being bullied, *listen*. Your child needs to be heard. Avoid interrogating words such as *why* and *you*. Let your child *feel* their feelings and reassure her it is normal to feel hurt, angry, scared or alone when she is bullied. Find out if there are other victims by talking with other parents. Talk to school officials about their anti-bullying policies and procedures.

If applicable, keep a long, detailed journal of any injuries/incidents that occur, including pictures of injuries. Identify an adult that your child can report to daily while at school. Try to monitor your child’s whereabouts and friendships and watch for signs of anger, anxiety and depression. Above all, teach your child social skills and how to find the right kind of friends.

Oftentimes parents make the situation worse by reacting in fear or anger to their child being bullied. This is a natural reaction, but may cause poor choices to be made. For example, it may seem realistic to call the parents of the bully, but this often leads to more conflict and may escalate the behavior. Don’t tell your child to retaliate for both spiritual and practical reasons. First Peter 3:9 says, “Do not repay evil for evil or reviling for reviling, but on the contrary, bless, for to this you were called, that you may obtain a blessing” (ESV).

Under most school policies, your child becomes as guilty as

the bully when retaliation is involved. Allow adults to handle it and if they will not, continue making your way to the top until someone takes notice.

Never promise your child you won't tell anyone, but instead, reassure her that you will do your best not to make it worse. Involve your child in deciding what should be done if the bullying continues. Most of all, don't give up! No one deserves to be mistreated at the hands of another. There is hope!

If you find out that your child is the bully, stay calm and meet with the adults who have witnessed the behavior. Apply clear and significant consequences and require your child to apologize to any she has offended with you as the witness.

If necessary, "shadow" your child at school for a day. Go everywhere she goes and monitor behavior. Immediately reinforce positive behavior when your child does good and immediately seek professional help if the bullying behavior continues for an extended period of time.

Ultimately, God is our vindicator when we are being bullied, harassed or abused. Isaiah 41: 11-13 says, "Behold, all who are incensed against you shall be put to shame and confounded; those who strive against you shall be as nothing and shall perish. You shall seek those who contend with you, but you shall not find them; those who war against you shall be as nothing at all. For I, the Lord your God, hold your right hand; it is I who say to you, 'Fear not, I am the one who helps you.'"

There is hope for bullies, the victims of bullies and their families. All of us deserve to be treated with love and respect, and by emulating Jesus, we can begin to reshape the devastating effects of bullying when each of us confronts this issue with wisdom and understanding.

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Bullying Statistics

- The most common reason cited for being harassed is a student's appearance or body size. Two out of five teens feel that they are bullied because of the way that they look. *Source:*
- A victim of bullying is twice as likely to take his or her own life compared to someone who is not a victim. *Source:*
- One out of 10 students drop out of school because they are bullied. *Source:*
- It is estimated that 160,000 children miss school every day due to fear of attack or intimidation by other students. *Source: National Education Association*
- One in seven students in Grades K-12 is either a bully or a victim of bullying. *Source:*
- 71 percent of students report incidents of bullying as a problem at their school. *Source:*
- One out of 20 students has seen a student with a gun at school. *Source:*
- 282,000 students are physically attacked in secondary schools each month. *Source:*
- 90 percent of 4th through 8th graders report being victims of bullying. *Source:*
- Harassment and bullying have been linked to 75% of school-shooting incidents. *Source:*