

The Roots of Bullying

Bullying can lead to serious and often life-long problems for both the bully and the bullied. Our schools keep trying to find solutions but are rarely successful at eradicating it because the roots of bullying run deep. Appropriate policies can certainly help, but the fundamental problem is what happens at home.

A child does not have to witness violence at home and on TV to become a bully, although these factors certainly raise the risk. Bullies can emerge from perfectly good families where television viewing may even be restricted. Bullying behavior is primed early on. Society's normative use of punishment to control behavior has steered parenting and driven schools for generations. Punishment is a bi-product of a hierarchical system and a pecking order typically results. It starts innocently at home.

For example: From the time his sister was born, Jared, two years older, has been under pressure to "be nice to the baby." Thinking they were protecting Sally from harm, Jared's parents would consistently tell him to stop doing whatever he was doing to her, to leave her alone, to stop being mean, to know better, etc. In their sibling battles, his parents perceived Jared as the provoker. He got yelled at and punished. Sally was the innocent victim. She got protected. Jared learned at an early age that he was a troublemaker. "Jared, leave her alone," "Jared, stop it, let her have it," "Jared, don't be so mean," "Jared, how many times do I have to tell you to stop hitting? Get to your room." The more Jared got yelled at, the more Sally learned how to get him in trouble and get herself protected. She often started crying when he merely approached.

Jared was treated like a troublemaker. His identity formed from what he perceived his parents expected of him—to be a troublemaker. He is left with, "Nobody understands me. I can't ever get it right. It's no fair. They love her best. I'll never win." We don't realize how our normal, everyday criticisms of our children break down their self-esteem. Children who are blamed and punished are left with a desire to retaliate. It's human nature to go on the defensive when we are made to feel powerless. Jared is set up in the pecking order. He perceives Sally to be his problem, not his parents. But he gets in trouble when he pecks at Sally, so he tries it out on someone weaker at school.

Children often become targets because they are perceived as less willing or able to fight back. Children who are over protected by well-meaning parents often don't learn how to stand up for themselves and grow dependent on someone to do it for

them. Sally knows that she will be rescued so doesn't need to take responsibility for herself.

Certainly there are many factors that go into making a bully. The bully could be the younger sibling or have no siblings at all to still be in the pecking order and feel powerless. Plenty of children who are blamed and punished at home never become bullies and plenty of overprotected children never become victims. Different problems result.

This pecking order pattern must be understood when creating a school program to reduce bullying. A bully is never someone with self-confidence. He or she is not bullying because he wants to. His bravado is a defensive mechanism, a mask, to hide his inner turmoil and hurt. Underneath the strutting is a powerless child. Further punishment, detention, or isolation will add insult to injury.

A good program must set the bully and the victim on equal turf—a place where they can speak to each other and work out solutions with a facilitator. As soon as the bully is blamed, she retreats behind her defensive shell. And when the victim is rescued, he grows more dependent. Victims and bullies must be helped and encouraged to voice their sides of the story without authorities taking it solely upon themselves to solve the problem. They must be validated for their deeper hurt and anger that motivate their behavior. When bullies are punished and victims are vindicated, the cycle perpetuates; no pattern is changed.

At home, pay attention to your child's cues. She may be vocal and say things like, "It's no fair," "You don't get it," "How come I'm always the one who gets in trouble?" "Get out of my life." Take them as clear signals that your child is not being heard. Behavior gets louder and more dramatic the more unheard the child feels. Not so clear signals are withdrawal from family conversation, defiant resistance to requests, and sharp comebacks with attitude. This is a child who does not need to be further reprimanded, as we are so tempted to do. She is telling you she's invisible and doesn't want to hear what you say. That is what needs to be acknowledged.

Watch how tempting it is to step in and try to solve your child's problem. When we understand that it is their problem to solve, we can be much more helpful with our advocacy and support than with all our fixing. When we raise children who feel heard and important in their own homes, who know what responsibility feels like, and who

know they are an appreciated component to a working family unit, no pecking order exists, so they have no reason to create one at school.