

Your Personal Coach

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In the more than two years that I have been writing this column, I have never gone back to revise or repeat one. Even when out of town or on vacation, I've schlepped my laptop, written on the beach (or plane, or train, or automobile), and dutifully sent a new column to the editor. My commitment is to bring fresh, new material to my loyal readers every week. This is all by way of explanation to make this point: In order for me to repeat a lot of information that has already appeared in a previous column, I better have a darn good reason. There is. Our community faces a serious problem with bullies in our schools. Over the past several weeks, I've encountered children who have told me stories – with tears in their eyes – about how they have been frightened, intimidated, and humiliated by bullies in their classrooms and playgrounds. This problem is right here in our own community, and it has to stop.

It is unfortunate that too many parents (and even some teachers and administrators) ignore teasing, writing it off as just a part of normal childhood experiences. Mild good-natured teasing will not harm most children, and in fact, these interactions teach about group culture and peer interactions.

But when teasing and bullying escalate to the point where some students are victimized by repeated acts of antagonism and exclusion, it can have serious, long-lasting, and extremely negative psychological effects. According to a US Justice Department report, 160,000 American school children stated that they were afraid to go to school because they were threatened, embarrassed, and/or humiliated by their peers. Another recent study showed that 88% of middle and high school students had witnessed violence among the school population, and 77% had themselves been bullied. Bullies cannot be tolerated. No one has the right to make another person feel uncomfortable or unsafe.

Experts now understand that bullying is one of the leading causes of aggressive behavior. If you think about the Columbine school shootings in Littleton, Colorado in 1999, you may remember that both Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold – the shooters – left notes that described their rage toward students who had excluded and bullied them throughout high school.

The apparent link between school bullying and acts of violence by students gained added significance with the fatal shooting at Ricori High School in Cold Spring, Minnesota just last fall. Students, who bring guns to school with intent to kill or harm others, have often been the targets of bullying themselves. This is not to say that all those who are left out and teased will express their anger through violence. But bullying sets the stage for acts of violence as an immature and tragic way of expressing rage and pain.

In some ways we have idealized children. We see their innocence and potential, and overlook the fact that bullies can behave in ways that make the characters from *Lord of the Flies* look well mannered and benevolent.

Children should not have to deal with bullies and teasers on their own. Parents, teachers, and school administrators have an important role to play in ending the cycle of teasing – low self-esteem – more teasing.

Here are some steps I think we can take to solve this problem in our community:

1. If you are the parent of a school-age child, talk to him/her. Ask about bullying in their school. If your child is a victim, help him/her cope with this challenge by modeling healthy conflict resolution skills and building strong attachments. Find ways of boosting your child's self-esteem by exploring activities and hobbies where he/she can be a star. Talk with his teacher and principal about what's being done to stop bullying in this school. If your child has any special challenges – for example, a learning disability or inadequate social skills -- consider working with a counselor who can help him/her become more empowered and confident, and who will help him/her learn to control behaviors that may contribute to being chosen as a victim.
2. If your child is a bully, find out why. Bullies usually have significantly low self-esteem and they attempt to feel better about themselves by making someone else feel worse. Get to the bottom of the problem. These kids are also at risk, and will likely continue with their aggressive behavior unless they get some help.
3. Become active in the PTA and other parent/teacher groups to establish a no-tolerance zone for bullying and teasing at your child's school and on the school bus.
4. Regardless of whether you have a school-aged child or not, as a member of this community, get involved. A number of states have enacted anti-bullying laws. There's strength in numbers. Petition your local authorities and School Board to insist on having laws passed that prevent future violence among our kids. Accept nothing less than no-tolerance for bullies. A number of excellent programs have been instituted in numerous school systems around the country. Check out the Committee for Children based in Seattle, Washington for some excellent resources (<http://www.cfchildren.org>).

Adults have the responsibility to send the message that bullies are not running the schools, and that all kids have the right to be safe from taunts and threats. This is our civic duty to our younger generation. What will you do?

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