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DEALING WITH BULLIES IN CHRISTIAN SCHOOLS

Jimmy twists Billy's arm behind him in the crowded school hallway, calling him a "geek" and a "nerd." Judy teases Sandy unmercifully about her unfashionable hairstyle and hand-me-down clothes. At recess, several of the third graders "gang up" on Jeremy, a second grader, after he strikes out in a softball game.

Do schools have a responsibility to deal with bullies and the power struggles between children? When students complain about being harassed and threatened by their peers, should teachers intervene?

Pamela Lister says they should. "There have always been tough boys and girls who pick on other kids," says Lister. "But it's the '90s, and the bullies have become more dangerous."¹ The news media are more likely to highlight the violent episodes of bullying—those related to knives, guns, and gangs. Because of this, people assume that bullying occurs mostly among adolescents and older teenagers. In actuality, bullies come in all ages. Typically, bullying begins in the primary grades, escalates in third grade, and peaks around eighth grade.²

Bullying is not limited to big cities, says Hara Estroff Marano. "If anything, it's more common in the one-room schoolhouse than in urban settings."³ At school, bullying occurs in a variety of locations, but especially on the playground and in crowded halls or other locations with little supervision.

How Common Is Bullying?

Frank J. Barone, adjunct professor of education at the State University of New York at Oswego,

says 58 percent of students stay home from school at least once because they were "victims of child peer abuse," a euphemism for bullying.⁴ The American Medical Association says 33 to 44 percent of male teens say they were slapped, hit, or punched at school.⁵ Barone's studies revealed that 59 percent of students said they had been bullied, but school staff thought only 16 percent were victims of bullies.⁶

The Terrible Results of Bullying

Take Curtis Taylor, for example. An eighth grader in the Oak Street Middle School in Burlington, Iowa, Curtis hated to go to school because for years, other boys had tripped him in the hallways and knocked books and other possessions out of his hands. Sometimes they banged his head on a locker.

Early in 1993, the bullying students escalated their attack. The name-calling became harsher, and they stole books that Curtis especially loved. In front of other classmates, they poured chocolate milk down the front of his sweat-shirt.

When Curtis had all he could handle, he went to the school counselor. He blamed himself because

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BY CLARENCE U. DUNBEBIN

the other students didn't like him. The counselor knew Curtis was an honor student and had not done anything to deserve this kind of abuse, but he wasn't sure how to help.

The night of the first day of spring 1993, Curtis "solved" the counselor's problem. He went into a family bedroom, took out a gun, and shot himself.⁷

Marano says Curtis' death was not the only bullying-related death that year. "Months later, in Cherokee County, Georgia, 15-year-old Brian Head grew tired of the same teasing and deeds. . . . He shot and killed himself—in front of his classmates."⁸ Brian's death came on the heels of five bullying-related suicides in a small town in New Hampshire.

A decade earlier, in 1982, three boys ages 10 to 14 killed themselves in Norway. The local newspaper said they committed suicide to avoid continued harassment from classmates. The tragedy sparked an initiative against bullying in the country's primary and junior high schools, with psychologist Dan Olweus as its principal architect. Olweus' systematic study of bullying had made him a national hero in Sweden.⁹

Why would Norway and Sweden take so seriously the impact of bullying upon children, while such problems get little attention in the United States? Marano offers the following explanation: "The difference. . . could arguably be summed up in four words: Mighty Morphin' Power Rangers. A nation whose toys are given to slashing robots in half seems to have more tolerance for violence as a solution to problems."¹⁰

Most Americans do not take bullying seriously—not even school personnel, which is surprising, since most bullying takes place in schools.¹¹ Marano suggests that Americans "tend to think that bullying is a given of childhood, at most a passing stage, one inhabited largely by boys who will, simply, inevitably, be boys."¹²

In Scandinavia, England, Japan, the Netherlands, Canada, and now the United States, researchers have been analyzing data about bullying. Their conclusions should alarm us.

- *Bullies are a special breed of children.* Sixty to 70 percent of children never bully other children. Early in their development, most children acquire in-

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ternal restraints against bullying behaviors.

- *Aggressive behaviors begin at an early age,* showing up as early as kindergarten.

- *Bullies are in a power struggle with other students and teachers.*

- *Bullying causes a great deal of misery.* Its effect upon victims lasts for decades—maybe even a lifetime.

- *The person hurt most by bullying is the bully himself.* Though not always apparent at first, the negative impact increases over time.

- *Most bullies' lives follow a down-*

ward spiral. Their behavior interferes with their schoolwork, friendships, employment, and mental health.

- *Bullies become antisocial adults.*

They are far more likely than non-aggressive children to become criminals, to abuse their spouses and children, and to produce children who become bullies.

- *Girls can be bullies, too.* Because their behavior is more subtle and complex than the overt physical aggression of boys, it is more likely to be overlooked.¹³

How to Recognize a Bully

What are bullies like? How can you recognize them before they harm others? Lister observes: "Somewhat of a catch-all phrase, bullying encompasses taunting, teasing, jeering, kicking, shoving, and beating up on other kids." She notes that bullying also includes indirect behaviors "in which the child is never touched but is intentionally ignored or excluded—[which] can be as devastating as physical assault."¹⁴

Olweus' definition of bullies includes three core elements: (1) a pattern of *repeated aggressive behavior* with (2) *negative intent* and (3) a *power difference* between bully and victim.¹⁵ Bullying may involve a bigger child picking on a smaller one or several children picking

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on one child.

Research data indicates that bullies are perpetually hostile toward others and tend to be paranoid, seeing provocation where it does not exist. For example, if a student accidentally bumps into a bully and apologizes, the bully would still see this “as a call to arms.” Marano observes that bullies “act aggressively because they process social information inaccurately. They endorse revenge.”¹⁶

Bullies gain satisfaction from dominating and hurting other people. They do not know how to relate to their peers in positive ways. Since they lack empathy, they find it easy to deny that they are harming others either physically or psychologically.

Surprisingly, bullies “see themselves quite positively,” according to Marano.¹⁷ Melissa De Rosier, of the University of North Carolina, says, “Bullies are clueless as to how little they are liked. They are out of touch with what kids think [about them].”¹⁸

Bullies usually prey on specific types of children. At the beginning of a school year, about 22 percent of children report they have been harassed by others. By the end of the year, when bullies have identified the “good victims,” the number diminishes to about eight percent, says Gary Ladd from the University of Illinois.¹⁹ Bullies usually single out victims who are younger and smaller or are different in some significant way, such as appearance or physical handicaps.

Who Are the Victims?

Although bullying often goes on in private, teachers can look for certain traits that seem to put children at risk. They are younger, smaller, and weaker than other children. They are ill-equipped psychologically to keep a bully at bay because they tend to be more cautious, sensitive, and quiet.²⁰

Typically, victims will do almost anything to avoid a hostile confrontation. “It’s not just that they’re nonaggressive, for lots of kids are nonaggressive. But these kids withdraw from confrontations of any kind and cry when attacked. They radiate what one researcher calls ‘an anxious vulnerability.’” When these children face conflict, they become gripped by fear, which sets them up to be victimized.²¹

Bullies come in all ages.

Not only do children singled out by bullies not fight back, but they also readily hand over their possessions. They thus reward their attackers both psychologically and materially. Bullies are unlikely to face punishment or retaliation from their victims or their families. They probably will not be disciplined by authorities, either, because victims are too frightened to report them.

Other factors compound the bully-victim relationship. “No one likes a

Defining the School’s Mission

What can be done to help bullies and their victims? Teachers and entire faculties need to ask this question frequently to ensure that their school program protects students from being bullied. Their planning must include approaches to help bullies to learn acceptable behaviors.

Stephen Wallis, a Maryland public school administrator, says, “Coddling disruptive individuals is a disservice to earnest, hard-working students, faculty and staff—all of whom must face the resulting intolerable working conditions.”²⁵ He suggests that school systems develop comprehensive behavior policies and wisely enforce them. When administra-

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bully,” notes Marano, “but no one likes a victim either.”²² An important part of growing up is learning how to stick up for yourself, says Gary W. Ladd.²³ Becoming a “whipping boy” makes a child more and more socially isolated.

The Consequences of Being Bullied

When Ladd asked victims about their school experiences, he found that they were unhappy and lonely. They wanted to quit school and escape their tormentors. Bullying affects school achievement and causes a disproportionate number of victims to drop out, Ladd noted.²⁴

tors tolerate bad behavior and permit students to act disrespectfully toward their teachers and peers, the schools they lead are in deep trouble, says Wallis.

To ensure improved student behavior and achievement, faculties must create behavior policies based upon three basic principles:

- *Disruptive and violent behavior gets zero tolerance.* This does not mean that policies should be controlling or punitive. Ellen White says: “To direct the child’s development without hindering it by undue control should be the study of both parent and teacher. Too

much management is as bad as too little.”²⁶

- *Discipline is evenhanded, regardless of race, gender, or other factors.* Principals and faculty must always deal with behaviors, not motives. When rules are appropriate and clearly stated, educators commit a major breach of professional ethics if they allow students to excuse their misbehavior.

- *Strong discipline contributes to personal growth and freedom.* “Students should be taught that discipline is a kindness to them and a source of their personal empowerment,” says Wallis. He adds, “The sooner administrators recognize the vital role schools play in this area, the sooner students will begin to feel a sense of security often lacking in their own families and communities.”²⁷

Based on their research, Martin Haberman of the University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee, and Vicky Dill of the Texas Education Agency derived the following “Three Principles to Live by in Counteracting School Violence”²⁸:

- *Whatever is illegal outside school cannot be treated as if it were not a crime inside the school.* If a student sets a fire or carries a weapon, the principal is not at liberty to decide “No one was really hurt, so I will overlook it.”

- *The processes of school management and discipline are more important than the outcomes.* This does not mean that schools should be light on discipline. Rather, Haberman and Dill observe: “How their particular cases are handled teaches students more than whether they get detention or are suspended. Students must not be reinforced in their belief that power is everything; that who can do what to whom is all that really matters.” “Thinking, reasoning, and working through problems” should be the focus of the process.

- *Dealing with problems of school violence is not an intrusion on the school program; it is an integral part of the education process.* The researchers observe, “Making the building safe is a necessary but not sufficient condition: teaching students to care about and predict the consequences of their behavior is the goal.” Options to violence, such as peer mediation or conflict resolution, should be regularly modeled in every classroom.

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Teaching Self-Control and Ethical Literacy

When people see their schools as violent places, they may view control and punishment as appropriate solutions, rather than continuing to encourage strong academics and achievement. However, schools do need to teach self-control and appropriate behavior.

Ruth Charney, head teacher of Greenfield Center School in Greenfield, Massachusetts, says, “The most important thing I have learned in 20 years of teaching is that discipline is a subject to be taught, just as reading and math are: year after year and without apology.” She adds, “We need an ongoing curriculum in self-control, social participation, and human development.”²⁹

Charney also calls for schools to teach ethical literacy. “Teachers need to pass on an affection for moral and ethical behavior in a different world. Children desperately need to examine questions of right and wrong.” She suggests adding a new set of 3 R’s: “Reinforcin’, Remindin’, and Redirectin’.” If faculties want to rid their schools of violence and bullying, they must do more than merely disapprove of violence. They must foster distinctive ways of acting and thinking

that pervade the entire school program.

Adventist teachers know that one of the primary lessons children must learn is obedience. But we sometimes forget *how* to teach obedience. Ellen White says, “By gentle, persistent effort, the habit [of obedience] should be established.”³⁰ The object of discipline is not punishment and control. This only reinforces the bully’s conviction that the object of power is finding ways to control other people. Instead, as we design discipline processes, we should remember what Ellen White tells us: “The object of discipline is the training of a child for self-government. He should be taught self-reliance and self-control. Therefore as soon as he is capable of understanding, his reason should be enlisted on the side of obedience. Let all dealing with him be such as to show obedience to be just and reasonable.”³¹

How to Deal With Bullying

No matter how good the statement of mission and the guidelines voted by boards and faculties, success in dealing with harassment and bullying really occurs in the classroom. At the beginning of the school year, teachers need to state clearly: “This is a Christian school, which means that we treat each other with love and respect. Teasing, hitting, and other disrespectful behavior will not be tolerated.” They must then follow up consistently if problems develop.

When children begin to recognize differences between people, teachers must help them develop a tolerance for diversity. Cooperative learning projects can help children learn to get along with others. Class meetings can focus on acceptable interpersonal relationships and teach children how to listen to one another and offer help.

If students laugh at classmates’ mistakes or engage in name calling and hostile non-verbal behavior, teachers must use this opportunity to teach right behaviors rather than right answers. They do this by giving the clear, emphatic message: “Hurtful, intimidating behavior will not be tolerated here.”

Adults can by their actions give unspoken permission for bullies to operate. When a student mumbles, “I’ll get you,” or punches another child and this goes unchallenged, he or she gets the message

that is all right to threaten and hurt others.

Schools should give serious consideration to teaching conflict resolution. This can be integrated into social studies, language arts, and Bible classes. When conflict erupts, teachers should stop and teach the more important lesson of self-control and self-worth. Ruth Charney says, "Even the hint, rumor, or threat of violence disrupts the order and safety of school life."³²

When handling bullying and other harassment problems, a teacher's first impulse may be to punish the offenders. However, punitive solutions tend to produce defiance rather than to correct misbehavior. The goal of discipline is to teach young people how to solve problems. Punishment reinforces the bully's conviction that anyone who is bigger, stronger, or older gains power through the use of force.

School faculties should seek ways to teach bullies self-discipline and motivate them toward positive goals. Using logical consequences that are known in advance by the students must replace capricious reactions to the "crisis of the day."

Here are three principles to keep in mind when updating discipline policies:

- Disruptive and violent behavior gets zero tolerance.
- Discipline must be evenhanded. If an action is wrong, offenders must receive the same consequences, regardless of their color, race, or national origin. Every student must learn how to live responsibly in this world in order to share in the happiness of the world to come.
- Strong discipline (discipling, teaching) contributes to personal growth and freedom. Students need to learn that discipline helps and empowers them.³³

Wallis notes, "To deny youngsters the opportunities that result from wholesome discipline, as schools now do, serves only to perpetuate an unrealistic and troubling view of life for those entering adulthood."³⁴

School administrators should ensure that teachers, teacher aides, and playground supervisors learn how to mediate interpersonal problems.

Modeling What We Teach

Ultimately, principals and faculties model and teach nonviolence by the way

they behave and through the social arrangements of their schools. Charney says, "Children need to see us, the grownups, behave decently and with integrity."³⁵ When students misbehave, teachers need to say, "I don't treat you like that. I don't make faces or put down your requests. I treat you with respect, even if I disagree with something you do. I expect the same."

If teachers treat others as they want their students to behave, modeling such as the above will grab their students' attention and move them a step closer to internalizing basic respect for others, notes Charney.³⁶

What Children Can Do If They Are Bullied

- Avoid bullies. Walk away when they try to harass you.
- Use humor to defuse the situation. Make a joke, "Look, Mike, lay off. I don't want you to be late for school."
- Address the bully directly and forcefully. Say, "Leave me alone," and walk away.
- Make friends with other children and ask for their help. Having a friend on the playground is one of the most powerful protective strategies for dealing with a bully.
- Ask a teacher or other adult for advice and help; for example, keeping you and the bully separated.
- Learn how to negotiate.
- Ask your mom and dad or another trusted adult to help you learn strategies for handling harassment.

The American School Counselor Association's Five-Step Plan:

1. Ignore.
2. Move away.
3. Ask the person to stop the harassment.
4. Firmly tell the bully to stop what he or she is doing.
5. Tell an adult—your parents, teacher or principal, or a neighbor.

The Saviour's Rule

When creating lesson plans for teaching discipline and ethical behavior, Christ's teaching should be our guiding vision. "As you would have others do to you, deal in the same manner with them" (Luke 6:31 paraphrased). Ellen White sums it up: "Christ's rule should be sacredly observed toward the dullest, the youngest, the most blundering, and even toward the erring and the rebellious."³⁷

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