

ARTICLE ON “BULLY-PROOFING OUR SCHOOLS”

Bully-proofing Our Schools

To eliminate bullying, first we must agree not to tolerate it

By, Bob Chase
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Another bullied and tormented boy brings a gun from home and commits murder at school. Another dazed community spokesperson stands up in front of television cameras and says, “We didn’t think it could happen here.”

Santana High and Columbine have forced adults to focus on bullying. But in truth, bullying has always had serious ramifications. And the consensus among leading researchers such as pediatric psychologist Dorothea Ross is that bullying today is more frequent — and much more vicious — than it was 10 to 15 years ago.

If we adults continue to insist that bullying is a normal part of growing up, even a “character building” experience, then, to be blunt, we have never listened, I mean really listened, to a child who has been victimized by persistent bullying. For children who are constantly picked on, ridiculed, threatened, harassed, or robbed, school becomes torture. As a teenage girl from Naperville, Illinois reported in NEA’s recent “Safe Schools Now” television program, the bullying can get so bad that you yearn for death because “then it will stop.”

Let us dispel, once and for all, the myths.

Bullying exacts a terrible toll on children. Their schoolwork suffers, their physical and mental health suffers, and the scars can last a lifetime.

Bullying is also bad for the bullies because they never learn about consequences. Sixty percent of the boys identified as bullies in middle school had one criminal conviction by age 24, according to psychologist Dan Olweus in his groundbreaking work, *Bullying at School*.

Another revealing study, reported by Ross, takes us inside the minds of the bullies. When high school seniors in a Virginia school were asked why they had relentlessly persecuted much younger boys, one of them said: “Pick on people? We do that all the time. We pick on the little guys. We don’t leave them alone. Why do I do it? To have fun, to really have fun.”

Other troubling discoveries also emerge from Dorothea Ross’ research.

One is that the child who is being bullied often does not tell his or her parents. They are too afraid, ashamed, or discouraged.

Secondly, when parents complain to the schools about bullying, “generally, little is done to correct the problem and school officials react with total indifference, although sometimes they go as far as to blame the victim.”

In the wake of the recent school shootings, however, this may be changing and not a minute too soon.

Not only do schools need to set up procedures for conscientiously dealing with individual instances of bullying, they must also create a whole school approach.

A single school assembly will not solve the problem. Every school, elementary or secondary, needs to create a formal code of conduct. And every adult in the school, every student, and every parent should be well briefed in the code as well as the consequences for not living up to it.

What’s more, students, teachers, and school support staff must be trained in how to intervene effectively. Eliminate the silent bystanders, and we go a long way to eliminating bullying.

Every time an adult does not speak out or intervene when witnessing the bullying or harassment of a student, they are complicit in that abuse.

Another theme from the research is that bullying can become particularly virulent if the victim is thought to be gay or lesbian. We must incorporate this knowledge into our anti-bullying efforts.

Bullying may be as old as the hills, but resources exist today from NEA and other organizations to help adults prevent it. In fiction, Harry Potter possessed magical powers to silence his bully — the abominable Dudley Dursley.

In real life, children don’t have such magic at their disposal. Caring adults and concerned communities are all that kids have to protect them.

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