



Bullying Prevention Begins Early

Almost weekly we are confronted with disturbing news about bullying, the most recent being the cruel and vicious physical and verbal abuse of a school bus monitor by middle schoolers, videoed with impunity by another child who then posted it on YouTube, thus herself engaging in cyber-bullying.

After the video went viral, and again since the sentencing, the blogosphere has gone wild with comments, some of which are cause for grave concern. Many people blamed the victim for allowing the bullying to continue. The father of one of the bullies dismissed what his son did as "...a stupid mistake..." and said it was time for things to get back to normal. Some said that this was just kids being kids. Others said that if these kids had been "whapped" more when growing up they wouldn't have bullied; others thought whapping was still an appropriate punishment.

These opinions are disturbing not only because of their hostile, aggressive tone, but because they reflect a serious misunderstanding of the underlying causes of bullying, and the terrible costs to society of this destructive epidemic of maladaptive behavior. Who suffers when bullying occurs? Everyone: the victims, of course; the frightened witnesses; the parents of the victims suffer for their children; our humanity takes a nosedive; and yes, the bullies suffer, too. If feelings of compassion don't motivate us to get involved there is a bottom line argument that might impel us: bullying costs our communities lots of money, particularly when the bullies are older – as are these middle schoolers.

Almost all school districts have policies and/or programs aimed at **stopping** bullying after it occurs. Often these are "get tough" interventions that include a punishment aspect, usually require an apology, perhaps community service, and participation in anti-bullying programs. Why are so many unsuccessful and expensive? Kids aren't born bullies; they become bullies over time, and the older they are, the harder it is to change. Punishment just drives bullying behavior undercover (and certainly, whapping is bullying perpetrated by an adult); apologies can't possibly be sincere at this stage in intervention because most of these children don't yet recognize that their behavior is wrong. Suspension is **never** appropriate unless it is "in school" or at an alternative school. Most intervention programs fail to address a major underlying cause of bullying and other aggressive behavior – the failure to develop empathy (more on that shortly). Children who don't develop empathy from infancy are often resentful, angry, jealous, remorseless, and don't accept responsibility for their actions. For a variety of complex reasons they don't behave with compassion, are not altruistic, and thus don't get enough of the feel good brain hormone, oxytocin, to act with kindness and compassion. They don't know what it feels like to feel good about themselves and their behavior.

Should we just give up on these children? Absolutely not – their bullying will continue and escalate through their lifespan, eventually destroying them and the social fabric of our communities. What does work for children who missed out on the kinds of interactions and experiences they needed to develop empathy? The most successful, large scale, evidenced-based (meaning it has been proven to work by good research) anti-bullying program for school-aged children is called Roots of Empathy, founded in 1996 by Mary Gordon. It now has a younger sibling called Seeds of Empathy for early childhood programs. These wonderful programs fight bullying with babies – yes, babies! All children participate, not just bullies; the goals include encouraging the development of empathy, compassion, altruism, and responsive parenting. I urge everyone to visit the websites and learn more. In the absence of these programs locally, get involved in our schools to give input

about bullying policies and programs so they are consistent with what works. Always model respect, compassion, and empathy in interactions with children, particularly those who bully. Avoid shaming, denigrating, and other forms of bullying – no one can change from a position of shame. Ensure that bullies get the long-term counseling they need in order to develop better social-emotional competence, and their families have opportunities to participate in parenting programs to develop more helpful parenting strategies. Don't give up on bullies!

And finally, prevention of bullying is better in every way than intervention. Empathy is a complex, abstract emotion that develops over time through sensitive, nurturing, predictable, and developmentally appropriate interactions beginning from birth. Through these interactions babies fall in love with their caregivers and learn self-regulation. Toddlers learn to recognize their feelings and those of others, and express feelings using symbols instead of actions. Preschoolers learn to take another person's perspective (to know how another person feels), and gradually develop the social-emotional competence that enables them to behave altruistically and with compassion, to make friends, to be kind to others. Parents, caregivers, and teachers are absolutely essential to this gradual interactive process, as they model these behaviors and help children navigate the sometimes-troubled waters of growing up.

We are so fortunate that our community has many programs for families, for young children, in early childhood settings, and through home visits designed to encourage the development of social-emotional competence, including empathy. I hope everyone reading this will become familiar with these community resources, will make a personal commitment to do whatever he or she can to encourage the development of empathy in our youngest citizens, will model empathy in interactions with others. Let's work together to prevent bullying, one baby at a time!

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