

Bullies vs. victims: Who has the power?

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Strong self-esteem best defense against bullying

When I need a concrete example to help explain the behavior of bullies, I don't have to look any further than the flock of chickens we keep in our own back yard. I've told my three boys that it's actually fear that motivates bullies (as well as chickens) to flock together, for they find safety in numbers and feel threatened by individuals outside of their group. It's the same when people form cliques, clubs and gangs. I've told my children that it takes more strength and courage to maintain their individuality.

Within chicken society, there is an elaborate pecking order, so named because the birds achieve their status based on how many others in the flock they can subordinate by pecking them on the head. A lot of bullying and teasing occurs when people feel the only way they can be important is by putting others down. I've told my boys instead to respect the differences they find in others and to know their own worth based on God's truth, not in comparing themselves with others.

Sometimes a flock of chickens can turn hostile toward an individual that has been wounded. The other chickens will continue to peck away at the wound until they have killed that bird. I've told my sons that often it's best to ignore bullies when they tease, that it's just like a chicken pecking, they're just looking for a vulnerable spot to hurt them. Often when a bully knows a remark has caused pain, then others will also join in, just like chickens pecking at a blood spot.

One rooster may threaten another, but if the other one stands his ground, puffs up his feathers and doesn't show fear, the fight usually ends in a draw. But if that rooster turns tail and runs away, the other rooster will pursue him. I've told my boys that many bullies' threats are no more than those puffed-up feathers of our roosters. If they'll stand their ground, then perhaps the conflict will stop right there in a draw.

In our house, we're learning to see bullies for what they really are: They're just chicken!

~ Carol King, *The Acreage*

I think the philosophy behind (psychologist Izzy Kalman's) method is profound, and I agree with him that focusing on stopping the bullies (vs. empowering victims) probably creates bigger problems than the original ones it was meant to solve — with the exception of physical violence. The schools definitely need a zero-tolerance policy for that.

Since attending his seminar, I've tried Izzy's method with a couple of middle-school age clients; in both cases they'd been bullied. One of the kids reported good results almost immediately; once he stopped reacting with anger to a boy who had enjoyed grabbing his folder and taunting him with it, the boy stopped.

One of the best results so far, though, has been with a woman who learned to stop defending her every action to a critical ex-husband and instead started to simply say, "I hear ya." He was mystified.

I wish I'd learned this stuff years ago.

~ Tina Montalvo, marriage and family therapist, West Palm Beach

Retain the power

By teaching our kids to retain power over their own reactions, and not give it up to bullies, we can help to inoculate them against bullying throughout their lives. Adult bullies behave in a similar manner as child bullies, by intimidating. If we know how to stand our ground and not give in to that intimidation, we don't become victims.

I have used some of Izzy's techniques in my own life. Specifically, I am talking about preventing myself from overreacting when I am insulted, misunderstood, unfairly accused, or drawn into a conflict that has nothing to do with me. If I react to the manipulation, I give up my power. Rather, I let the other person experience their problems and then ask if he/she would like my assistance. It is all a matter of setting boundaries and being firm with how far I am willing to go. The application for the technique is manifold!

And with a background in improvisational comedy, I especially can appreciate the use of humor in his examples.

~ Gregory Evan Golden, psychologist, Delray Beach

'Terrific article'

What a terrific article! I am a retired early childhood teacher and I taught some of this, using (Kalman's) methods. It does a great deal to help, and parents today badly need this help.

~ Zelda Jacobs

Bully a bully

My mother, God rest her soul, used to tell me, "When you bully a bully, a bully backs down."

~ Michelle Rivera, Jupiter

Stop the blame

Wow. Seven years after Columbine and the experts are still trying to blame the victims of bullying. Will we ever learn?

~ Rhonda Demille

Aggression is not acceptable

Physical aggression, no matter how minor, is not acceptable. How do we explain to our children that it is OK to let someone hit or push but not OK to let them stab or shoot them? Apply Izzy Kalman's approach to domestic abuse and see if it makes sense. Should the wife and kids let dad verbally and physically abuse them? Won't a bully just look for another victim if you will not be their victim? So it is OK that someone is a bully as long as you are not their victim?

Shouldn't adults provide civilized guidance (look out for each other) and not jungle instinct (keep your head low and your mouth shut)? Izzy Kalman seems to imply existing programs are not working, so we should stop trying to fix inappropriate social behavior and just let it be survival of the fittest. Isn't that what happened at Columbine?

~ Mary Rapkin, *Juno Beach*

Wrong philosophy

Teaching children how to diffuse bullies is an important issue, but I am not very impressed by (Izzy Kalman's methods), which encourage kids to poke fun at their heritage, their families, and themselves (in order to get along with) an antagonist with confrontational issues. I cannot agree with the statement that it is the victim who has a problem and not the bully.

Perhaps it is not the bully OR the victim who needs better social skills, but the bully AND the victim. It is important to teach coping skills to hyper-sensitive children, but it is the bully who is aggressive, disruptive and confrontational and will likely go through life making countless people unhappy. If a strong message were sent to these kids, they would not get away with continually preying on others (both in adolescence and adulthood).

By saying that bullying is inevitable, it is almost as if Kalman condones it. If we pride ourselves on being a step above the wild kingdom, we cannot simply say bullying is inevitable and the bully is not the one with the problem; he/she sure is.

—Natalie A. Bruzzese, *Boynton Beach*

Gossip, exclusion more harmful than a punch in the nose

We are sure Izzy Kalman's heart is in the right place and while we commend him for wanting to help kids cope with bullying, we are shocked and, frankly, livid at some of his approaches. Yes, we agree that kids do need to toughen up and that it is our responsibility as adults to teach our kids the social skills they need to toughen up. And yes, we agree that a "zero-tolerance" policy is not the solution when it comes to dealing with bullying in our nation's schools.

Now, let us tell you where we disagree with Mr. Kalman. Kalman says that bullies don't have the problem. According to the latest research, kids identified as bullies

by age 8 are six times more likely to be convicted of a crime by age 24 and five times more likely than non-bullies to end up with serious criminal records by the age of 30 (Maine Project Against Bullying, 2000). If interventions do not occur before age 8, the bully is likely to develop delinquent behavior and require more intensive and expensive programs later in life (Center for Effective Collaboration and Practice, 2000). Bullies are also likely to suffer peer rejection, display symptoms of eating disorders, have relationship problems, and suffer from substance abuse. Clearly bullies do have a problem and their future success in life depends on adult intervention.

Kalman also says that as long as a kid is not physically hurt, adults (including educators, he says) should not intervene. This comment dangerously negates the latest research findings on relational aggression (the use of relationships to manipulate and hurt others), a term coined by Dr. Nikki Crick, who is the pioneering researcher in this field. According to research findings reported by Werner & Hill in 2003, boys and girls in middle school and high school found relational aggression (e.g., intentional exclusion, the silent treatment, gossip, spreading rumors, etc.) **MORE HARMFUL** than physical and verbal aggression.

Changing patterns of harassment requires changing the culture of a school. It takes a comprehensive approach, including setting clear standards for acceptable behavior, implementing consistent consequences for actions that are likely to hurt others, and educating every student.

~ Trudy Ludwig, author of "My Secret Bully" and "Just Kidding"

~ Lisa Sloan, executive director of Full Esteem Ahead

~ Mary Baird, president and CEO of The Ophelia Project

~ Stan Davis, anti-bullying consultant, author of "Schools Where Everyone Belongs" and founder of www.stopbullyingnow.com

~ Rosalind Wiseman, co-founder and president of the Empower Program, author of "Queen Bees & Wannabees"

~ Rachel Simmons, author of "Odd Girl Out" and "Odd Girl Speaks Out"