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Can Bullying Be Stopped?

By Jennifer Wake



Photo J. Wake

Sending a child off to school for the first time can fill most parents with a sense of apprehension, but the anguish one Moraga mom felt over the course of two and half years when dropping off her son at a local elementary school, knowing he was being continually bullied there, was palpable.

"We were desperate to get him help, but also keep him safe at school. The bully also targeted [my son] at sports and got other boys involved so it became more and more difficult as he got older," said the mom, who asked that her son's and her own name remain anonymous. By the fourth grade, her son, who had always been talkative and open, became depressed - to the point of talking about hurting himself.

and third grade, and the bullying having continued, the mom decided to pull her son out of public school.

Confront Problems

A report by the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development estimates that 1.6 million children in grades six through 10 are bullied at least once a week in the United States. Seventh-grade students reported the highest rates of bullying or harassment, according to Kidsdata.org, a program of Lucille Packard Foundation for Children's Health.

Margie Ryerson, an Orinda marriage and family therapist, suggests that parents teach their children problem-solving skills and how to confront problems rather than deny them.

"You want to help him [or her] avoid feeling like a victim," she said. "Provide a positive, peaceful environment at home. Keep communication open with your child so that he or she has a safe place to talk and get support and ideas for handling the situation.

"Hopefully, the child will let a parent know immediately and won't suffer in silence," added Ryerson. "In my experience, unfortunately parents don't find out early on."

She says that one female high school sophomore she worked with was bullied over six months online and at school. Her parents didn't know anything about it until she attempted suicide.

Cyberbullying on the Rise

A 2012 Indicators of School Crime and Safety report stated that an adult was notified in only 40 percent of bullying incidents. And because of a rise in technology use, cyberbullying, which often involves disrupting a student's social world by sharing embarrassing information or leaving someone out of a social circle, is much more common.

Saint Mary's College Counseling Department Chair Suzy Thomas, Ph.D., doesn't believe cyberbullying is necessarily more destructive than other types of bullying, but she says the anonymity of cyberbullying makes it harder to identify the bully or bullies involved. "And the ways in which images and texts can spread so quickly and so widely also means that cyberbullying can have an immediate and far-reaching effect as well," she said.

Parents need to look for changes in their child's demeanor, explained Ryerson. It can be more difficult in the cases of cyberbullying. "A younger child may give hints that someone is being mean to him online, but older children are more private."

According to StopBullying.gov, a website facilitated by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, signs of potential bullying include inexplicable injuries; lost or destroyed clothing, books, electronics or jewelry; frequent headaches or stomach aches, feeling sick or faking illness; changes in eating habits, like suddenly skipping meals or binge eating; difficulty sleeping; declining grades; sudden loss of friends or avoidance of social situations; and self-destructive behaviors.

"The most important intervention for parents is to talk to their children, and not assume that the problem will resolve itself on its own," Thomas said. When parents of an Orinda middle school student found out that rumors were being spread around campus that their child had been molested, they contacted the school counselor, the principal, the superintendent and even the State Board of Education. "I believe that the most important thing we did was to stand up and support our daughter," the mother, who asked not to be named, said.

How Bullying Happens

Bullying happens when someone does something mean, but repeats those actions because a victim is unwilling or unable to stop it due to an imbalance of power, says Kevin Weinert, who facilitates anti-bullying seminars at local schools. "Some bullying situations start as conflicts, however if participants feel they need to 'win' the conflict, rather than resolve it, bullying is the likely endgame as one participant accumulates all the power." Parents need to understand that everyone is capable of bullying. "Your child is not immune, but it also means that your child is not evil, nor are you a failure as a parent [if your child is bullying someone.]"

"Teach your child empathy," said Weinert. "Ask questions like, 'How would you feel if . . .?'" and "How do you think they felt when . . .?" Do these exercises under non-stress situations, when a child is not in trouble or being confronted. Make it a part of the normal conversations you have every day."

"This is really an issue that is connected to larger discussions about power, violence, and how we all treat one another," said Thomas. "Students learn many of their behaviors from adults, and so interventions must be both specific to each case but also more general in terms of the kind of world we want them to inherit."

The bottom line? Get involved, said the Moraga mom whose son was bullied. "Be present - at school, at sports, in your neighborhood. Talk to your child. Talk to other parents - about your kid, the other children, about the school. Educate yourself. Bullying is serious and shouldn't be ignored.

"I have worked hard to build up [my son's] confidence," she said, "but it will take years to undo the damage that was done."

For more information about combating bullying, and steps children and adults can take, visit the following websites:

www.cccoe.k12.ca.us/edsvcs/bullying.html

www.StopBullying.gov

Common Mistakes Adults Make When Trying to Stop Bullying

Once bullying is identified and an adult is involved, the Contra Costa County Bully Prevention Task Force, created by the Contra Costa County Office of Education Coordinating Council, states that there are specific steps adults can take to keep children safe, like separating the individuals immediately and collecting facts separately.

Common mistakes adults make at school include:

Forcing other children to say publicly what they saw

Talking to the children involved together, rather than individually

Making the children involved apologize or patch up relations on the spot

Blaming the student for being bullied

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