Beyond Sticks and Stones: Strategies for Recognizing and Reducing Bullying

By Sandra Burkhardt, Ph.D., ABPP

... It happens in most families...a child comes home from school or a scouting activity or playing at the park complaining that Joseph or Jenny is “mean.”

Adults are often put in the position of evaluating their children’s complaints and refereeing their children’s conflicts. Some adults tend toward the motto, “Kids will be kids. Let them work it out and keep the adults out of it.” Other adults tend to become highly involved with their children’s social lives, particularly trying to prevent their own children from being treated unfairly. Mothers and fathers may have differing strategies for sons and for daughters. Parents and teachers often take into consideration:

- the age of the children involved in a conflict,
- the difference in age between the children involved, and
- if a child involved in the conflict has special needs.

Identifying Bullying

So what is bullying? Bullying is more than an isolated incident of misunderstanding or conflict between two children. Bullying involves a pattern of mistreatment of a targeted child by a more powerful child who is often supported or encouraged by onlookers.

Bullying, a serious problem, is defined by the following key elements (from Greene, 2000):

1. The bully intends to inflict harm or fear upon the victim.
2. Aggression toward the victim occurs repeatedly.
3. The victim does not provoke bullying behavior by using verbal or physical aggression.
4. Bullying occurs in familiar social groups.
5. The bully is more powerful (either real or perceived power) than the victim.
A simple way to judge if another child is a bully is to determine if he or she is truly being MEAN:

M → a bully means to inflict harm or fear
E → a bully picks an easy target who cannot defend himself or herself due to physical, social, emotional, intellectual or age differences
A → a bully relies on aggressive words and actions
N → nothing bad happens to a bully during the episode; in fact, the reaction of bystanders may reward the bully’s behavior

One confusing feature of bullying is the role of the Bystander – the other children or adults who witness the conflict. When it comes to bullying, there really are no innocent bystanders. Bullies thrive on the reactions of the audience. Also, bystanders who witness bullying, even when they are not the target, can become distressed by what they see.

Reducing Bullying

So – what’s a parent or helpful adult to do to reduce bullying? The good news is that bullying can be reduced by changing any one of the three factors.

Targets of Bullying: An adult determines if a conflict involving children is a “fair” fight. If a younger, weaker, smaller child is the target, then an adult MUST take action to protect the target from repeated aggression. One effective, protective action may be as simple as increased supervision of play activities.

Bystanders: When a child reports being upset or confused by witnessing bullying behavior, an adult can help that child determine how to respond. Talk over how bullying is hurtful. Encourage the child to walk away or object when someone starts to bully another child. Not every bystander will have the courage to become a defender, but all bystanders can deprive a bully of an audience.

Bullies: Bullies are often children who have learned to be bullies. Some were once targets of bullying, domestic violence or child abuse. Some may have difficulties understanding the feelings of others. If your child displays bullying behavior at home with siblings or in the community, it may be time to evaluate how this problem has developed – and what helpful steps can be taken to improve the child’s social capabilities.

To learn more about how to reduce or prevent bullying, visit the websites below.


In addition, plan to attend the CRG/MCCOY symposium, “Bullying Prevention: Creating a Culture of Acceptance” on November 3, 2012. More information may be found at: