

Relational Bullying

By The VIRTUS® Programs

Our 13-year old daughter isn't someone you would think of as timid. She isn't shy, unskilled, or without talent, nor is she gregarious, gifted, or "out there." She's neither unpopular nor popular. "Geek" or "nerd" doesn't fit her but neither does "jock," "brain," or "prep." She is a "middle of the road" kid, firmly on the fence, not caring to go one way or another.

How then could she be bullied?

Throughout sixth and seventh grade our daughter, Grace, had a few good acquaintances but she really longed for a "best friend." She was thrilled, then, when she clicked with Sara at the beginning of the eighth grade. Grace came home from school one day announcing that she had finally found someone who was just like her—that Sara was so similar it was scary. They became inseparable.

Enter Vicki. Vicki sat at the lunch table with Grace and Sara and made it clear that she wanted to be Sara's best friend. Our daughter, Grace liked Vicki well enough but felt that Vicki just wasn't someone she would go out of her way to spend time with; they just weren't cut from the same cloth. The three of them tried to limp along as a threesome for a while but if you know anything about middle school girls, you know that groups of three don't work very well.

Vicki began telling lies about Grace and gave everyone a different story. To some she said Grace was a "two-timer" who would talk trash behind the girls' backs. To others she criticized the jeans Grace wore or the choice of shoes and shirt and would accuse her of being a "poser"—someone who copies everyone else, trying to be just like them (didn't we used to refer to that as flattery?). Vicki threatened others not to be friends with Grace and fabricated allegations, "Did you see the way she looked at me?"

Vicki's tactics worked. Grace was ignored at the lunch table, ostracized in class, and excluded from weekend events.

Our daughter was the victim of relational bullying, unwarranted, persistent, unwelcome behavior in the form of criticism, isolation, or fabricated allegations that cause damage to peer relationships. Relational bullying includes social exclusion, "You can't be with us", spreading rumors, "Did you hear...?", or withholding friendship, "I won't be your friend if you..." (Bauman, Sheri; Del Rio, Adrienne, *Journal of Educational Psychology*).

Relational bullying can often seem ambiguous to outside observers and often garners less attention than physical bullying or verbal bullying. It is sometimes wrongly perceived as less harmful or is discounted as "normal, adolescent behavior." Yet, several recent studies suggest relational bullying is more strongly related to emotional distress and teen depression than any other form of bullying.

Relational bullying behaviors are often subtle, occurring out of sight or out of earshot of adults. Children are less likely to report instances of relational bullying because many feel school personnel or parents will not believe them or that they are unable to protect them.

I noticed Grace no longer received phone calls at home nor did she ask to have people come over. She stayed around the house more, shared with me the events of her day less and less and her television viewing and computer usage increased.

After much prodding she finally revealed what had been going on; we were able to discuss that this was more than dealing with a “difficult person.” Grace was the victim of someone with a compulsive need to project their inadequacy onto another through control and subjugation, and it continued in a climate of fear, indifference, silence, and tolerance.

I placed a call to the school counselor who agreed to bring Vicki and Grace together for a conference. Fortunately our daughter was strong enough to expose Vicki’s behaviors in front of the counselor, “It is fine if you don’t want to be my friend but don’t spread lies to make others dislike me too.” Vicki instinctively began using denial and blame to avoid her responsibility and any consequence.

In most cases, what the bully fears most is exposure of their inadequacy; calling Vicki out and making her account for her behavior was enough to get Vicki to stop using Grace as a target, but because the reasons for Vicki’s feelings of inadequacy weren’t addressed, Vicki found another target, someone else to displace her feelings upon and the cycle of bullying continued.

I’m certain that what you want from me now is a step-by-step guide on how to stop bullying. I wish I could but it’s not coming. In our instant society, there is no instant answer to the problem of bullying. To stop this behavior we must get to the root cause and this means we must intervene. Successful intervention, however, requires time and patience. For many parents and teachers it is much easier to just say, “knock it off” but unfortunately, “knock it off” doesn’t work.

The need for education programs that include an assessment of attitudes toward bullying, knowledge, awareness, and skills for addressing all types of bullying, but especially relational bullying is urgent.

The old adage, “Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me,” is wrong. From his book, *All I Really Needed to Know I Learned in Kindergarten*, Robert Fulghum’s adage, “Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will break my heart” provides a greater understanding of this phenomenon.

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