

Getting beyond bullying

Parents and teachers can intervene to help both bullies and their victims

By Heather World

When Eden Steele started teaching in San Diego in the late '60s, she heard adults making excuses for bullies—"boys will be boys"—or telling bullies to repeat rote apologies. Victims were told, "just ignore it."

Now headline-grabbing stories of school violence have parents, teachers, and administrators rethinking bullying, from hurtful comments to physical attacks, and understanding that both bully and victim need help.

Parents and teachers can work with children when they're young to prevent dangerous harassment later on. Steele, for example, consults with Interactions for Peace, a nonprofit whose anti-bullying program starts with kindergartners.

Parents and educators offer the following tips on dealing with bullying.

Talk to your child's teachers and caregivers. Maritza Lozano, a San Francisco child care provider and mother of two, says she didn't know her son was being harassed at school until the staff at his after-school program called her. He was acting out when given directions and had thrown a book at one counselor.

"She asked, 'how is he doing at school?'" Lozano says. "That's when I called the teacher."

Lozano learned that at school other children taunted her son because he sometimes sat quietly, away from other kids. After the call, "the teachers told the children to stop," says Lozano. "Now, two years later, he is friends with those children."

Look for subtle signs. Sometimes parents and teachers don't notice subtle signs that a student is being harassed, says Linda Young, a second-grade teacher and mother in El Cerrito.

"Kids can be silent and really terrified," she says. "I've had kids complaining of stomachaches and that kind of thing and not really know why."

When Young notices these signs, she starts by talking to the child. "They often don't talk right away," she says. "You just open the door. Kids sometimes blame themselves for what's going on, and they don't want to tell."

Teach kids how to stand up to bullying. Steele's program teaches children to have the confidence to stand up for themselves in ways other than pushing, shoving, and name-calling.

"It's about giving the skills and confidence to kids, so adults don't always have to be involved," she says. "When the culture of the group is that we're going to work together in a more peaceful way, then the students feel willing to jump in and say 'stop!' [to bullying.]"

Sit children down to talk out conflicts. Sometimes mediators-teachers or fellow students-can help diffuse tension that has led to bullying.

"Usually it's a communication breakdown," says Mark Urwick, who has taught middle school in Torrance and Burbank. "I had one girl named Vicki who was very big into bullying other girls. A lot of it was that she didn't have friends. Once you got her into a room and she could tell her side of the story and they could tell their side, the tension wasn't there anymore. She was bullying them for attention."

Steele creates a "talking circle," for children to share their thoughts. At the request of a kindergartner, Steele called a talking circle to discuss why the children were picking on a little boy named Nicholas. Having worked on their communication skills and self-confidence, the children spoke freely. Some admitted to thinking Nicholas dressed oddly, for example. Nicholas was able to tell the children that their teasing made him feel bad.

"The other kids totally stopped when they were confronted with the issue that this behavior is making someone else feel bad," Steele says.

Help children who bully learn empathy. Wynnetta Hartman and her husband live in Fullerton with their seven children, including four foster children. Hartman says elementary-school-age children can be quite cruel because they don't really know better yet.

"I think the most helpful and effective thing to do is to try to make them understand how the other person feels," she says.

She once fostered a nine-year-old boy, who at one point told Hartman's four-year-old daughter that no one liked her and everyone only pretended to be her friend.

Hartman says she "hit the roof" when she overheard the remark. Nonetheless, "I talked to him about how that made her feel," she says. "I was trying to get him to learn empathy."

Make students acknowledge their role. "Do not protect the child from itself," says Jan Goodman, who worked as an elementary school teacher and principal for 20 years in Berkeley. "When a child does something mean and is never held accountable or given a chance to make amends, that has a severe psychological effect."

Goodman addressed bullying by bringing the bully and victim together in her office. She would tell them to turn their differing recollections into a written document with one description of the incident and a remedy. She then read this contract back to the them and sent copies home.

Goodman remembers one boy who called another boy's father "retard," then, when this comment produced tears, followed up with "sissy." When Goodman pulled the two together, the name-caller learned his victim's father had died.

"He said, 'Man, am I sorry!'" she says. "I think he even invited the kid to do something with his own dad. Kids have unlimited room in their hearts for empathy and compassion, if they're given the opportunity."

Give the bully responsibility. Children who bully often feel powerless outside school, says Goodman, and a teacher can worsen the situation with snap judgments and punishment. Sometimes bullies are "angry, but not at their target. They're angry at situations where they've had no power."

Parents and teachers can try to understand what is making the child angry. Goodman also saw results when she set up daily behavior monitoring charts listing positive expectations ("Speak respectfully," for example). Both the teacher and the child then assessed the child's behavior.

"Students have to feel power in these situations," she says. "Otherwise we just have mini-prisons."

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