

Your Personal Coach

Kathleen Brehony, Ph.D.

Dear Kathleen,

My ten-year-old son – Eddie -- has Attention Deficit Disorder and is constantly being teased and bullied by his schoolmates. He sometimes throws tantrums in his classroom and often comes home crying. He is taking medication for the ADD and seeing a counselor. But I know the constant teasing is contributing to his low self-esteem and behavior problems. What else can my wife and I do to help him?

-- Concerned Father

Dear Dad,

You have every reason to be disturbed about the way your son is being treated by his peers. It is unfortunate that too many parents (and even some teachers) 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 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 just last month. 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.

The fact that you are aware of Eddie's situation with his classmates gives him a tremendous resource. I hope that he knows that he can talk with you and his mother about his feelings. I'm also glad to know that Eddie is working with a counselor who can help him become more empowered, confident, and learn to control behaviors that may contribute to his being chosen as a victim.

Your Personal Coach

Kathleen Brehony

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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.

Parents can model healthy conflict resolution skills and help their children build strong attachments. Find ways of boosting Eddie's self-esteem by exploring with him activities and hobbies where he can be a star. Talk with his 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. Work together to establish a no-tolerance zone for bullying and teasing at Eddie's school and on the school bus.

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>). Adults need to send the message that bullies are not running the school, and that all kids 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.