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Three Wrong Ways to Handle Bullying

There are three common myths about how children and their caregivers should respond to bullies. It is necessary to understand these to be able to address the problem of bullies.

Myth #1 Bullies children can solve their own problems by learning to fight back

Fact: Children are born with different dispositional personality types. Some are naturally outgoing, other inherently shy. Some are loud and demanding, other are generally reserved, and there are all ranges in-between. Bullying victims as a group tend to reside more on the latter end of the spectrum, they shy and reserved. Most are naturally shy, sensitive, caring and passive. They tend to be non-violent and have personalities averse to conflict. It's precisely what makes them such convenient victims.

Expecting these kids to suddenly change who they are and become aggressive is a lot like asking a gazelle to attack the lion. These traits are one's which we should be relishing in kids, rather than be encouraging the sensitive and non-aggressive student to act more like their bullies.

Furthermore, asking a bullied child to defend themselves ignores the realities of the situation. Seldom is bullying a one-on-one prospect, and it's never a fair fight. It's more like 5 to 1, or 10 to 1, or 30 to 1. What's a child to do: start a war with half the school? Bullying exists because there is a power differential (physical, psychological, or social), whether real or perceived. This isn't fixed with a pep talk or karate lesson.

It also ignores the fact that many bullying victims who fought back have found themselves expelled, in the hospital, in legal trouble, or in prison for murder when an especially well-placed punch killed their tormenter. All kids need to learn how to stand up for themselves to some degree, but expecting bullying victims to solve their problems by fighting back is bad advice.

Myth #2: Getting "tough" on bullies and passing new laws will solve the problem

Fact: Get-tough laws always do far more harm than good, and abusing other through bullying is already illegal under current laws. The only thing such policies do is single out a select few kids to destroy as scapegoats for what is in reality a widespread problem. These initiatives are a way of passing the buck; absolving ourselves of responsibility by selecting some patsies to blame and destroy.

Bullies are not bad kids, just misguided kids, and the last thing we need in this world is more self-righteous anger that will destroy more children. Moreover, the cold hard truth is that we adults are largely to blame for this epidemic. We set the example, and it's not always a good one. Youth pick on those they consider strange because they can see adults do the same thing. They bully rivals because that is what they see people in movies and television shows doing. It's a little bit hypocritical to try to hold our kids to a higher standard than society itself abides by.

Myth #3: Parents should handle the situation on their own

Fact: Another common mistake is for parents to rush off guns blazing and assume they are helping their child. This instinct is understandable, but the results are never what you expect.

Abruptly calling up other parents to angrily tell them about their son or daughter's bullying often elicits defensive attitudes, and may only serve to draw all adults into the conflict as well. This approach sometimes works in elementary school, but more often than not, it will only exacerbate the bullying. You've now labeled your child a "snitch" and a "mama's boy (girl)" in addition to everything else they must deal with.

Ultimately, bullying is a peer problem and the solutions must involve your child. This does not mean adults should be absent or disinvolved in the situation, but their participation must be handled tactfully. Any involvement you have and any solution you come up with should be approved by your teen ahead of time. Parents should take a support role, offering ideas and resources on how to handle the situation. If this includes having you talk to other parents to try and negotiate a truce, so be it. Bit it's their life and their peer group, and they should be in charge of choosing the solution. After all, it's your kids who must live with the results either way.