

Your Personal Coach

Kathleen Brehony, Ph.D.

An open letter to students, parents, teachers, school administrators, and members of the community:

In the midst of brutally hot summer weather, it's hard to comprehend that, for most students, a familiar fall ritual is just around the corner. The beginning of the new school year is just a week or so away. As parents and students scurry to buy new school clothes and supplies and as teachers put the finishing touches on lesson plans, it seems a good time to readdress a topic that is near and dear to my heart: Bullying in schools.

As a clinical psychologist, I work often with kids whose problems with depression, anxiety, and low self-esteem are caused by (or at least made worse by) rejection from peers and victimization by bullies. It breaks my heart to see tears run down the cheek of some young kid who is afraid to go to school, or eats lunch alone, or is shunned and excluded from social relationships.

I have observed that far too many parents (and even some teachers and administrators) ignore even brutal levels of 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, physical violence, 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 towards students who had excluded and bullied them throughout high school.

The apparent link between school bullying and acts of gun violence by students gained added significance with the fatal shooting at Ricori High School in Cold Spring, Minnesota two years ago. 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.

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Parents can model healthy conflict resolution skills and help their children build strong attachments. Mothers and fathers can help their children discover ways of boosting self-esteem by exploring with activities and hobbies where their children can be stars. If you believe your son or daughter is a victim of bullies, talk with his/her teacher and principal. Engage the parents of the bullies – their kids are also at risk, and will likely continue with their aggressive behavior unless they get some help. Children who bully others are more likely to get into fights, vandalize property, and drop out of school. Approximately 60% of boys who were bullies in middle school have at least one criminal conviction by the age of 24.

It's important that we raise our consciousness and become more sensitive to the negative impact of bullying on children. These behaviors are not a rite of passage, an unavoidable reality of growing up. All members of the community must step up, take a stand, and lend a hand. We must work together to establish a zero-tolerance zone for bullying and teasing at all of our county school and on the school buses.

A number of states have enacted anti-bullying laws – has yours? If not, get your community involved to have laws passed that prevent future violence among our kids. 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>). Also go to the US Department of Health and Human Services website about bullying: www.stopbullyingnow.hrsa.gov. Adults need to send the message that bullies are not running our schools, and that all children have the right to be safe from taunts and threats.

Send your personal coaching questions to kathleen@fullpotentialliving.com or call 473-4004. Kathleen is a personal and executive coach, clinical psychologist, and writer. (©2003 Kathleen Brehony. All Rights Reserved.) Columns are archived at www.fullpotentialliving.com.