



Dealing with Bullying: What Doesn't Work and What Will

by Dr. Deborah MacNamara

Bullying ranks high on the list of parenting concerns and for good reason. According to the National Institute of Mental Health in the United States, in any 6-week period, one third of children report being bullied and it is on the rise.

To complicate matters, bullying interventions and programs have failed to produce lasting results and measureable success including zero tolerance policies, empathy training, awareness raising campaigns, to imposing consequences. We are struggling to make headway on bullying but perhaps the answer is right in front of us and is just simply being missed?

One of the most consistent findings when it comes to bullying is the importance of human relationships in dealing with the bully, the bystanders, and their victims. Instead of expecting kids to figure out problems related to bullying, the emphasis is placed on adults in being able to lead kids in finding their way through.

From these findings it would appear the answer to bullying cannot be found in programs or policies but in the adults who step in and assume responsibility to help. Perhaps what every bully, bystander, or the victim needs is an adult they trust and feel cared for by.

How Adult Relationships Help Victims

When kids are hurt they need adults who will care for them. This is true for them physically as it is emotionally. A bully exploits the weakness in others and goes after the most vulnerable victims as their target. The kids who will be the most vulnerable are those who do not have adults to shield their hearts.

The antidote to the wounding words of a bully can be found in the caring connection with adults who convey these sentiments are simply not true. When a child believes they matter to an adult, then the words of others will matter less. As I often say to my daughter, "Don't take those words into your heart, they are someone else's hurt and you don't have to carry that with you."

What every victim needs is a place of rest, a relationship they feel at home in, and a person they can share their story with. One of the most important things we can do to help victims is to make room for them to express their hurt and fear. As we come alongside all that is unfair and unkind, it will be their tears that provide them with some relief too.

If a child is in harm's way when it comes to ongoing and persistent bullying, then it will fall to their adults to do whatever is required. It may mean consulting with the school, legal authorities, or moving a child if attempts to make their world safe again cannot be assured. What every victim of bullying needs is an adult to lean on.

How Adult Relationships Help the Bystanders

The biggest fear bystanders have as they watch bullies in action is that they could be next. Even when someone else is being bullied, it creates a sense of unsafety

for everyone. Some bystanders cope by making themselves invisible, while others stick their necks out into the fray, either joining the bully or defending the victim.

What bystanders need are adults who communicate they are in charge and responsible for what happens in the classroom or at home. When there are problems, these adults need to provide direction, assume control of the things they can control, and provide supervision so kids can feel safe. Bullies are less likely to exploit kids when adults are watching making it an effective relational intervention. The best protection from a bully are adults who convey they are in charge and watching what happens.

How Adult Relationships Help the Bully

Bullies are devoid of genuine remorse, feelings of shame and embarrassment, as well as the capacity for self-reflection on any topic that would make them feel too vulnerable. What a bully lacks is a soft heart due to emotional wounding. The source of wounding is not always obvious but can be related to peer orientation, dominance problems, as well as facing too much separation from their caretakers.

One of the most effective ways to increase the vulnerability of a bully and bring down emotional defenses is through the caring relationship with adults. It will fall to these adults to find a way to cultivate relationships with a bully and invite them to rest in their care. When a bully feels cared for again they can be made fully human and humane. A bully's heart can only be brought back to life with the caring heart of another human being. Insight from adults is needed to help others understand that hurt kids are the ones most likely to hurt others.

So many of our approaches to bullying assume the behaviours are learned and can be unlearned through teaching or consequences. If this were true we would be making headway on the bullying problem and we wouldn't be seeing an escalation of wounding behaviour among our kids. The answers to bullying can be found in understanding human relationships and cultivating strong connections with our kids. The secret to resiliency and recovery is simple, whoever a child gives their heart to has the power to protect it with their own.

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