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Bullying -- Silence Is Acceptance

By Cherie Takemoto

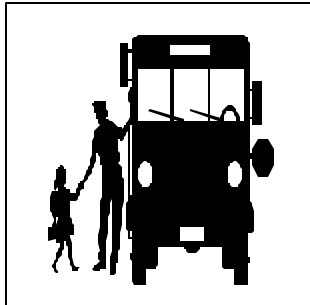
Jaime is now being home schooled. His psychiatrist says that he has depression and school phobia. His mother worries that he is falling further behind. She wonders if he will ever be able to go back to school.

Maria is caught with a knife at school. When asked why she brought it, she replies that she was threatened by some girls and brought it to school for protection.

Although she used to like to go to school, Beka now comes home and cries when she gets off the bus. She is nonverbal and her mother doesn't know what is wrong. One of the other mothers calls her because her son, who is verbal, says that the teacher is yelling at Beka because she cannot control her bowel movements.

Jamichel tells his friend's mother that he is thankful for the ride home. Just before she offered to take him home, he was trying to get out of having to fight a couple of boys who challenged him after school.

Though the names were changed, the above parents have called PEATC in recent months, frantic about what to do about bullying/victim behavior. Bullying is repeated, negative actions directed toward someone perceived as weaker. It can take the form of physical, verbal, or social aggression. Too often, other students or adults ignore bullying behavior. Yet it affects a large number of children. A recent study by the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development found that 29% of students reported being bullied and/or victimized.



“Silence is acceptance,” declared Dr. Sally Murphy, a George Mason University professor, at a recent PEATC workshop on bullying. Consider these findings:

- There is bullying in **all** schools. Age, class, race, gender, or geography do not matter.
- Without intervention, bullies are more likely to be convicted of serious crimes. Murphy cited a study in which 60% of boys characterized as bullies in grades 6-9 had at least one conviction by age 24.
- Victims often develop emotional, social, and academic problems.
- Most bullies are exposed to violence at home.
- A Secret Service study of school shooters shows that two-thirds of the attackers claimed they were victims of bullying.

Victims can be passive, lacking in social skills, insecure, and anxious, according to Murphy.

These types of victims do nothing to defend themselves when bullied. Another type of victim can seem to provoke abuse by pestering or irritating others. If picked on, these victims will fight back. However, unlike bullies, they always lose. In addition, they usually don't believe adults can help and rarely report being bullied. Sometimes they carry weapons to protect themselves.

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What about the bullies? Murphy observes that bullies at school are often victims at home. They are often strong,

confident, and dominant; they enjoy making others suffer and blame the victim for provoking the attack. Their good communication skills allow them to talk their way out of trouble.

Silence is acceptance. Bullying is a behavior that cannot be ignored. People who see or experience bullying need to step in and address this issue. The effects of bullying can lead to serious and long term consequences including depression, low self-esteem, shyness, poor academic achievement, isolation, threatened or attempted suicide, and retaliatory violence. Experts in bullying agree that the best way to curb bullying is to implement a whole school approach. One person is not going to make much of a difference. Stopping the bully is everyone's job. How does one build support? Raising awareness and getting the school and community involved is a good way to get started. According to Murphy, one way to do this is for schools to survey students and teachers about the level of bully/victim behaviors at a school. It can be an eye-opener and start discussions at the school and community level and lead to action aimed at curtailing bullying at the school, class, and individual level.

What are some ways a parent can get involved when a child has been bullied? The box below has some suggestions for how you can help your child. A good,

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yet difficult start, is to be there to listen to your child and take his or her concerns seriously. Victims often feel a sense of helplessness around solving problems from being bullied. Your support and help with problem solving will go a long way toward keeping communication open between you and your child. Murphy has some suggestions for working with the school:

1. Go to the school. Present yourself in a way that shows that you want to work together to solve the problem.
2. If your child reports an adult at school who is not taking action against bullying behavior, talk to that person first. If you are unsure about where to start, a school counselor might suggest a good approach for your child's situation.
3. If you don't feel like you have support within the school, work with other parents. In any approach, however, one should try to work with the school to address the situation positively.

A friend of my son told me about two boys who had been harassing and threatening him. We discussed his options. If they caught up with him, would he fight back? Of course he would! And when the teachers came to break up the fight, would they care who started it? Probably not. We decided that Mr. Williams, the assistant principal, would be a good person to talk to about this boy's predicament. The next day, the boy thanked me for helping him solve the problem.

Later, I called Mr. Williams, the assistant principal at Swanson Middle School in Arlington. He said, "When a

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child feels they are verbally abused, even if a child is exaggerating, there is some truth to it. Everyone is constantly seeking security. I listen to the child and investigate. I have had some of the most heartfelt conversations with the children who have come to complain. I tell students that they have the right to be who they are. They have no obligation to tolerate anyone insulting them, verbally abusing them or threatening them. And we must intervene with the bully. If we don't, we don't give the bully a chance to change their behavior."

Silence is acceptance. In the long run, we can't afford not to confront bullying behavior. The futures for both bullies and victims may depend on what we do (or don't do) today.

HELP YOUR CHILDREN TO...

- **Be assertive.** Teach your child how to respond to bullying behavior. Ask the principal or school counselor for suggestions for teaching assertiveness skills.
- **Be a friend in need.** Encourage your children to look out for their friends and support students who are being bullied. They should tell an adult when they know of a student who is being seriously bullied, either physically or verbally.
- **Don't show emotions.** Help your children understand that they can deprive bullies of the satisfaction of seeing your child's hurt or angry reaction by not openly reacting to taunts or insults.
- **Never be a bully.** If you observe your child being cruel to others, address the bullying behavior. If the behavior continues, it may be necessary to seek counseling.
- **Build self-esteem.** Children who feel good about themselves, and show it, aren't as likely to become victims of bullies, who prefer easier targets. Build their self-esteem by giving them genuine praise and unconditional love.

From the National Association of Elementary School Principals "Bullying Report to Parents"

Resources

C. Sally Murphy, Ph.D., Counseling & Development Program, George Mason University provided much of the information for this article. She can be reached at cmurphy@gmu.edu or 703-993-3826.

Center for Effective Collaboration and Practice (<http://cecp.air.org>) has a number of publications that they have developed with a number of associations and the US Department of Education and the Department of Justice. *Early Warning, Timely Response: A Guide to Safe Schools* and *Safeguarding our Children: An Action Guide* are two popular publications that can be accessed through their website. These publications can also be ordered by calling ED Pubs (877-443-7827)

Safe Schools Healthy Students Action Center (<http://www.sshsac.org>) is a technical assistance center funded by the US Departments of Justice, Education, and Health and Human Services. Call the center toll-free at 877-339-SSHS or complete the online request form if you want personal help finding ideas, information, technical assistance or training materials.

Also good places to call for support and information about bullying, mental health or protection against bullying are Federation of Families for Children's Mental Health (703-684-7710) and the National Mental Health Association (800-969-NMHA.)



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