

BULLYING: WHAT IT IS, WHAT IT ISN'T, AND WHAT PARENTS CAN DO

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There has been a lot of attention on the topic of bullying in the last decade. It has been warranted. For too long this type of behavior has been written off as a normal part of childhood, something to be endured as children grow up. Now we know that this type of behavior can have long lasting psychological effects on those who have been victimized by it. It is being taken seriously in most schools and by most parents, and this has been a tremendously positive shift in an effort to keep children emotionally safe and healthy.

Let's start by trying to define bullying. If you do a quick internet search you will find varying definitions of bullying. Some are more liberal in their definition and others are more specific. The overarching theme, however, is that bullying involves and is motivated by a power imbalance between the child doing the bullying and the child being bullied. Bullying occurs when one child (or person) abuses or threatens to abuse another child, repeatedly, with the intention of gaining and maintain power of the other person. The three primary indicators of bullying are: repetition, intention and power imbalance. I would add that bullying always includes an attack on the dignity of the victim.

There are some other telltale indicators that characterize a bullying dynamic. These can include a dynamic of dependence of the victim on the bully for acceptance and approval, the bully threatening the victim if the victim tells someone about the abuse, and other members of the community supporting the dynamic through passive acceptance (bystanders). Most often, the "relationship" between the bully and victim does not only involve a power imbalance, it is developed because of the perceived power imbalance. This is one of the keys to defining a true bullying situation.

What muddies the waters when speaking of bullying, is that many of the behaviors that manifest in a bullying dynamic are also developmentally or age appropriate misbehaviors. Here are a few examples: teasing, physical aggression, excluding, name calling, etc. This can be confusing to parents. For instance, teasing is a very common behavior or tactic used to maintain or increase the power imbalance in a bullying dynamic. However, most all children are teased in their lifetime, and most all will participate in some teasing, especially during the elementary years when children are in a sensitive developmental period for developing peer relationships and social awareness.

When schools or media publications use a broad brush to paint a picture of bullying, it is no doubt done with good intention. What could be so bad about attempting to raise the awareness of all unkind behavior and seek to eliminate it? The problem is that making the definition too broad reduces the seriousness of bullying, and increases the severity of typical misbehavior. As well, true bullying requires some intentional and defined adult intervention and support, and blurring the lines between bullying and typical misbehavior, actually dilutes important resources and focus when a real situation occurs. It also can cause a punitive overreaction to typical misbehavior leading to a cycle of shame for children who try on these behaviors. Instead of learning to resolve conflict and navigate normal social challenges, children who exhibit age appropriate misbehaviors are labeled as victims or bullies. When overreaction occurs, by adults, children are often rescued, if they are perceived as a victim, or punished,

if they are perceived to be the bully, and children begin to make decisions about themselves in response to these adult reactions. Those decisions may not be the most accurate or healthy decisions.

To review, a true bullying dynamic occurs when there is intentionality, repetition and a power imbalance. The relationship is often sought out specifically due to a real or perceived power imbalance, and is characterized by verbal, physical and social aggression. As important to consider, is that most all children experience verbal, physical and social aggression at some point, either giving or receiving (most often both, at some point), and there are sometimes one child may have more social standing or power in a relationship. It is the ongoing, repetitive and intentional nature of the behavior, along with the intent of maintaining power that defines true bullying behavior.

P.S. You may have noticed that I use the term 'bullying dynamic' and avoid, wherever possible, the terms 'bully' and 'victim'. I do this intentionally to stay away from labeling the children rather than the behavior. Bullying behavior is learned, and can become unlearned with proper support.

What Can Parents Do?

If you are concerned that your child is involved in a bullying dynamic here are some suggestions to support them:

1. Work closely with your child's school. Some elements of an effective bullying plan include:
 - a. Setting up a buddy system, so that the child being bullied gets peer support when it's time to talk to an adult.
 - b. Educating the classroom community on the roles in ending this behavior – it truly takes a village to do so. Other children should be educated, aware, and know what to do if they see this type of behavior.
 - c. Advocate for non-punitive responses to the child who is bullying. Zero tolerance hopefully means zero tolerance for the behavior, not the child. As tempting as it is to want justice for your child, it is important to understand that the child who is bullying is hurting and has most likely learned the behavior from other adults or children. Children misbehave because they are discouraged, and a bully is a very discouraged child. This doesn't mean that you excuse or rationalize the behavior, but knowing that punitive responses generally drive the behavior farther underground and teach the perpetrator to figure out how to continue the behavior without getting caught.
2. Observe your child in social situations to see if the dynamic is truly a bullying dynamic. Again, there is a lot of focus on this issue right now, and it is important to know that true bullying behavior is the exception and not the rule. If the dynamic does not appear to be true bullying (although it may still be unkind and disrespectful), observe for behaviors in your child that may be inviting unwanted attention. Is it possible that your child may be participating in some behavior that might be baiting another child to misbehave?
3. Teach assertiveness. It is never too late to teach your child how to say *no* or *stop with* assertiveness. Bullies tend to behave like puffer fish. They blow themselves up very big and they appear scary. However, when another child responds assertively, they tend to deflate very quickly. Enrolling children in martial arts classes can be a wonderful way for children to learn to defend themselves, to be assertive and to respect their own power and limitations.
4. Listen, listen, listen! If your child is feeling bullied or picked on, you can help them most by actively listening and validating their feelings. Even if the situation isn't a bullying dynamic,

being an active listener will set up an environment for your child where they know they can talk to you even when it's most difficult. And, it will be most difficult if a child is feeling bullied, because the victim in a bullying dynamic feels embarrassed and ashamed, and it may be very scary to share these feelings, even with their parents.

Planning Ahead

Children who become victims in a bullying dynamic are often seen as weak or passive by the child engaging in the bullying behavior. They are children who are less likely to self-advocate or speak up. Teaching children to be assertive and helping them develop confidence and a sense of social capability starts early. Bullies generally do not engage socially confident children. It's never too early to help develop a strong sense of confidence in security in children.

1. Allow children to participate in age appropriate decisions that affect them. For instance, allow them to participate in decisions on after-school activities, or the family movie that you'll be watching. Encourage them to voice their opinion and take it seriously. This helps develop a sense of personal autonomy in children, and gives them the message that they are significant and important to others.
2. Teach children to say *no*, by modeling saying *no* firmly and kindly, and by accepting *no* if you ask a *yes* or *no* question from them (be sure to avoid asking *yes* or *no* questions if you don't want a *no*). As a matter of fact, look for reasonable opportunities to allow them to say *no*. Too often, adults, without realizing it, teach children that *no* is not an acceptable answer. This leads to passive or pleasing behavior, and can teach manipulation skills.
3. Avoid forcing your child to share when they are younger. When children are young, parents often require their children to share their toys or belongings with their friends or siblings. Children often respond with either rebellion or passivity. However, this is a perfect time to learn the important life lesson of saying *no*, and developing respectful assertiveness. Let your child know that it is OK not to share if they don't want to, but that they must be respectful in how they say *no*. Give them an opportunity to practice. An added benefit to this approach is that children who are given the freedom to say *no* and are not forced to share tend to be more generous.
4. Allow children to have their feelings. Feelings are feelings, not facts. A child's disappointment is not a grade on your parenting. Disappointment, anger, sadness and frustration are OK, and are part of life. By honoring a child's right to have those feelings, without rescuing, children learn to experience and trust their emotions and to become resilient. When adults rescue or try to control a child's experience so that they don't have to experience negative feelings, children learn to depend on others to make them happy or solve their problems. They learn dependency and that they are not capable of solving their problems, and may even come to fear negative experiences. Honoring a child's feelings means being present, listening, listening, listening, and validating their right to have those feelings. When children feel listened to, they are often able to solve their own problems, magically!
5. Teach siblings how to negotiate conflict independently. Find a place at home where children can go (when they are calm) to resolve their problems, respectfully. There are many good sources online that outline a simple plan for negotiating conflict. Avoid setting up a victim/bully

dynamic at home, without realizing it, by protecting one child and blaming the other. After 20 years of working with children, I can say with certainty, that in most all cases of conflict with children, there are two sides to the story. Many times, the “victim” is really a volunteer!

6. To avoid raising a bully, there’s no need for another set of suggestions. Children engage in bullying behavior because they feel powerless and that they don’t belong. Giving children age appropriate power and influence, as well as age appropriate boundaries, in their lives allows them to feel connected and significant, and safe. Children who feel significant have no need to find it through exerting power over another child.

Until next time...