

CHAPTER SEVEN

THE BULLIES AMONG US

“Courage is fire, bullying is smoke.”
-Benjamin Disraeli

Bullying is the use of force or coercion to abuse or intimidate others and involves a perceived imbalance of power. The victim of bullying is commonly referred to as the “target.” Bullying involves various forms of abuse including physical, emotional, mental and verbal attacks. When bullying is inflicted by a group it is called mobbing.

The “perceived imbalance” which prompts bullies to act out is the result of viewing another as weaker. A bully’s victim may be smaller in stature, a different race or religion. They may even receive abuse because they’re quiet in nature.

At the core, bullies are very insecure individuals who are afraid of being exposed. In order to avoid rejection, bullies find victims who are unlikely to retaliate. Bullies place negative focus on their victim so they appear “better” in the eyes of others. Bullies are very “self-focused” individuals and control drives them. Many bullies are narcissistic in nature and believe they have the right to treat others any way they choose. Some bullies suffer from mental disorders and need professional help. “It is estimated that one out of every four bullies who do not receive help will have a criminal record by the time they reach the age of 30 (Lyness).”

As a teacher and public school counselor for fourteen years, I witnessed tears, anger, and the gripping fear that bullying produces in its victims. I also witnessed the ultimate devastation that bullying can bring.

Tara was a beautiful, outgoing and sensitive little girl in elementary school. She and I began working together as a result of the bullying taking place in her classroom. Many days she would run to my office in tears because another person had been mean to her or to one of her friends. Tara’s sensitivity was a target for bullies. She was kind to everyone and would have never thought of retaliating. Instead, she did what many victims of bullying do. She kept it all inside.

As I began working with Tara and her mom, we found effective ways for Tara to respond to bullies. Tara’s self-confidence grew stronger and she learned how to ignore remarks and behavior, as well as respond to a bully when needed. What did not change when I worked with Tara was her sensitivity. It was a beautiful attribute of Tara and the reason she had so many friends.

When Tara left elementary school, I lost contact with her family until the beginning of her junior year in high school. Tara “friended” me on Facebook, and as always, had such kind and sweet words to say. As I read her messages, it was obvious that her personality had not changed in all of those years. Her kind heart was obvious in every word she wrote.

Tara was also successful socially. She was very popular in high school and was a prominent member of the school’s dance team. Unfortunately, Tara was still dealing with some “mean girls” in high school and the interactions were more serious than those she encountered during her elementary school days. One particular member of the dance team harassed Tara relentlessly. Tara and her mom contacted the school, but felt little support for the situation that ensued. One October night, Tara decided she could no longer endure the torture. She took a gun and ended her life.

Tara's mother asked if I would speak and sing at her funeral. The enormous sanctuary overflowed with teenagers who came to honor Tara's life. She was so loved, and I couldn't help but wonder if

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Tara would have made the same decision if she could have seen the love in that room.

As I stepped up to the platform to speak, I looked down to see her grieving mother sitting on the front row. Tara was an only child and was her mother's world since the two of them lived alone. The senseless act of bullying caused such heartbreak that day that watching it was unbearable at times.

Since Tara's death, I have stayed in close contact with her mom. I stand in amazement at the strength she continues to show after Tara's death. Although she is quick to share that her life will never be the same, she is also quick to share her hope in Jesus Christ and her determination to help educate others on the warning signs and effects of bullying. She longs to share the experience of bullying and suicide from a parent's perspective and you can read more from Tara's mom in Appendix A.

Tara's story is not isolated. Over 3.2 million students suffer at the hands of bullies each year ("11 Facts About Bullying").

I know first-hand the terror that can be created by bullies when we feel we have no tools to defend ourselves. Growing up, I was slightly overweight and the children in my neighborhood bullied me continually. There were many times I would run home from playing outside, and ask my mom and dad why I was so "ugly and unloved." I often cried myself to sleep believing the lies of the bullies until the summer I turned 13. I grew several inches in just a few months and when I returned to school for the fall, I wasn't just one of the tallest girls in the school, but also, the thinnest. No one ever made fun of me again, because they had to look up to me. Suddenly, I was considered tall and pretty to my peers, and I became a popular school cheerleader. Unfortunately, those old lies continued playing in my head. "You're ugly, you're worthless and no one wants to be around you," were lies I had exchanged for the truth. Although I was on the honor roll, head cheerleader and even a finalist in beauty pageants, the tapes in my head continued to play. The damage done by those neighborhood bullies was deep. I had difficulty not believing the lies at times. Fortunately, I had parents and friends who spoke the TRUTH of God's word into me, and eventually, I was able to overcome the low self-esteem that bullying had exacerbated.

Bullies can be friends, siblings, acquaintances, dates or even, yes, parents. Bullies can be total strangers, or those who are closest to us. Those who have been bullied often bully in return, while some are so beaten down they never tell anyone.

In order to help our tween and teen deal with bullying, we must know some important facts about bullying.

- The most common reason people are bullied is because of their physical appearance. Two out of five teens feel that they are bullied because of the way that they look ("11 Facts About Bullying")
- One out of 10 students drop out of school because they are bullied ("11 Facts About Bullying").
- It is estimated that 160,000 children miss school every day due to fear of being bullied ("11 Facts About Bullying").

- One in seven students in Grades K-12 is either a bully or a victim of bullying (“Facts & Statistics”).
- 71 percent of students report incidents of bullying as a problem at their school (“Facts & Statistics”).
- 282,000 students are physically attacked in secondary schools each month (“Facts & Statistics”).
- 90 percent of 4th through 8th graders report being victims of bullying (“Facts & Statistics”).
- A victim of bullying is twice as likely to take his or her own life compared to someone who is not a victim (“11 Facts About Bullying”).
- 1 in 4 teachers see nothing wrong with bullying and will only intervene 4 percent of the time (“11 Facts About Bullying”).

From the statistics above, one can see that it is imperative that both teens and their parents know what to do when bullying occurs.

The Bible says, “God has not given us a spirit of fear, but of power, love and a sound mind.” (2 Timothy 1:7) We must learn to stand against the tactics of the bully with all of the above. The TRUTH of God’s Word and strategic steps will help teens and parents confront bullying effectively.

Some suggested steps we can use as parents to confront bullying are listed below:

- Teach zero tolerance for any type of bullying behavior in your home. Even when disguised as a “joke,” words are hurtful.
- Talk with your teen about appropriate ways to handle/display anger.
- Teach words of empathy by example, such as “I’m sorry, please forgive me.”
- Discuss movie scenes or television shows that involve bullying. As a family, discuss the appropriate behavior that should have taken place in bullying situations. It’s even happening in cartoons!
- If your teen tells you they are being bullied, LISTEN! They need to be heard.
- Avoid interrogating words like “Why” and “You.” Let your teen feel their feelings and reassure them it is normal to feel hurt, angry, scared or alone when bullied.
- Find out if there are more victims by talking with other parents.
- Talk to school officials about their anti-bullying policies and procedures. If they do not have one, STRONGLY suggest they develop one.
- If your teen is bullied, keep a long, detailed journal of any injuries/incidents that occur, including pictures of injuries.
- Help your teen find an adult they can report to on a daily basis while at school.
- Monitor your child’s whereabouts and friendships.
- Watch for signs of anger, anxiety or depression.
- Above all, teach your child social skills and how to find the right kind of friends.

If you find that your teen has been the victim of bullying, try to remain calm. When we react by fear or anger, it can make things worse. Some parents I have counseled contact the parents of the bully and let them know their thoughts on the situation before gaining all the facts. This can backfire and cause your tween or teen more harassment. If you feel that you need to contact the parents of the bully, be sure that you discuss it with your teen and make the contact when you are calm.

Remember, bullies often breed bullies. If you are dealing with a bully, there is a chance they have witnessed bullying in their home or surrounding environment.

DO NOT STOP going up the ladder of authority until someone addresses the bullying behavior.

Most importantly, refrain from telling your teen to retaliate, for both spiritual and practical reasons. Refusing to retaliate goes against everything our flesh feels when we are bullied, but we must keep one important reminder in mind: “The bully’s modus operandi is to get a reaction.” When we react and respond with a firm and Godly response, the bully loses power. Need a scriptural reminder? I Peter 3:9 says, “Do not repay evil for evil or reviling for reviling, but on the contrary, bless, for to this you were called, that you may obtain a blessing.” While this verse does not necessarily encourage ongoing relationships with a bully, it does remind us to bless them.

But how can we bless a bully? One way is to give him what he needs. What does a bully need? Humility. We can help bullies find humility when we refuse to feed the controlling monster that lives inside the bully. When we retaliate, cry, carry-on or give in, we meet the needs of the bully and only feed the monster. The control gets worse, and the bully feels new power. As a former school administrator, I will also remind you that under most school policies, your teen becomes as guilty as the bully when they retaliate.

It is likely that the bully’s behavior will initially escalate after your teen stands up to the bad behavior of the bully. After all, your teen is challenging the control that the bully desperately seeks. When this occurs, remind your teen to stay safe and to stay strong. If your teen feels they are in physical danger, tell them to move away from the physical space of the bully. If they need support at school to confront the bully, they should ask for it. If bullying takes place outside of the school environment, permit them to contact authorities if the need arises. Remind your teen that their safety comes first, and there are options if they feel unsafe.

When bullying takes place at school and your teen reports it to an adult who does nothing, encourage your teen to go to another adult until intervention takes place. Parents, you and your teen must go as high as you need to go in the administrative chain until someone listens to you. **DO NOT STOP** going up the ladder of authority until someone addresses the bullying behavior. Never promise your teen that you won’t tell anyone about the bullying. Instead, reassure your teen that you will do your best not to make the bullying worse. Let them know you will not give up until the issue is resolved.

While many are on the receiving end of bullying, what can you do if YOUR teen IS the bully? The first thing we must do is to remain calm. While this may not be a “normal” reaction, it must be your initial reaction. Next, meet with any adults who may have witnessed your teen’s bullying behavior. If there were no adults who can give an account of your teen’s behavior, talk calmly with the kids who were involved. Once you have the facts, give clear and appropriate consequences to your teen. Make your teen apologize to those they have offended and be sure to witness the apology.

If your teen continues their bullying behavior, you may need to “shadow” them. When you follow your teen everywhere - whether to school or a party - they will quickly know that you plan to hold them accountable for their behavior toward others. While following your teen, be sure to recognize the positive things they do. If the bullying continues after you “shadow” your teen, get professional help immediately.

When our teen is the victim of bullying, we must fill their toolbox with tools to counter the bully. Some things our teen can say to a bully include the following:

- “Say what you want to say. I’m not going to stand here and listen to it.” Then, turn around and walk away.
- Say “STOP IT” with a reassured and calm look. Remember, bullies are looking for a reaction, so staying calm is VERY important.
- Say something like, “This is a waste of my time.”
- Agreeing with the bully is also a fun way to deflect their insults. For example, if a bully says, “You’re fat,” say, “You know, you’re right; I could stand to lose a few pounds. Thanks for noticing.” It throws them off almost every time.

There are also some tools our teens can use to show physical strength in the face of a bully. First, remind your teen to always keep their head up and to look confident. It is important that a bully never see our teen with a hurt or fearful look. Fear and insecurity feed the monster! Our teen may feel fear, but it is important that they do not show it. Bullies can “sniff out fear” and it is like blood to a shark. If your teen struggles to hide their fear, encourage them to “fake it ‘til they make it,” then talk about their feelings with you or another trusted individual. Remind your teen to keep their arms to their side and to stand on both feet. They must keep their hands out of their pockets since that is a sign of insecurity.

Our teen must also remember to keep non-threatening eye contact with the bully. Threats are enticing to bullies.

Most importantly, insist that your teen never run away from a bully UNLESS they are in PHYSICAL DANGER. Our teen must never get physical or argue with the bully in return. A fight is what a bully wants, and strong repercussions may occur once our teen is embroiled in the brawl. I know a young lady who is very gentle, quiet and soft spoken. She is in no way boisterous, but once she had enough of being bullied, she exchanged punches with the bully. Although the bully threw the first punch, she too was expelled from school for fighting and was forced to serve the same term as the one who had been harassing her. While this seems unfair to some, it is reality in many schools and courtrooms.

We must also encourage our teen to find good, true friends with similar standards when teaching them to avoid bullies. Our teens must know they are safe to share their hurts or disappointments. Friends they deem trustworthy are essential.

Cyberbullying is another form of bullying where technology is used to harass, threaten, embarrass or target another person. This form of bullying may include use of the internet, Facebook, emails, texts, and other technological programs. Cyberbullying is taken very seriously by the law and often involves severe consequences, including the possibility of arrest.

Cyberbullying is common because bullies know they are often more difficult to trace. Cyberbullies believe they may not have to confront their victims so they feel confident hiding behind technology.

The most important thing to teach our teen is NOT to respond to a cyberbully. If they do, there is written evidence of the response and our teen’s name may be drawn into controversy.

In order to effectively deal with a cyberbully, have your teen save all evidence of bullying on a flash drive. Once the evidence is saved, it needs to be removed from your teen’s technology. Removing evidence of bullying removes the reminder of bullying. Keep the flash drive in a safe place, and then report the bullying to your internet service provider. You must also be sure your teen blocks the

bully from sending texts, notes or emails to any of their accounts. Once those accounts are blocked, be sure your teen protects their cell phone and other technology with strong passwords. Remind your teen to change their password often, and under NO CIRCUMSTANCES should your teen give their password to ANYONE besides you. More teens are exposed to bullying and other forms of negative behavior because they grant access to those who have no business in their personal information.

We want our teens to be safe and they must know they can talk with us about their bullying concerns. If our teen is uncomfortable talking with us, we must find a trusted youth director, friend or other adult who can listen and help give our teen insight into their response to bullying.

If you would like more information about bullying, be sure to visit Appendix B at the back of the book. Included are key points from a curriculum I wrote when working for one of the largest school districts in Texas. Many of the procedures and suggestions are still used in counseling sessions today and include the TRUTH for dealing with the rising epidemic of bullying.

PARENT PAUSE:

- 1. HAS YOUR TEEN EVER BEEN A VICTIM OF BULLYING? IF SO, WHAT STEPS DID YOU TAKE TO HANDLE THE SITUATION?**
- 2. IF YOU WERE A BYSTANDER OF A BULLYING SITUATION, WHAT STEPS WOULD YOU TAKE TO HELP THE VICTIM?**
- 3. DOES YOUR TEEN'S SCHOOL HAVE AN ANTI-BULLYING POLICY IN PLACE? IF SO, WHAT ARE THE PROCEDURES LISTED FOR HANDLING BULLYING? IF NOT, WHAT CAN YOU DO TO RAISE AWARENESS THAT A PLAN SHOULD BE IMPLEMENTED?**

