

## Stepping Stones, Winter 2010

### Stomp out bullying

When we think of bullying, many of us might picture a middle or high school student picking on a smaller kid, perhaps taking the smaller kid's lunch money, knocking his books out of his arms, or pushing him into a locker. However, times have changed: Bullying is starting at an earlier age and is becoming more aggressive.

Although bullying tends to reach its high point during the middle school years, elementary school-age children often see first-hand this degrading and humiliating kind of behavior. It may be hard to fathom that your elementary school child could be being exposed to bullying, either as a victim or a bystander, or that he might even be the bully himself. Yet, as one elementary school social worker explains, "Bullying is happening in the elementary schools, and it's much more aggressive and cruel than in years past."

To make matters worse the electronic age has given kids even more ways to be mean. Technologies such as the Internet, instant messaging, text messaging, social networking sites (Facebook, MySpace, etc.), and cell phones with cameras, to name a few, have only expanded the way kids spread rumors and harass each other.

#### The signs of bullying

Bullying can take many forms. Here are some of the more common characteristics of bullying:

**Physical:** Hitting, kicking, tripping, shoving, stealing, or damaging one's personal property.

**Verbal:** Using words to hurt, humiliate, or ridicule someone, such as name calling or insults.

**Relational:** Spreading rumors, rejecting a person from a peer group, manipulating friends and relationships (i.e., posting rude or embarrassing comments or pictures on social networking site for all "friends" to see, making suggestions via e-mail or text message to "de-friend" someone.)

**Prejudicial:** Making racial slurs, making fun of cultural, religious or other differences.

**Sexual harassment:** Using suggestive words or inappropriate touch, e-mailing or texting inappropriate pictures of self or someone else.

Bullying usually occurs between individuals who are not friends. The bully may be bigger, tougher, or have the power to exclude others from their social group. Lots of kids joke around with their friends, which might include innocent name-calling or rough-housing but these incidents are not necessarily bullying. Bullying has three characteristics that set it apart:

1. There is a power difference between the bully and the victim.
2. The bully intends to hurt, embarrass, or humiliate the other person.
3. The behavior is repeated—with others or with the same person over time.

The National School Safety Center explains that boys and girls tend to bully in different ways. The authors of the Center's *Fight the Bully Battle* fact sheet explain that "traditionally, boys tend to bully in direct or physical ways, and girls tend to bully in emotional or indirect ways."

Teachers, social workers, and school psychologists say that derogatory name-calling, exclusion, and relational bullying, increasingly common among girls during the upper elementary years, are the types of bullying they see most often in elementary school.

"I've seen a group of elementary school girls snicker, laugh, and point at another girl in the cafeteria line," an elementary school social worker explains. "While they didn't physically hurt her, I'm certain the other girl's self-esteem was shaken as she racked her brain trying to figure out why they were laughing at her."

Whether the bullying is direct or indirect, the key component of bullying is that the physical or psychological intimidation occurs repeatedly over time to create an ongoing pattern of harassment and abuse.

### **How do we stop the bullying?**

Getting picked on—once considered just a part of being a kid—is no longer being shrugged off so easily. Today, educators, counselors, and parents know that victims of bullying often carry the emotional scars well into their adult lives.

Various reports and studies have shown that nearly 15 percent of students are either bullied regularly or are initiators of bullying behavior. School educators say that the best way to help prevent bullying is early education.

All New York State schools are required to have clear policies on how bullying will be handled. (Check your school's policy handbook for more information.) They must also conduct lessons on character education in grades K-12.

During the elementary years, character education lessons teach children how to resolve conflicts peacefully, to accept and embrace others' differences, and to work well as part of a team. Children who learn tolerance—at home and at school—and can get along with all kinds of people are less likely to become bullies as teens and adults. Additionally, tolerance is a must for students in the 21<sup>st</sup> century as our country continues to reach overseas to work with peers of different nationalities.

Another goal of character education in our elementary schools is to help children develop good coping skills that they can use if they are victims of bullying or if they witness bullying.

Here are a few ways to tell if your child is being bullied:

- Subtle changes in behavior, such as being withdrawn, anxious, preoccupied, having a loss of interest in school or in a favorite pastime.

- Coming home with bruises and scratches, torn or dirtied clothing, or missing or damaged school or personal items (i.e., books, cell phones, new sneakers)
- A loss of appetite.
- Excessive trips to the school nurse, or faking sickness to stay home from school.
- Loss of sleep, bad dreams, crying in his sleep.
- Afraid or reluctant to go to school in the morning.
- Feeling lonely
- Sensitive or withdrawn when asked about his or her day at school.

(Adapted from the National PTA, <http://www.pta.org>)

If you've learned your child is being bullied, here are some ways to help your child cope:

- First, listen carefully to what your child is saying about the bullying incidents because different situations will warrant different approaches. For example, if your child is being picked on by another child while on the playground, you might suggest that your child move to a different area of the playground – or perhaps play closer to the playground monitor. Often times the presence of an authority figure is enough to end the situation. However, if the bullying doesn't resolve itself or if your child is getting physical threats or abuse, you should alert school administrators immediately for appropriate intervention with both children and their parents.
- Teach your children how to be safe and stand up for themselves and others. For example, look a bully in the eye, stand tall, and use a firm voice to discourage the bully. Oftentimes bullies will back away when they realize their victim is not an easy target.
- Encourage your child to get involved in activities with peers and form meaningful relationships. Bullies tend to pick on children who seem to be loners.
- Encourage your child to make friends with the person bullying them. Treat the bully kindly, like you would a new classmate instead of as an enemy.
- Use humor during a threatening situation. Try to make the incident funny and laugh about it.
- Walk away from the situation or threat and simply do not get involved.
- Try to act carefree by agreeing with the bully and letting insults go ignored and don't fight back.
- If the confrontation could become violent, scream or yell for help. This will end the conflict before it goes too far.

(Adapted from *Why is Everyone Always Picking on Me? A Guide to Handling Bullies*, by Dr. Terrence Webster-Doyle.)

### **Encourage your child to take a stand against bullying**

Traditionally, bullying prevention programs were focused on the bully and the victim. However, new approaches now shine a light on the important role a witness or bystander can play in stopping bullies in their tracks. Bystanders can be just as harmed by watching bullying as they are by being bullied. Witnesses often feel powerless and may experience fear, sadness, anger, guilt or shame at not being able to stop the incident. However, standing up for others can take a lot of courage.

Encouraging your children to help prevent bullying is admirable. However, there are a lot of factors, such as fear of retaliation, that can discourage your children from acting on what they've been taught. Here are some ways you can help your children take a stand without being afraid:

- **Talk with your children about bullying.** Ask them about what they witness at school. Keep the lines of communication open so that you will likely be the one they confide in.
- **Let your children know it is OK to report bullying.** Make it safe for your children to tell you and other adults about things they have seen at school and what bothers them. Listen carefully to what they are saying and guide your child in seeing how dangerous bullying can be if not stopped.
- **Help your child empathize with the victim.** It's much easier for children to ignore a situation if the person being bullied is not a friend. Talk with your children about how they would feel if they or one of their close friends were in the victim's shoes.
- **Work with your child to develop strategies to help those being bullied.** For instance, if rumors are being spread about someone, you can counsel your children to counter it with the truth. Help the victim stick up for him- or herself by providing support.
- **Enlist the help of others.** Bystanders far outnumber the bullies. With children who are reluctant to help stop bullying, the aid of a sympathetic friend or two might make the difference.
- **Encourage your child to be proactive.** Children at the elementary age love to belong to groups and clubs, and feel like they are part of something. Encourage your children to start an anti-bullying club and talk to their school's counselor or principal for guidance and support to stomp out bullying before it can even start.