

THERAPY MATTERS: The Very Real Problem of Bullying  
By Sue Mayo and Helen Muscolo

“Sticks and stones may break your bones, but words can never hurt you!”

If only this were the truth, bullying may not be the issue it is today. Social media has given rise to instant and wide-spread bullying. Words do indeed hurt and have driven some children to a point so desperate that they feel there is no other option than to take their life. Bullying does not take place only through social media, however. Schoolyards are fertile ground for both bullies and the bullied. What causes one child to be a bully, while the other is the bullied?

Parents, the answer to this question may lie with you. Often the bully acts out and torments others due to their own sense of insecurity and low self-esteem. Very often, bullies are made to feel “less than” in their own families. In order to establish a feeling of superiority, they act out aggressively and denigrate others in an attempt to feel better about themselves. A bully’s victim is very often a child who is perceived as “different” from the norm. Different can take on many characteristics. These can range from having red hair, a different ethnicity or religion, learning disabilities, to being gay.

Most schools have a zero tolerance towards bullying, which is commendable. However, policy and practice do not always intersect. We continue to hear about schools who turn a blind eye to the bullying and schools who do not support the student who comes forward or trivializes the issue. We recall families who were forced to home-school their child or transfer to a new school in order to escape the bullying.

Regardless of a school’s response, the real solution to combat bullying lies with parental involvement and guidance. The “zero tolerance” message needs to start at home. Parents have a responsibility to teach their children what is and what is not acceptable, and such training must begin when kids are young. Most parents can understand the importance of teaching three-year-old Johnny to use words and not his fists when he is angry. Unfortunately, far fewer parents seize the opportunity to educate eight-year-old Janie on why teasing someone who is not good at jump rope is both cruel and unkind. We strongly encourage parents to regularly observe their child’s social interactions, beginning at an early age. Questions to ask yourself include but are not limited to: how does my child treat others, is my child more of a leader or a follower, how does my child respond to winning and losing, is my child inclusive or exclusive of other kids, and how does my child handle conflicts.

As children grow older, the need for parental oversight only increases. The middle school years are particularly prone to a rise in bullying behaviors, as both peer pressure and the need to fit in intensifies. Cell phones, the internet, and social media sites such as Facebook become easy options for bullies, and it is these areas in particular where schools may rightfully claim it is beyond their control. The responsibility, once again, lies with the parents. Sadly, too many parents appear helpless in this endeavor, as though they are fearful of causing a rift with their child and/or of invading their privacy. Parents, we remind you that your job is to be your child’s parent, **not** their friend. We have had to “coach” parents into actions such as accessing and reviewing their child’s Facebook page or text messages – actions that we feel should be fairly routine in households where there are young teenagers. This is not the same as reading a private diary or journal. Instant communication via the internet usually has many viewers and parents need to know what their child is saying to the world.

Parental involvement is also a necessary component in helping victims withstand the pain of bullying. A strong, supportive, and loving family environment can go a long way to counteract the cruel words of one’s peers. The key is for parents to **listen** to their child talk about their experiences, and not jump to conclusions that their child somehow encouraged or invited the bullying behavior. Try to keep your child talking – because the tragedies tend to happen when the young person shuts down. Offer your child a different way of looking at the situation by educating them on why bullies bully. Remind your child of all of the special qualities that you see in him/her to help inoculate them from their aggressor. Parents can also help a child in problem-solving how to deal with the bullying behavior. Encourage your child’s healthy friendships and interests, along with the use of the “buddy system” when walking the school hallways. Help your child practice assertive yet non-aggressive responses to bullies, and remember that “tattling” can sometimes backfire on older kids (although may be absolutely necessary in cases where physical safety is at risk or the bullying behavior has become extreme).

The face of bullying has changed in the past 20+ years. Kids were picked on, ostracized, and/or physically hurt. Usually this involved a few children ganging up on another child who was viewed as “different”. It did not become “viral” and parents typically did not become involved. However, times have changed and responses need to change. Bullies need to be educated about their effect on others, parents need to not tolerate bullying behavior, and victims (the bullied) need to be taught ways to stand up for themselves and not shut down. Everyone needs support - parents, bullies, and the bullied - for lives not to be ruined.

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Originally published in the Martinez News Gazette, October 2011