

# Bullying - How Do We Protect Our Children?

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## Why do Kids Bully other Kids?

It's been happening since the beginning of time. We endured it. Our parents tolerated it. And probably their parents before them experienced it, too. Nellie and Willie Olsen did it on Little House on the Prairie. Bullying is a timeless problem. Kids pick on kids. They do it for lots of reasons. It makes them feel more important and more popular. It makes them forget their own shortcomings and inadequacies. They do it out of fear of the unknown. They do it to get a laugh. They pick on the kid who is a little different, the kid who doesn't learn as fast, who doesn't wear the right clothes. They bully the boy who stutters or wears thick glasses, the girl who is too tall or too fat.

## What Kind of Bullying Happens?

The worse part is that most teachers will tell you that they don't allow it in their class and that it simply does not happen. I taught for 33 years in a public middle school and I didn't see much of it under my nose either, but that doesn't mean that it didn't happen. Most kids are smart enough to know not to pick on kids when the teacher or any adult is in close proximity, but signs of it are everywhere. It can be a look, a gesture, a quick glance across a classroom. This is the slow torturous type of bullying. It eats away at children's self-esteem and makes them feel like outcasts. It thrusts them into a state of depression. It generates school phobia and avoidance.

Bullying can be subtle, but it doesn't end there. Kids get pushed and shoved, they get tripped and poked and yes, even beaten up. They live in fear of being physically hurt. Verbal bullying can be just as devastating. They are called stupid, weird, retarded, psycho. Their days in school are agonizing. They are tormented by physical and verbal abuse. And finally they reach their limit and they retaliate which then gets them punished themselves.



## Why Are Kids with TS Easy Targets?

Kids with Tourette Syndrome are particularly vulnerable to this type of treatment. They have motor and vocal tics that very few people understand. They may be hyperactive and impulsive and exhibit what appears to be very odd behavior as a result of Obsessive Compulsive Disorder. They may be physically uncoordinated and socially awkward. They are prime targets of abuse by other students. Do we have a chance of ending this enduring problem that has gone on for generations? We probably won't end it, but there is much that can be done to protect our children from it, to empower them to stand up for themselves and diffuse the harassment. Schools can initiate programs that go to the heart of bullying and help kids understand how hurtful it can be.

## Why are Parents the Last to Find Out?

Parents often are unaware of the bullying that their child has had to endure. Kids don't usually tell their parents in order to protect them from the hurt. They are embarrassed by their inability to defend themselves. They don't tell teachers because they're afraid that they won't be believed and that the abuse will get worse when other students find out that they "tattled". They simply yield to it with long lasting, devastating effects that will complicate their lives as long as they live. Some kids even admit to having suicidal thoughts because they don't see any other way out.

## Is It Getting Worse?

I think that we need only to read the newspaper or listen to the nightly news to get the answer to that question. Kids are being driven to acts of violence against their fellow students and their teachers after years of teasing and bullying. Other students will then readily admit that this was a kid who was different, who was picked on for whatever reason. Teachers will describe this student as someone who was a loner, who had no friends. Yes, it is possible that these kids had emotional and often psychiatric problems, but yes, they were also bullied. And what are schools doing to identify and help these kids? Does it always have to be too little, too late? If teachers are really paying attention, it's very evident which students are in trouble socially.

I will be the first one to admit that the role of the teacher has continually expanded and is truly bursting at the seams. We have become surrogate parents, counselors, social workers and even nurses at times. We can't just teach subject matter anymore. We teach values, character, patriotism and compassion. We conduct lock down drills and evacuation drills, all while maintaining a calm demeanor so as not to arouse fear in our students. We may not be



happy about our changing role, but I fear that it's here to stay. The good news is that we have many persons in our schools to help us out. As a high school student in the 60's, there was no school social worker or school psychologist in my building and the role of the guidance counselor was to provide career guidance. But, unfortunately all of these support personnel are unable to be in your classroom. They rely on classroom teachers to advise them about students in trouble not only academically, but also socially and emotionally. They rely on parents to inform them of children who may be experiencing signs of unhappiness, depression or academic failure.

## What Can We Do?

We simply cannot continue to ignore this type of abuse and pretend that it does not exist. We are only fooling ourselves and we certainly are not helping our children. And even worse, what message are we sending these children if we cannot even admit that this type of behavior happens in our schools?

There are many things that both parents and schools can do. Since my main focus is children with Tourette Syndrome, I will direct my comments to that particular population. However, TS is not unlike many other traits that cause kids to be perceived as different. Most of these suggestions can be applied to bullying in general.

It is my personal experience that children with TS are the brunt of teasing by other students for two reasons. The first reason is fear and the second is ignorance. Children tease and make fun of what they fear and do not understand. I have presented hundreds of inservice programs on TS to students from Kindergarten to seniors in high school. If done in an appropriate and sensitive manner, a student can be transported from being the class outcast to the class hero in 30 minutes. Once TS is explained as the medical disorder that it is, the fear is erased and the student is accepted as just another kid in the class with a medical issue not unlike asthma, diabetes or any other number of medical conditions that kids are already aware of. TSA, Inc. has a brochure entitled Educating Classmates About TS which can be used for such an inservice. They also have excellent age appropriate videos that can be shown to children of all grade levels.

Parents are often reluctant to call attention to their child and therefore will not allow the other students to be told about their child's TS. They feel that there will be a stigma attached to the other kids knowing. They often even relate to me that teasing and bullying have not been an issue with their child. It is also my experience that these parents are burying their heads in the sand to protect their own feelings. Remember, kids don't usually tell their parents. Yet, if confronted by someone outside the family, a counselor, therapist, a favorite teacher, the child will readily admit that the bullying he or she has encountered is intolerable.



Children with TS need to be taught coping strategies to deal with this teasing. They need to role play with adults about how to handle these situations that they find themselves in. Some children find using humor to diffuse these situations most useful, but this may not be automatic for them. One boy recently told me that when kids imitate his tics, he goes up to them and says something like, "You're not doing that tic exactly right. This is how it should be." He then demonstrates his tic. Some may be more comfortable simply saying something like, "I'm sorry, but I have Tourette Syndrome and I can't help the things I'm doing". Whatever is the most comfortable for that child, must be practiced and rehearsed so that their reaction is spontaneous. They also need to know that it is not wrong, nor should they fear telling a teacher or a counselor or the school principal that they are the victim of unacceptable bullying.

This is where the responsibility of the school should take over. Kids have a basic right to go to school every day and be safe not only from physical abuse, but also verbal abuse and bullying. Schools need to have a mechanism in place to deal with these types of behavior. Bullying needs to be dealt with as severely as fighting, drug and substance abuse and all other intolerable conduct. A student who is caught smoking in the bathroom is suspended. A student who is involved in a fight is suspended. A student who is picking on, teasing or bullying another student is often simply given a warning not to do it again. It is rarely treated as seriously as other offenses. It is therefore fostered and allowed to continue until the child who is the object of the bullying is emotionally destroyed.

Schools also have a responsibility to identify students who are socially and emotionally at risk and to provide services for these children. This could be in the form of individual counseling, social groups for children dealing with these issues, social worker intervention with the family, to name a few. I have found groups such as "lunch bunch" can be most useful in helping these children find a friend and establish a support system that they can turn to. Getting these kids involved in a club or after school activity with a sensitive and caring teacher can be invaluable.

Administrators have an obligation to ensure that all staff members who may come into contact with the child with TS are inserviced about the disorder. Teachers set the tone in their classroom just as bus drivers and cafeteria monitors do in their domain. If the adults are not modeling acceptance of a child's Tourette Syndrome, then the children will follow that lead. Teachers can indirectly give "permission" to other students to pick on kids with TS because of their lack of understanding of the symptoms and therefore their own lack of tolerance. If the teacher is punishing the child for symptoms out of his/her control, then the other kids will perceive TS as bad behavior and treat the child accordingly.

## Summary



Bullying is hardly a recent phenomenon. Children with Tourette Syndrome are especially vulnerable to this type of mistreatment. Whether we witness it directly or whether the child denies being a victim does not mean that it is not happening. Bullying destroys a child's self worth and spirit. It creates fear, anxiety and incredible pain. It leaves the child with emotional scars that will last a lifetime. Parents and educators have an obligation to do whatever they can to stop the bullying. They must take all steps possible to prevent this insidious type of abuse from slowly destroying lives. Below are some very specific ways that bullying can and must be addressed by parents, teachers and school administrators.

### **Parents**

- Listen to your kids and look for changes in behavior.
- Role play with your child teaching them specific words to use in response to the teasing.
- Give your child ideas about how to stay away from the kids who are bullying.
- Keep a record of dates, times, who was involved in the bullying.
- Speak to the teacher about it. If nothing happens, contact the principal.
- Inform the principal that you expect this to be dealt with very severely.
- Make sure that the other children have been taught about TS and its symptoms.

### **Teachers**

- Watch and listen carefully to what is happening in your classroom.
- Keep a close eye on kids who are socially in trouble, who seem to be loners.
- Discuss these kids with support staff - guidance counselors, social workers, etc.
- Try to involve these kids in counseling or friendship groups.

- Educate classmates about Tourette Syndrome.
- Make it well known that teasing and bullying will not be tolerated and carry through with consequences.
- Encourage kids who are being picked on to discuss it with you.
- Set a tone of acceptance of the child with TS in your classroom.

### Administrators

- Set the tone in your school that bullying will not be tolerated.
- Take a proactive approach by setting up programs for students that deal with bullying.
- Make sure that the consequences for bullying are as severe as they are for other serious infractions of school rules.
- Work with support staff such as guidance counselors, school social workers, school psychologists to establish a program of support groups for children who are most susceptible to being teased or bullied.
- Work with the bullies themselves. Kids who bully almost always have issues of their own which could include feelings of inadequacy, low self esteem and insecurity.
- It is the responsibility of an administrator to make sure that students are safe not only from physical harm, but also emotional harm.

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