



## Education

# Want to end bullying? Teach empathy early

01:00 AM EST on Sunday, December 19, 2010



The American public is enraged about the seeming epidemic of bullying. Nasty, aggressive behavior in cyberspace is freaking out parents and educators. Most spectacularly, two young people recently committed suicide as a result of torment at the hands of peers. What sort of sick creeps would secretly videotape a shy Rutgers freshman to out him online as gay?

But in all the angry fulminating about bullying, I haven't heard a mention of empathy, or the glaring lack of it. No one's born empathetic. Kids need to learn about the effects of their actions, about walking in the other guy's shoes and feeling their pain. And they need to do so long before a bloodlust for cruelty has taken root.

Because only empathy curbs bullying.

Instead, the news media and public seem hell-bent on fingering bullies and punishing the daylight out of them. States across the nation are passing anti-bullying laws.

Didn't we do this already? The 1990s' "zero-tolerance" laws, designed to curb violence, backfired. The increase of suspensions, expulsions and prison sentences wrecked more kids' lives without much improving anyone's sense of safety.

So how will laws designed to bully the bullies promote empathy?

Last year I sat in on a bullying group at a middle school. Every day, five seriously nasty sixth-grade girls had been forming a gauntlet through which their peers had to pass. The girls would choose one of the lame, fat, poorly dressed or short, and make cleverly cruel comments to amuse themselves and their crowd.

School adults were frantic to stop the behavior. They intervened when they could, but the girls just kept it out of sight. The school is in an impoverished community, so most kids were going to class with plenty of learning challenges anyway. None could afford to be distracted by feeling horrible about being teased.

And as seriously low-income kids, you can bet both victims and bullies had been picked on, deprived and punished more than enough already. So what would suspension, detention or getting yelled at do for them?

A few caring school adults asked them to come together to talk about the problem. Surprisingly, they jumped at the chance. Between the super-busy adults in their lives and electronic distractions, modern kids rarely get a chance to work together on social issues, under the guidance of kind, non-angry adults. Even well-to-do kids need help with their feelings and social issues, never mind kids whose parents or guardians are struggling to survive.

As the girls' stories tumbled out, a pecking order emerged. The unmistakable queen bee referred to the others as "her girls." Two were her lieutenants, strong with their own anger and toughness. And two obviously terrified followers participated mainly to avoid becoming victims themselves.

The adults started by asking each girl if she'd ever been bullied herself. That was a universal and irate "yes!" They told heartbreaking stories of getting taunted, belittled and ostracized by both peers and adults. They choked up and whispered when explaining exactly what they were teased about.

Then the adults asked whether the girls had ever bullied others, and how that made them feel. A tense silence finally broke when one honest lieutenant declared, "I felt good hurting that kid, really good!" The adults surprised her by praising her honesty. She then admitted that she also felt "bad, really small and, um, kind of dirty."

Ah, empathy starts to set in.

Another lieutenant burst into tears and declared that she bullied because no one in her life cared about her. The adults were shocked. When debriefing afterward, they marveled how she, of all of them, could say such a thing. With two parents and a steady family income, she had more resources than the others. But so what? That's how she feels. And she's taking it out on others. Now the adults can help her sort out her feelings and quit acting out. But if they hadn't asked, they wouldn't know.

Only the Queen resisted giving details about having been bullied, in a scary way that suggested she might be occupying a private hell. Her circumstances also needed exploring.

And the last question was: could they describe how their victims might feel? The girls groaned with the hurt they knew they'd caused. Even the Queen could identify with her victims, and was not happy about it.

After that conversation, the gauntlet apparently disbanded, at least for a time.

Was the solution permanent? Probably not. Bad behavior doesn't stop overnight.

Unfortunately, conversations that promote empathy take time and patience, while typical punishment is fast and easy. Punishment, with no questions asked, assures adults they're doing a good job, when really they're pushing the problem into the future. Of course kids should have consequences, but only when they fully understand the choices they're making. What's the point of punishing a girl whose behavior is crying for help? How will she learn to care about others' feelings if we don't care about hers?

This Christmas, give kids the gift of empathy. Walk in their shoes. Teach them how to do likewise for others. And start when they're young.

Or watch the bullying get bigger and nastier, among kids and adults alike.

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12/20/2010

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