

BULLYING

A Primer for Parents

A pass-along handout for parents, from TEACHING TOLERANCE magazine.

By Dana Williams

Cyberbullying is the latest version of an age-old phenomenon. By age 4 or 5, children learn to use name-calling or teasing as a form of social power. And that power continues, through elementary and middle school, on into high school — in the classroom, the cafeteria, school hallways, on playgrounds and school buses, and, more recently, on computer screens and cell phones.

While many generations have viewed this phenomenon of social cruelty as a childhood rite of passage, research has shown the early isolation some children experience can follow them throughout their academic careers, sometimes leading to depression, low self-esteem and even violence.

“Early on, parents have to work at creating open communication with their kids about what’s going on in school every day,” said Wendy Craig, a psychology professor and researcher on bullying at Queens University in Kingston, Ontario. “Creating an atmosphere of open communication is important because many times kids are reluctant or embarrassed to talk about being teased or bullied.”

Craig offered a number of ways parents and teachers can help take the sting out of social cruelty — for those on the giving or the receiving end:

IF YOU SUSPECT YOUR CHILD IS BEING TEASED OR BULLIED > Look for the signs:

Keep an eye out for reluctance to go to school, silence about what’s happening at school, frequently lost objects or possessions, a frequent “everybody’s picking on me” attitude, or low self-esteem.

> Ask open-ended questions: Show interest by asking questions less likely to be answered with a brief yes or no. Don’t ask, “Did you have a good day?” Instead, try asking, “What kinds of things did you do at recess today?” or “What happened at lunchtime today?”

> Share your experiences: Tell your child about your own childhood experiences with being teased or bullied. Talk about how it made you feel and how you handled it.

> Respect the child’s wishes: Parents often want to act immediately by calling the teacher or

a school administrator, which can sometimes make the situation more difficult for the child who is being teased or bullied. If your child asks you not to do anything about it, try to respect this wish and work instead on making her feel empowered enough to try handling the situation on her own.

• Try role-playing: Reenact the bullying or teasing, and help your child practice non-aggressive ways to handle it. Brainstorm witty or humorous comebacks. Teach your child preventative tactics such as reporting aggressive, abusive behavior and staying near friends or adult supervisors.

IF YOU SUSPECT YOUR CHILD

IS THE AGGRESSOR > Be a good role model:

Be aware of your own aggressive behavior. Observe how you handle fights over parking spaces at the grocery store, and keep a handle on your aggression at sporting events, for example.

> Reevaluate discipline techniques: Children who are bullies require discipline that is non-violent and logically handed out. As with any parenting moment, never discipline in the heat of anger.

> Identify the triggers: Know what pushes your child’s buttons and when he is most likely to become aggressive. Role play and suggest ways your child can respond to these situations assertively, not aggressively. Validate and reward assertive versus aggressive behavior.

> Suggest ways to join in with others: Provide opportunities for your child to be of service to others — reading to a younger child, helping out at a soup kitchen, making cards for nursing home residents. These activities can help your child feel better about herself, making her less likely to bully.

Above all, parents should know that the old “sticks and stones” adage doesn’t tell the whole truth. Words may not break bones, but they can break a child’s spirit and self-esteem.

Tell children to never share personal information online

Email address and cell phone numbers should be guarded

Limit amount of time children spend online

Purchase tracking software that can block inappropriate messages and websites, as well as track online activity

Ask your child to report threatening messages

Assure bullied children you will not take away the phone or computer

Never respond to a bully

Print messages if harassment continues

Report the situation to the bully’s ISP

Change your child’s email address if necessary

Source: Allan Beane, Ph.D. How To Help Your Child Be Bully Free and StopTextBully.com

Adapted from Dana Williams’ monthly parenting columns, available online at www.tolerance.org/parents