

Stop hassling me

Breaking the cycle of bullying

By Steve Fisher

IT USED TO BE dismissed as a “normal” part of growing up. It can happen to, and be caused by, boys or girls. It ranges from verbal taunting to physical brutalization. It happens on the way to school, on school property, by phone and in cyberspace. For the perpetrators, it’s “fun.” For the recipients, torture.

It’s called bullying, and effects can be long-lasting—from depression and low self-esteem into adulthood, to adolescent suicide for the bullied, to criminal behavior on the part of the bully. And despite the proliferation of school and community programs to deal with it, “almost 30 percent of youth in the United States are estimated to be involved, as either a bully, a target of bullying, or both,” according to the National Youth Violence Prevention Resource Center (www.safeyouth.org).

The root of the problem

Speaker and author Barbara Coloroso (<http://kidsareworthit.com>) claims we are living in a “culture of mean.” The Littleton, Colorado, Costco member says, “Kids are learning from the shows they watch, and the video games they play, to get pleasure from somebody else’s pain. Bill Cosby said it so beautifully: ‘I miss the days when comedy wasn’t mean. When you weren’t making a joke at somebody else’s expense.’ Kids are exposed to that regularly.”

“The anti-bullying education makes the problem worse,” asserts school psychologist and psychotherapist Israel C. “Izzy” Kalman (www.bullies2buddies.com), a Costco member in New York City. “It’s letting kids know that all kinds of things should upset them. Words should upset them. There are all kinds of things they shouldn’t tolerate, so when it happens, they get angry and when they get angry

it happens even more.

“Parents are being led to believe it’s the school’s responsibility to make the bullying stop. But the schools can’t make it stop because the anti-bullying programs don’t work. The schools are instructing kids to tell. So what happens? You and I are kids in school; I tell the school you bullied me. They get involved and punish you. That’s going to make you like me?”

Beat the bully

If the problem is recognized and the solutions don’t seem to be working, can bullying ever be stopped? Coloroso and Kalman believe it can, although their approaches differ.

“I do believe we have to hold the bully accountable, empower the target and keep them safe,” Coloroso says. She also believes bystanders have to be taught not to be complacent and to express disapproval.

It starts with parents. Coloroso tells the story of a parent, whose child was being bullied, calling the parent of the bully and being cut off because the other parent was in the middle of making dinner. “If someone called me to say my child was bullying theirs,” attests Coloroso, “dinner would be waiting for a while.”

It is not simply a matter of addressing the issue but also of modeling empathetic behavior. “When you’re at a family gathering, and somebody tells a racist or sexist joke, can your children hear you saying, in front of all the relatives, ‘I’m bothered by that’ or ‘That was cruel?’” Coloroso asks. “You know you’ve had an impact when you walk back in

If your child is bullied

DO’S:

- Tell your child, “I hear you; I am here for you; I believe you; you are not alone in this.”
- Tell your child, “It is not your fault.”
- Tell your child, “There are things you can do.” [See “*Tips for kids*” on page 34.—Ed.]
- Report the bullying to school personnel.

DON’TS:

- Don’t minimize, rationalize or explain away the bully’s behavior.
- Don’t solve the problem for your child.
- Don’t tell your child to avoid the bully.
- Don’t tell your child to fight back.
- Don’t confront the bully or the bully’s parents alone.

Adapted from *The Bully, the Bullied, and the Bystander*, by Barbara Coloroso (Collins Living, 2008).



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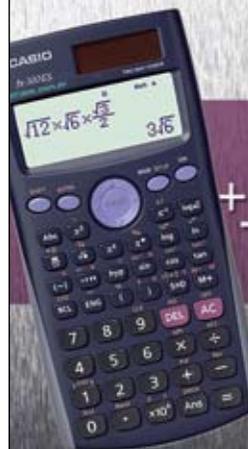


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the dining room and everyone shuts up, but you've also had an impact on your children."

Kalman believes in focusing on the bullied, teaching them to control their anger at the situation and take the pleasure out of bullying for the bully. "I teach kids how not to be victims," he says. "And if you learn how not to be a victim, nobody can bully you."

Reform the bully

If children have already reached the bullying stage, they have to be held accountable and made to deal directly with the person they hurt. "It's a role," says Coloroso. "We have to rewrite the script."

Kalman agrees bullies cannot be ignored, but advises care in the way they are addressed. "I hate referring to kids as bullies," he cautions. "It is not a diagnosis, but an insult. Just as I wouldn't call a child a wimp, loser or fool, I wouldn't refer to a child as a bully. Many kids who get labeled bullies feel they are victims. The reason they are aggressive is because they don't like the way they are being treated, so they respond aggressively."

Coloroso and Kalman don't necessarily see eye to eye on all aspects of the issue, but both acknowledge that bullying is cyclical. Abuse can create a bully who then passes it on to someone perceptibly weaker. The bullied can easily become the bully. And Coloroso and Kalman agree the cycle must be broken. ☐

Tips for kids who are bullied

IZZY KALMAN OFFERS these suggestions to stem the tide of bullying.

- Be nice to kids when they are mean to you, and before long they will stop being mean. This is known as the Golden Rule, and is the solution to bullying.
- Don't tell on kids who upset you. They will hate you and want to beat you up. Talk to them directly and they will respect you much more. Tell an adult only if there is an emergency situation, or because you want the adult to teach you how to handle the problem.
- Don't get angry when kids insult you. They love to see you getting angry. Make it clear they can insult you all they want and it doesn't bother you. After a few days, they will stop.
- If kids bring you nasty rumors, don't defend yourself. Just ask the kids, "Do you believe it?" If they say they do, answer, "You can believe it if you want." You come out being the winner, and they will leave you alone. And if they say they don't believe it, you also win!
- If kids hit you and you're not hurt, act like nothing happened. This way you look tough and cool because you don't get upset over nonsense. If they keep hitting or pushing you, ask them calmly, "Are you mad at me?" If they aren't, they'll stop hitting you. If they are angry, they'll tell you why. You can discuss the matter, apologize if appropriate, and they will also stop hitting you. ☐