

Eradicating Bullying:

How to create an environment in which bullying would never dare exist!

By Josh Schiering

Two negatives make a positive, right?... Not when it comes to bullying!

A single negative comment or act can have a lifelong and irreversible impact on a person. Whether in camps, schools, families, playgrounds and even playgroups, bullying is a natural part of our culture. But, it doesn't have to be that way anymore. As individuals, we are empowered to make decisions about our actions. How we react to what we see and hear is up to each person. When it comes to bullying, I always challenge my staff and children to be counter-cultural in their decision making,

BULLYING (Verb: 'boōlē)

Use of superior strength, influence, force, threat, or coercion to abuse, intimidate, or to aggressively impose domination over others. The behavior is often repeated and habitual while there is an imbalance of social or physical power. Bullying may consist of one or more of these four basic types of abuse: emotional, verbal, physical and cyber.

Synonyms: persecute, oppress, tyrannize, browbeat, harass, torment, intimidate, strong-arm, dominate

IS IT BULLYING?

Some say the term "bullying" is overused and doesn't apply to all cases of meanness. I say, "Listen to the victim!" So who gets to decide if an action is "bullying?" The answer is clear and simple, "The victim alone decides if they are being bullied." While a single act of calling someone a name may not appear to fit into the definition of bullying, I challenge us all to take a closer look. Did being called that name make the victim feel intimidated? Did the name caller have an implied power differential over the victim? As a result of this action, did the victim have a hard time focusing on school work? Were they afraid of a repeat of the action? Did they feel oppressed?... When it comes to feelings, well, no one gets to tell someone else what they are feeling. Therefore, the victim decides if he/she is being bullied. Period! End of discussion.

TAKE IT SERIOUSLY!

As educators and role models we must take every reported and observed act of meanness seriously. While as adults we may have thicker skin and our life experiences help us handle the intimidating actions of a bully, the issue a child is facing might be the most significant and "biggest deal" in their lives. We must let children know that as adults we:

- Hear them;
- Take what they are saying seriously;
- Are there to help, coach and train them;
- Will make sure justice is served;
- Will make them whole again;
- Will hold the aggressor/bully accountable for their actions;
- Be there to help them in the future.

ERADICATING BULLYING - IS IT POSSIBLE?... I SAY, "YES!"

When we sit down with our children before the start of a new school year to discuss their goals in school, we do not say, "Let's try for C's across the board." We encourage and motivate them to strive for all "A's." We acknowledge it will be tough, and it will require a lot of hard work, but nonetheless, we work for the best possible outcome. Subsequently, when it comes to bullying, I encourage all institutions to take a stand and

declare their initiative to eradicate bullying. We are not in the business of “dealing” with bullying, we are in the business of not allowing it to exist in our environment. So how do we eradicate it?

ERADICATE (Verb: i'radi,kāt)

Destroy completely; put an end to

Synonyms: eliminate, get rid of, remove, obliterate

To eradicate bullying we must do two things:

1. Train parents, staff and children on how to handle bullying when it happens regarding:
 - a. How to see it;
 - b. How to immediately address and remove it.

2. Create an environment so rich in “positives,” that bullying would never have a chance to even enter the environment by doing the following:
 - a. Set goals and expectations that everyone be kind, respectful and inclusive;
 - b. Share your goals with others (colleagues, supervisors, etc.);
 - c. Motivate effectively so those involved want to exceed your expectations;
 - d. Get buy-in from your staff (have each person be a contributor at your goal setting meeting so they feel a connection to the mission);
 - e. Get buy-in from your children/students/campers and parents (have your staff facilitate the goal setting meeting the same way you led the meeting with them);
 - f. Never let your guard down and never give up this mission;
 - g. Celebrate your accomplishments (Celebrations at home can be extra story time, special outing with a parent, etc. Celebrations at school or camp can be a dance, carnival, game the children want to play, etc.)!

I am known for saying, “I would rather lose one mean camper from our actions, than lose a single camper due to the actions of one mean camper.” These are strong words to stand by, but parents, staff and campers know I mean business, and therefore no one in our environment will stand for acts of meanness. As a result, campers feel safe and encouraged to try new things without fear of rejection, humiliation or being put down. The result is a community in which people are free to fail, and therefore more likely to learn, due to the supportive environment provided to everyone.

FOLLOW THROUGH

All too often institutions have a great method for handling bullying, but they tend to forget one of the most critical steps of them all, FOLLOW THROUGH. If we fix a car that is leaking oil we can't assume it is fixed forever, we check the source of the leak as time goes by. We make sure there is nothing dripping from the area we fixed, and we make sure there are no new leaks. If there are more leaks, or the same area we fixed leaks again, we take it back to the shop to be fixed again. A customer should leave the shop feeling like he/she has been encouraged to come back if there is another problem. It is much the same way when working with children. They should feel welcomed and encouraged to return by having been provided with feedback that addresses present and future concerns and problems. Every issue must be dealt with or all of our efforts leading into the “fixing/eradicating” of the problem are for nought. So follow through and follow up often.

Example: My plumber Jamie recently installed a garbage disposal at my house. When he left he said, “keep an eye on it and look for leaks. If you see anything, let me know and I will come back immediately.” Jamie is not only an excellent plumber (no leaks) but he made sure I felt comfortable to come back to him in the event of a problem. Even if it is in a year, I will go to Jamie, because I know he cares and stands by his word/work.

Be like Jamie when it comes to working with kids who come to you!

TRAINING

How to see bullying:

- Have appropriate staffing ratios. Give your team a chance to see and hear everything. Not just in the classroom, but on the playing fields at recess, on the buses and all around.
- Build relationships based on trust. Your team will not see and hear everything that happens, they just can't. So building a relationship of trust will make the victim more inclined to come to you in cases you don't see or hear what happened.
- Promise and follow through on anonymity - children need to know they can trust you, and need to know they won't get in trouble for telling you something
- Remember this - "Silence is approval" if you see it or it has been reported to you - you must act!

How to address it and remove bullying:

- Handle each situation with "kid gloves;"
- Take what a child shares, seriously, and remember that if you think it is a small deal, it is likely a big deal to the person reporting the incident to you;
- Remove the child who was victimized and listen to their story with compassion and concern, let them know you are there to help him/her. And let him know you are proud he came to you! You want to encourage this action and therefore must provide positive reinforcement for this behavior;
- Remove the aggressor from the situation and have a one-on-one;
- Remember that perception is reality. While you might get conflicting stories, you need to listen carefully and find the right balance to help both parties come to terms and own their actions/decisions;
- Follow the apology training flow-chart to ensure proper accountability, training and empowerment;
- Communicate with home! Parents are there to help raise their child and need to be in the know.

CREATING

Create an environment so rich in the positives:

If you go to your doctor and you learn you have high cholesterol, you have a few options to help your situation. You can improve your diet, or you might take medicine, or be more active. Each of these steps, like the bully-response plan above, are reactionary. What if you took the steps to ensure you never had high cholesterol in the first place? What if you ate well and exercised your entire life? You are ahead of the game and might never know life with high cholesterol!

Remember that bullying is part of human nature and what we are trying to do is to be counter-cultural or create a different, more positive cultural habit and habitat. It will take time and patience, but you must succeed! Be a change agent.

Establish expectations and rules for your group

You must have a meeting within the first 15 minutes of a group coming together for the first time. Any time a new member enters the group you must sit together and review the rules collectively. In this gathering, never dictate the rules - you want buy-in and ownership, you are a facilitator. You can, of

course, lead the group to the answers you want by using leading questions (should we be respectful...? what should we do when...?). The outcome of this conversation must include words with powerful meanings, explanations and examples like: respect, kindness, inclusion, fairness, taking turns, cooperation, good listening, good sportsmanship and spirit! Solidify this discussion by making a sign, poster, creed, bill of rights... you decide. But, get everyone in your group to agree to honor this list of rules and expectations. Then, hang it up or carry it with you. If the occasion arises - you might need to reference the list and remind children what we ALL agreed to uphold.

Put positive reinforcements in place. Many schools and camps use different models for this, each is adaptable to a home situation too. Whether filling a jar with marbles for each time a rule is followed or expectation exceeded, or giving a high five; be sure to recognize and celebrate accomplishments!

Evaluate your plan - do this on your own as the administrator and do it with your group. Have debriefs and discussions to check "how things are going." Publically provide positive recognition for behaviors you asked for when you see them

One day I went up to the softball field and saw two lines formed (partners throwing and catching across the field). The coach told the girls that for every successful catch they made, they got a point for their team. Girls were motivated to not fail at catching. Before they started throwing, I asked the girls to define good sportsmanship and explained that I wanted to see them being good sports during this activity. The second I heard one child say "nice catch" to her teammate, I jumped all over it!... I immediately said aloud, "Ooooh!... great, good sportsmanship encouraging your teammate!" What followed was inspiring, every single player shouted to their teammate words of encouragement, "Nice catch, ooh... good try.... you'll get it next time, way to go!"...

The lesson here is that kids are innate people pleasers. Tell them what you want, motivate them to exceed your expectations and then acknowledge them for their efforts and accomplishments. In this softball-catch game example, my praise was all it took to get them to do what I wanted. With younger children you might need to use point systems, sticker charts, games, and other strategies. For more on *Use of Positive Reward Systems* be on the look out for the article entitled, "Use of Positive Reward Systems."

What you've been reading comes down to this, you do not tolerate negative behavior and you maintain a ZERO TOLERANCE POLICY for any acts of meanness. You do that and follow the plan above and you will succeed. Is it true that if you demand perfection, you will get perfection?...I say, "Set the expectation for perfection, then give the people the tools needed to succeed, properly motivate them to exceed your expectations and watch the magic."