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Essential Articles on Parenting and Education

Bullying

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When I was in 8th grade, I had my own experience with bullying. First, my group of friends fired me, which I can say drily now, but at the time it was immensely painful. Then I made a new friend, and when she was being bullied, I had the chance to help her by standing up to her tormenters, and I didn't do anything. I've thought a lot about my own cowardice in that moment and it makes me want to figure out how to help other kids do better.

That question led me to write my first book, *Sticks and Stones: Defeating the Culture of Bullying and Rediscovering the Power of Character and Empathy*. I insisted on that mouthful of a subtitle because the most important lesson I learned from my research and reporting is that as parents and educators, we can't just fight to stop bullying in schools and communities. We also have to help kids develop a strong foundation—what previous generations called moral fiber—if we want them to behave better in a group. And we also have to help instill in them the value of understanding—and *valuing*—other people's emotions.

When It Goes Viral

Bullying is an especially key topic at this moment in time because we are just beginning to understand how the Internet changes what it's like to grow up. Cyberbullying often is very much related to bullying that takes place in person. But moving online changes the dynamics of bullying—and what the experience feels like for targets—in ways that are devastating for some teenagers. Bullying isn't really on the rise, according to the studies that have tracked it over the past 25 years. But bullying can

feel more pervasive for a lot of kids when it extends to the Web, which they can access 24/7.

Going home from school used to be a respite for kids who were being targeted. That's often no longer true. And now that bullying happens on social networking sites and in text messages, it

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is more lasting, more visible, more viral. From the point of view of kids prone to bullying, there are fewer cues to empathy online, and more anonymity, which can lead them to try out brasher, harsher personas. I've read plenty of cruel posts that I can't imagine hearing teenagers actually say to each other face

to face. That's how the problem has morphed over the last decade.

Let's Narrow the Definition

I've also learned how crucial it is to use a definition of bullying that's clear and relatively narrow. Dan Olweus, a Scandinavian psychologist who launched the field of studying bullying, in 1969 came up with the definition most psychologists still use today. Olweus asked 400 boys in Sweden a question no researcher had thought to ask before: what kind of treatment from your peers do you find most upsetting and hardest to deal with? The answer was verbal or physical aggression that occurs repeatedly and involves a power differential—one or more children lording their status over another. In other words, a concerted campaign to make a kid miserable.

That definition is helpful because it makes clear that two-way, mutual conflict (kids often call it "drama") is not bullying. Nor are one-off fights. At the same time, when bullying *is* going on, it's a form of mistreatment that study after study has linked to serious mental health issues and low academic performance. That's true for both bullies and targets. The bullying label is also one we should

use sparingly because it's stigmatizing. Increasingly, it has real consequences for kids.

When Schools Get Involved

I was surprised to discover in the course of my research that the majority of kids say that, when they reported bullying at school, the situation worsened for them. That shows we have a way to go. I hear parents complain about schools that aren't doing enough and I hear principals complain about regulations that bury them in paperwork. This is the problem that is still being under-policed in some schools—teachers still turn a blind eye to bullying, kids report—and over-policed in others.

This goes back to the issue of definition. When any instance of teasing is termed bullying, kids have an incentive to play victim, and they also lose the freedom they need to learn how to manage conflict. That doesn't mean teachers can't intervene unless they see a repeated pattern of a strong kid going after a weaker one. They can set the tone by telling kids who are being mean to cut it out. But to discipline a student for bullying, or label him as a bully, they should have more evidence of a demeaning and disturbing pattern. Sometimes an accusation of bullying can seem simple and turn out to be more multidimensional once a teacher or administrator understands the full context. The first step toward offering the most useful help is to make sure to have a thorough understanding of what's going on.

Bystanders, and Upstanders

To prevent bullying beyond individual cases, the whole school community has to take the issue on. This isn't a problem we can leave to the targets and their parents to work out, and it's also not about just working with the bullies. Bystanders play too significant

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a role. One important study showed that bullying takes place in front of other kids in more than four out of five cases. Bystanders step in to stop it in only one of five of those cases—but when they do, they succeed more than half the time.

Why? Adults often forget that bullying is a form of domination that has social value. It's a route to becoming more powerful and earning a kind of respect (even if it's not the good kind). It's asking a lot of the kids who witness bullying to stand up to an intimidating show of strength in the moment it's happening. How many adults stand up to bullies? It's not easy. Kids need a variety

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of strategies for intervening. And luckily it turns out that victims of bullying report that when other kids show empathy in small ways—by asking if they're OK, or sitting with them at lunch, or sending a sympathetic text—it can help a lot. Kids can stand with victims, as opposed to standing up to bullies, and still make a real difference.

Encouraging more kids to act like “upstanders,” as schools increasingly call kids who do stand up to bullies, really requires attaining or maintaining a culture in which school is a place where cruelty just isn't the norm and isn't accepted. One of the most heartening pieces of research I've seen shows that bullying rates go down when kids understand that most kids aren't involved in bullying. So for example, a school that did a student survey, and then put up posters saying things like “90% of the kids here don't deliberately exclude other kids to make them feel bad,” reduced the rate of bullying students reported afterward.

A Temporary Lapse of Empathy?

One note in closing: In the moment, kids who act like bullies can seem frighteningly devoid of empathy—they freeze out those feelings, in a way that's chilling. But in fact, for almost all kids, that is a

temporary lapse: They are capable of empathy underneath the cold façade. A girl who was being mean to Monique, one of the main characters in my book, made me cringe when she said at one point, “If she killed herself, it would be her own insecure problem.”

But then later that same girl said, “I feel like Monique was just depressed, because she didn’t have a lot of friends. I could see that she’d walk in the hallways with her head down.” So she *did* understand how Monique felt, when she let herself.

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