Bullying

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I imagine that most of us at some point in our childhood have had the experience of either being bullied, seeing someone else being bullied, or bullying someone ourselves. In the 50s and 60s when I was in school, it certainly wasn't something we saw every day—most of it seemed to take place in the schoolyard or neighborhood, and involved some pushing, shoving, an occasional torn shirt, black eye, or bloody nose. As children, some of us went home to plot our revenge (either real or imagined) and maybe shoved our kid brother or sister a bit for good measure. Yet most of the people I talk to these days don't remember bullying being so prevalent and pervasive in everyday life as it seems to be today, or leading to such extraordinary consequences as the violence and suicide that confront us in the daily news. So has the nature of bullying really changed or, as with the issue of child sexual abuse, is it the awareness of the issue that has changed? Many researchers, educators, and prevention specialists agree that both have occurred.

First, let's define what we're talking about. I've reviewed many bullying prevention programs over the years and most definitions of bullying revolve around a set of common themes. One such program used in Massachusetts schools, for example, teaches children that bullying happens when someone keeps hurting, frightening, threatening, or leaving someone out on purpose. Bullying is unfair and one-sided, and may consist of hitting, teasing, taunting, spreading rumors and gossip, stealing, or excluding someone from a group. It is carried out with the intent to harm someone. It is often a repeated activity, but may also occur as a one-time event. Bullying always involves a power imbalance. The person bullying has more power due to factors of age, size, strength, support of friends, or access to resources (such as toys and other belongings), and uses this power in a deliberately hurtful way.

In a recent conversation, Dr. Elizabeth Englander, Director of the Massachusetts Aggression Reduction Center at Bridgewater State University, expressed the opinion that the nature of bullying has indeed changed, and is much more common than in previous generations. Whereas bullying behavior among children used to be primarily physical and infrequent, it is now much more common and pervasive. The dynamics of bullying have been influenced by the way violence is represented in the media, the prevalence and availability of electronic communications, and social and academic pressures. Recent research at the Center indicates that "bullying is evolving from the classic image of a big schoolyard bully picking on smaller kids to a more technologically sophisticated model, with kids using cyber technology to electronically tease, bully,and harass their peers with texting, voicemails, emails, and posts on public websites, […] all of which are popular with young students." Via the anonymity of the Internet, the classic size differential between the bully and the victim seems to have been eliminated and the level of cruelty often increases.

Although national surveys indicate that childhood violence and abuse (including bullying) have declined in recent years, research continues to illustrate that, even while declining, bullying remains a highly prevalent behavior:

- Nine out of ten elementary students report being bullied by their peers.
- Nearly one in three students ages 12 to 18 reports being bullied at school.
- An estimated 160,000 children miss school every day due to fear of attack or intimidation by other students.

- One recent study estimated the potential cost of bullying to a 1,000-student high school to exceed $2 million a year in absenteeism, truancy, suspensions, disciplinary actions, and vandalism.

So, as advocates for children, and as we have so often asked ourselves in our continuing work to confront the issues of child sexual abuse, what can we do to keep our children safe? Here are some concrete examples:

- Encourage young people to talk about bullying. Assure them you will listen and take action if they come to you.
- Look for signs that children and young people are being bullied, such as requests to stay home from school, unexplained mild illnesses, and problems sleeping.
- Advocate for clear policies about bullying in school settings and for bullying prevention to be addressed in the classroom.
- Empower young people to speak up when they see someone being bullied by saying something like, "You know what, I don't think that's funny," and walking away. This changes the dynamic by depriving the one who bullies of an audience.
- Set age-appropriate boundaries for the use of technology and teach children and young people appropriate online social skills. Tell them to turn off the computer or cell phone if they are being bullied and to tell you about it.
- If you are concerned about bullying in a school setting, talk to the principal. Many states have laws in place that require schools to develop and act on bullying policies.

Sound familiar? As it turns out, many of the same principles used in the VIRTUS® programs apply. Knowing what's going on in the lives of our children, who they socialize with, keeping the lines of communication always open, knowing the warning signs, and communicating concerns are all ways to keep the issue of bullying on the table and to bring into the light those things which, when kept secret, cause such great harm.

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