

Ending Bullying

Back to School: Local educators offer advice for parents on how to deal with bullying as school resumes.



By Marilyn Campbell
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When Carol Baker cried, no one heard her. She and a classmate were alone in the girls locker room, and as Baker, then an eighth grade student, tried to leave, her classmate grabbed her gym shirt and pushed her into a locker. They weren't fighting over anything in particular and Baker didn't sustain any physical injuries.

"I was awkward and easily intimidated," said Baker. "I was an easy target for someone who got pleasure out of scaring other people."

As she describes her pubescent encounter, Baker is still visibly shaken, even though the encounter happened more than 30 years ago. It could just as easily happen to her two children — a daughter in fifth grade and son in eighth grade — today. Bullying remains a real issue in schools, and from smart phone apps to in-school programs, there are a

plethora of initiatives to address and prevent it.

“Most researchers agree that bullying is an intent to cause harm,” said Michele Garofalo, Ed.D, chair of the Department of Counseling and school counseling program director at Marymount University in Arlington. She is an expert in bullying, adolescent stress and character education.

Educators describe bullying as unwanted, aggressive behavior that is repeated and occurs where there is an imbalance of power, either real or perceived.

However, it’s important to know the difference between teasing, exchanges between two people who simply don’t like each other, and outright bullying. “Teasing can be hurtful, but the intention may not be to cause harm and an imbalance of power might not be there,” said Garofalo, who also has a private therapy practice.

When offering in-the-moment strategies for addressing bullies, Garofalo says children’s well-being comes first. “Most importantly, students should consider their safety,” she said. “If they feel they are in danger, they should quickly leave the area and go to a safe place and tell an adult — school counselor, teacher, administrator, parent. Students should not stay and fight back.”

Bullying is most likely to peak in sixth through ninth grades. “The early teen years is when it emerges, when there is a lot of identity development,” said Amy Best, Ph.D., chair of the Department of Sociology and Anthropology at George Mason University in Fairfax. Her research focuses on the study of youth identity formation, youth well-being and social inequalities. “Peer groups assume much greater importance for kids and kids are more self aware than they had been previously. There’s not a lot of cross-gender or cross-race bullying.”

If parents suspect a child has fallen victim to bullying, it helps if they already have open lines of communication and their kids feel comfortable talking to them. An effective dialogue is crucial when it comes to addressing the problem.

“The hard part is when kids don’t want to talk about it, but parents should have on-going conversations with their kids,” said Best. “It’s useful to be able to create spaces where kids feel comfortable sharing.”

ONE ROADBLOCK to assessing a potential bullying situation is when a child is reluctant to share or talk. Unfortunately, this is particularly common among the same age group most susceptible to bullying. “Yes and no questions won’t glean the best information,” said Lauren Keller, Lower and Middle School counselor at Bullis School in Potomac, Md. “Instead, parents should ask questions about relationships and times of day, such as: ‘Who did you sit with at lunch? What did you do during recess and who were you with? Is

there anyone you would like to make plans with for this weekend?”

A new phone app comes to the aid of parents who might find initiating a conversation with their children daunting. It's called Know Bullying, and it offers conversation prompts, tips for preventing bullying and warning signs that a child might be a victim or a bully.

Local school districts and private schools have anti-bullying policies and plans in place. St. Stephen's & St. Agnes School in Alexandria hosts groups such as Lunch Bunch and Courageous Conversations, which are forums where “students can talk candidly ... about their daily hopes and challenges,” said Linda Stratton, director of communications at the school. “These groups also take leadership in fostering a community of respect.”

Experts also urge parents to contact school counselors, administrators and classroom teachers to report bullying and to obtain more information. “If parents believe their child is a victim, they should consult the school counselor or mental health professional who can work with the child to examine feelings and come up with strategies to help the child cope,” said Garofalo, who also advises parents to be vigilant for signs of depression, anxiety and suicidal ideation. If any of those danger signs appear, they should immediately contact a mental health professional for assessment and counseling.

If parents find it necessary to contact their child's school, the approach is important, and experts suggest sticking with specifics. “Labels are often unhealthy in some cases. Parents and other adults would do well to address the behavior in front of them,” said Peter Braverman, founder of the education group ARC Professional Development in Bethesda, Md. “As a teacher or administrator, if you say, ‘Josh is a bully,’ I can't do anything about it, but if you say, ‘Every time my son walks into Spanish class, Josh dumps his notebook on the floor,’” then I can address it.”

AVOIDING LABELS also helps when confronting the child who is suspected of bullying. “One of the first things we hear from students is that they shut off when they hear the word ‘bully,’” said Erin O'Malley, dean of student services at Bishop O'Connell High School in Arlington. “And we want the students to listen to us.”

“Most kids don't want to be bullies,” added Braverman. “Addressing specific actions and behaviors allows the kid to think, ‘I'm a good person and I can modify these behaviors.’ As an administrator, I have no problem calling your parents at work and telling them to come and pick you up. I'll help you change your behavior in any way I can, but if you do it again, you're going home.”

Additionally, it is good for adults to focus on all parties involved in bullying. “There are three actors: the bully, the victim and the bystanders,” Braverman continued. “The great irony is the bystanders are the ones who hold all the power.”

Braverman knows this from experience. “The best class I ever graduated in 8th grade was the worst class I had in 6th grade. There were two boys in the class and for years one bullied the other, and one day one it stopped when [the victim] stood up to [the bully]. He got other kids to stand with him while he did it. If a powerful bystander stands next to the victim, the problem would stop immediately.”

Garofalo is about to embark on a research project to study the role of bystanders in bullying situations.

Parents can also turn bullying situations into teaching opportunities, says Best. “Learning to deal with conflict and confronting problems are important life skills. Listen to kids first and then map out a plan of action.”

Bullying Resources

- <https://www.stopbullying.gov/>
- <https://www.tolerance.org/>