

Comments on Bullying

Over the past few weeks, I have been thinking more than usual about the subject of bullying in schools. It seems that every day I read or hear something about the topic and how pervasive it has become in our society. I want to write a few commentaries about this from the perspective of a parent and school administrator. Some of what I write will be research based, and some of it is my opinion from having observed student interaction over a thirty year span. Before writing anything on the subject of bullying, I want to say that I am not naïve enough to believe that bullying does not occur in our school district. Regrettably, it occurs in every school district in some form or fashion, including ours. What I want to try to accomplish with these commentaries is to try to help us all understand exactly what bullying is, the types of bullying, some of the causes of bullying, and how to prevent it.

According to Norman B. Anderson, CEO of the American Psychological Association, “bullying is a form of aggressive behavior in which someone intentionally and REPEATEDLY causes another person injury or discomfort.” Notice the emphasis on repeatedly. True bullying is not a one-time event. The kind of bullying that we hear about on television that causes acute anxiety to children, even to the point of suicide, is likely to have occurred over a long period of time, and probably involved more than one bully. I get complaints from parents who say something like, “My daughter was bullied today.” If it only happened one time—it isn’t bullying. Yes, it may be rude, hurtful, and even cruel, but it doesn’t rise to the level of bullying. This is not to say that a child, or even an adult, doesn’t exhibit “bullying like” behavior, but they generally display this behavior toward many people, rather than concentrating their bullying efforts on one particular victim. Their widespread “bullying like” behavior toward many people is more a product of poor manners and being inconsiderate. I don’t mean to make light of isolated events—they should still be dealt with and corrected, but I want to establish the definition of real bullying as opposed to random instances of bad behavior and rudeness.

One researcher whose articles I read said he had trouble finding anything written about bullying prior to thirty years ago. Why? Did it exist? Did we just not talk about it? So, I started to look for answers about why bullying seems to be much more prevalent today than three or four decades ago. Interestingly enough, bullying may be partially attributed to historical events that happened and shaped our country.

My teenage years were the late sixties, and in reading about the nature and background of bullying, it seems that the world and national events that occurred during the decades of the 60's and 70's may help account for the prevalence of bullying issues we see today. Those of you who are old enough remember the anti-war protests, anti-establishment protests, sit-ins, love-ins, and all of the other forms of seeming rebellion that occurred in those turbulent years. You actually witnessed some of the causes of overt bullying in our country. In addition to the protest activity, we had the Kennedy assassinations, Martin Luther King's assassination, the Civil Rights movement, Vietnam, and Watergate. We were truly a nation that lost its innocence. Stop and think for a moment about the "good old days" of television when we laughed at I Love Lucy, Andy Griffith, The Beverly Hillbillies, and Red Skelton. The scariest thing that usually happened was when Barney Fife actually put his one bullet in his gun. Our ideal families were the two-parent homes of the Cleavers and Nelsons. The dad worked, the mom stayed home; everyone sat down to a home cooked meal each night, and the kids were tucked in at 9:00. Then came the 1970's and a total change in comedy shows. Gone were Lassie and Timmy, Ellie Mae and Jethro. A new phenomenon was the popularity of the stand-up comedian and the likes of George Carlin, Lenny Bruce, and Richard Pryor. At first they caused us to blush and be outraged—but we laughed. We started to laugh at other comedians such as Don Rickles, who used "in your face" type of humor to get applause. These comedians even picked people at random from the audience to make fun of and humiliate—and we laughed. Four letter words and other taunts, although scandalous at first, became increasingly popular—and we laughed. Today, this is the kind of humor we seem to enjoy—jokes at the expense of others. Whether we laugh at someone's weight, height, clothes, physical appearance, nothing much seems to be off limits. I can't think of one show or one comedian that doesn't joke at the expense of others. "Family" shows such as The Simpsons, Married With Children, and Roseanne are a far cry from those I watched as a teenager. I really believe these societal changes have had a substantial effect on the way we relate to each other and the way we treat each other. I know this is a very simplistic explanation for a complex subject, but I am convinced that these historical events caused behavioral changes that are partially responsible for providing a beginning of the evolution in the development of today's issue of bullying.

I think this behavior has rubbed off on our children. They think nothing of modeling the behavior they see on television and by their parents. Yes, their parents. Whether we are conscious of it or not, we have all used "put down" or "in your face" humor to laugh at others. I readily admit that I have been guilty of this behavior, and I never really thought about it until I started extensive reading about bullying and the background of bullying. I don't think we do this to be intentionally cruel; we have become accustomed to this kind of joking and accept it as the norm in our society. I challenge you to try to go one day without using this kind of humor, or being sarcastic with someone, or laughing when you hear others using this kind of

humor. For me it's tough! I haven't made it through a whole day, probably because I have become so used to doing this, I have to consciously make myself think NOT to do it. So I start all over again each day.

I remember when my son was with a high school group of friends, I was appalled at the way they talked to each other and made fun of each other. When we were alone, I would chastise him for this, and he would say, "Aw, Mom, we're just kidding each other. We all know that. Nobody thinks anything about it." They didn't seem to think anything about it or act hurt—I hope that is true. Children and teenagers who generally seem well adjusted and happy may be able to let the jokes and words "go in one ear and out the other." However, other children who may be sensitive, shy, have problems at home, handicapping conditions, or anything else that we consider to be "different" may not be all right with the jokes. We don't know what is going on inside their minds and hearts. If the teasing and harassing jokes continue for long enough and are intense enough, the outcome may be very harmful to the person being bullied and may cause them to lash out tragically against themselves or against others.

Next week—kinds of bullying, characteristics of bullying, and causes of bullying.

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