Bullying: A Challenge for Everyone Involved

Katie Leboeuf, MA
CIGNA Behavioral Health

Most of us don't tell our children that growing up will be easy. But we also don't typically tell them just how hard it can be either, or that we can worry ourselves sick about things that might harm them, or how our precious children can become the victims of big, bad bullies, even as soon as they're sent off to school. Now, we can't blame ourselves for that — as parents we inherently want to protect our children from the cruelties and hardships of society, so maybe we sugarcoat things now and then to make life seem a bit less trying. But we're not doing our kids any favors when we do this; life isn't always rosy and our children see that, they live that, and so we must respond accordingly. In a world where bullying has become dramatized by such movies as "Mean Girls" or mourned by such tragedies as Columbine, we cannot ignore the violence, both mental and physical that our children have the potential to witness or experience on a daily basis. Many of us have vivid childhood memories of bullies, even if we were not victims ourselves. Bullies are capable of conjuring up feelings of fear, anxiety, humiliation, and anger. This emotional reaction is no different for our children today, but what used to be considered just a "part of growing up" is now recognized as a serious form of school violence.

Just how serious is this problem? A recent survey reports that for every ten kids in class, one to two experience the torment of a bully. More than half say they have stayed home at least once because they were victims of bullying. In fact, four of every ten public school students in grades 6 through 12 have avoided using the school bathrooms at some time out of fear of being harassed (Wilkerson, 2004). The National Education Association (NEA) (2004) estimates that 28 million missed school days a year are due to fear of an attack by a bully. Sadly, in extreme cases, children and adolescents have even committed suicide or have retaliated violently as a way to escape bullying.

Bullying occurs when one child asserts his/her power over another by using aggression. The aggression can be physical, verbal or involve exclusionary tactics. Bullying always involves one peer that has the power and one peer that is vulnerable to that power (NEA, 2004). The bully may be physically more powerful, he/she may have the power to intimidate, or they may have the power to influence other peers to exclude the victim socially. Victims of bullies are usually stereotyped as being loners, passive, quiet, sensitive, anxious, with low self-esteem and they are often smaller and/or weaker than other children of the same age and may come from an overprotective home (Keepkidshealthy.com, 2004). More importantly it is how they react to the bully that often allows this violent behavior to continue. Victims usually react to bullying by crying, acting out, or withdrawing. Some victims may actually bring on the bullying attack by teasing or provoking a bully. Being the victim of a bully can lead your child to avoiding school, and developing fear and anxiety about going to school. It can also cause your child to feel insecure and have feelings of low self worth and poor self-esteem and can ultimately lead to depression and/or violence, either against himself or against the bully.
Victims of bullying tend to remain silent about their experiences out of shame or fear of retaliation. This silence, however, can further encourage a bully to continue their terror-inducing behaviors. Since your child may not immediately come to you for help, parents need to know what signs to look for in their kids. They can include:

- Reluctance to go to school
- Unusual fear or anxiety related to school
- Physical complaints like headaches or stomachaches, especially on school days
- Missing or damaging belongings or the need for extra money for supplies
- Torn clothes, bruises, or disheveled appearance
- Nightmares or sleep problems
- A change in grades or academic performance
- Coming home hungry from school regularly — this could indicate that a bully is taking a child's lunch or lunch money

If you suspect that your child may be a victim of a bully, you can ask her/him if they are being teased at school, or you can ask a more open-ended question, such as "What do you like to do at recess?" or "at lunchtime?" This less directive line of questioning may allow your child to feel less defensive about sharing their experiences, or even if they still aren't able to tell you outright that they are being bullied — their elusive or vague answers may give you a clue to what they cannot tell you.

Parents of the victims of bullies need not be the only ones worried, parents of bullies should also be concerned for their kids. Children who are bullies may also have problems with low self-esteem similar to their victims, but newer theories argue that bullies are driven more by a desire to have power over others and to be "in control" than because they have poor self-esteem and that they have little empathy for their victims (Keepkidshealthy, 2004). Bullies may also be aggressive, bossy, controlling, have a low level of self-control, and have difficulty making friends. Additionally, studies have shown that by adulthood, childhood bullies are more likely to have criminal records and job and relationship problems (NEA, 2004).

While as parents we may feel heartbroken to learn our child is being bullied or is bullying others, we are not powerless to make a change. "Bully proof" your child. Although there are more bullies than ever, the victims have not changed much. Bullies look for children who are passive, hesitant, and socially awkward. The preferred target is not overly popular with teachers or other students. Bullies rarely confront a victim alone, preferring an appreciative audience. Bully proofing your child involves changing some of these aspects.

Here are some helpful do's and don'ts to follow if you find out your child is a victim of bullying (NEA, 2004).

- **Teach your child how to use self-talk:** Bullies thrive on their ability to control their victim's reactions. By teaching your child positive messages they can tell themselves in the bully's presence, they can learn how to be in control of their
emotions, not the bully. Some examples of self-talk statements are: "Even though he's calling me names, I know they aren't true"; or "She has bigger problems than me if she has to spend her time trying to make me feel bad."

- **Teach your child to use strong, assertive body language:** Again, the glory for the bully is in the reaction, so your child needs to know how to act like the bully isn't bothering them. Show them how to display good posture, make direct eye contact and keep their hands steady. Practice this with them at home in mock bullying scenarios.

- **Teach your child the art of ignoring:** Ignoring a bully (or at least acting like it) is the best way for a child to get the upper hand. They will be taking away the reaction that the bully thrives on. Make sure to warn you child that when they first start to ignore the bully, the bullying may escalate as the bully tries harder to get their beloved reaction. Instead of thinking that the ignoring isn't working and giving up, they should know that this really means that *they* are getting to the bully for a change.

- **Teach your child it is okay to ask for help:** Explain that not telling an adult or teacher when it is appropriate to do so only gives the bully permission to keep up his/her actions. Explain to them, that it is not tattling to tell an adult when things get out of hand.

- **Pressure the school:** Many schools are instituting "Anti-Bullying" rules and procedures that include more monitoring, posted rules about bullying, mediation between bullies and victims and classroom discussions about bullying issues. If your child's school has not yet implemented such a program, suggest strongly that they consider one. Offer to volunteer in monitoring duties.

- **Don't tell your child to fight the bully:** While it may be true that *sometimes* a bully may back down if confronted by the victim, this is by no means a guarantee. Encouraging your child to fight the bully or engage in verbal sparring with them could not only put them in a potentially dangerous situation, it will likely just encourage more bullying. A bully needs to be bored into submission, not entertained.

- **Teach your child to carry him/herself with confidence:** Actions can be learned, even without the internal confidence to back them up. Bullies choose their victims based on an appearance of weakness, so teach your child to stand up straight and look people in the eye — especially when confronted.

- **Arm your child with funny comebacks:** Since audience is so important to bullies, if your child can make a clever (though not mean-spirited) retort, often the audience will begin to side with the victim, thus undermining the bully's support (Wilkerson, 2004). For example, if the bully said, "You have cooties," your child could reply, "Thank you, what a sweet thing to say!" This can takes the bully off guard. If the "clever comebacks" are successful, the bully will stop because the jokes end up on him/her. They are not getting the reaction they so desperately want. However, your child will need to be aware of when the 'comeback' method is NOT working, so they know when to quit. If it turns out to be working against them, it can make the situation worse, causing more laughs at your child's expense.
If you have discovered that your child has been bullying other children, there are actions that you can also take to prevent more suffering for both your child and your child's victims and make school a safer place for all to grow and learn:

- Try not to be defensive about your child's behavior.
- Find out what really happened. Get the facts.
- Don't blame anyone.
- Listen to what your child has to say about his or her actions.
- Make it very clear that bullying other children is not an acceptable way to act.
- Set clear consequences if your child bullies again.
- Give your child specific actions to take the next time they are in the same situation that gives them the urge to bully. Role-playing with your child is an effective way to model and teach proper behavior.
- When you see improved behavior, recognize and reward it appropriately.

As difficult as it may be to hear, studies show that bullying has its roots in the home environment (NEA, 2004). This does not point blame at us, the parents, but instead should empower us to understand that we can effect positive change in our children. Effective parenting can prevent future bullies and victims and also prevent "collateral bullies" (children who support the bully's behavior by cheering, smiling, laughing and isolating). Some proactive suggestions include:

- **Help your child feel successful:** Praise and recognize your child's talents and successes, big and small. Generally, the more confident a child is, the less likely they are to become a target of bullying.
- **Teach empathy:** Take time to help your child understand other people's feelings, especially in how their behavior can affect others.
- **Set Limits:** Always giving in when your child becomes demanding teaches them that bullying works.
- **Let your child stand up to you once in a while:** Letting your child be angry with you and express their opinions makes it more likely that they will have the confidence to stand up to a bully. This doesn't mean allowing them to display inappropriate behaviors along with those opinions, but it does mean valuing the fact that they have something to say (regardless of whether or not you agree with it).
- **Encourage positive friendships:** Loners are more vulnerable to bullying. Help your child develop friendships so they can learn good social skills and have a built-in "bully buffer."
- **Watch what you do:** Children learn from verbal and non-verbal behaviors you model. If you lead by the example of aggression, threats, criticism and intimidation, your child will likely use the same tactics with their peers. Avoid using violent forms of punishment.
- **Teach mediation skills:** Take every opportunity to teach your child how to resolve conflict peacefully and fairly. Teaching compromise and negotiation skills show them that there are other ways to handle conflict other than with force. It also shows them that they don't have to "win" to consider a situation resolved.
• **Reduce exposure to violence:** Many studies have documented the fact that children who are exposed to violence on TV, computers, and in the home are at a higher risk for acting out those behaviors (Pagewise, 2004).

• **Increase supervision:** Children who know the watchful eyes of their parents or guardians are never far away are less likely to engage in inappropriate behavior. Frequent and random supervision results in more accountability and more positive behavior. Your children should expect that you will be checking in on them, but should not know exactly when this will happen.

The information presented here can be a hard pill for a loving parent to swallow. We want the best for our children. We want them to be happy and safe and loved. The children are our future, but as adults, guardians, and parents we must help shape this future to become one filled less with violence, and more with peace and harmony. Taking the time to stop and candidly address the issue of bullying is the first step in this large task. Bullying is not acceptable and should not be tolerated. While we can arm our children with the tools to solve the problem through some of the techniques outlined above, it's important to remember that they may not be able to do it on their own. At these times it is necessary for us, as the parent or concerned adult, to step in and intervene. Seeking professional help from a child psychologist or other mental health professional may be necessary. Continuing to put a child in a no-win situation only further validates their powerlessness and continues the cycle of violence and hurt.

Education is imperative. Teach your child about the impact of bullying now, so to avoid the consequences later, that can easily escalate if not addressed. Growing up may not be easy, but it can be filled with happy memories, ones not shadowed by the actions of a bully.

**References:**

Website: http://www.keepkidshealthy.com/parenting_tips

Website: http://nea.org/schoolsafety

Website: http://ncnc.essortment.com/dealingwithbul_rtvx.htm

Website: http://www.new-life.net/bigbully.htm