

Parents: How Not to Raise a Bully: the Ten Things You Must Know, Part One

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Last month, I stood around the schoolyard with a huddle of other moms talking about the most recent incident involving the bully of our kids' elementary class. This girl's hatefulness was well established; her path of destruction now long and bloody. The conversation shifted from reactionary to diagnostic as we began to speculate about what was going on at this little girl's home.

It doesn't take an expert to tell a mom that parents play a role when their child is a bully; however the experts do concur with us. Study after study tells us that what happens at home can either foster or quell bullying. Of course, home-life isn't the only factor with an effect on bullying; other factors can make a bully, including social and community influences, psychological triggers, etc.

But what is it, exactly, that parents can do to raise a child who is able to lead a healthy social life and who has self-confidence and the respect of peers, garnered by kindness and empathy? In short, how do you not raise a bully? This is a complicated and nuanced question. In this two-part series, we'll review ten essential steps.

1. (Re-)consider what you are saying about power, popularity, and control. We love it when a teacher describes our child as a leader. Isn't there something satisfying about hearing through the grapevine that your child is really popular?

In so many ways we convey to our kids that being in charge is good and that being well liked is an asset. Yet, too often we fail to communicate that what we really want is for our child to exhibit the positive qualities that earn him or her that esteem. Power or popularity at all costs, or as the end in itself, is a framework that makes all sorts of inappropriate behavior okay, including bullying.

2. Teach your kids healthy ways to express anger. If you have ever yelled at your kids because you were mad at your spouse, you can appreciate that bullying is sometimes a misplaced response to anger. Do your kids know what makes them angry or even when they are feeling angry?

Parents too often make anger a "bad" emotion—one that "good" kids should never feel or at least learn to quell. But anger is a healthy emotion that plays a role alongside the more well-liked feelings of, say, happiness and pride. Yet anger has to be okay, and expressing it has to be okay. Have you demonstrated to your kids how one can simply say to someone else, "What you did made me angry. Here's why ..."? Do you make it acceptable for your kids to say similar things? Without this ability to address issues head-on, anger can become displaced and foster bullying behavior.

3. Does your child know what to do when another child is driving them crazy? By the age of eight or nine, kids can understand that there are more productive strategies than a public put-down. Help your children understand the annoying behavior of another child. Does the other child lack the social skills to see what he is doing? Is it an attempt at gaining attention?

Teach your child that, many times, he or she can say something like, "Hey, it is not fun to play this game when you keep singing that song over and over." Has your child heard you say similar things at home that were spoken with kindness rather than annoyance? Does your child know

that sometimes, he or she may have to find a teacher or other responsible adult to ask, “Eva keeps singing the same song over and over, and it is really annoying. What should I do?”

4. Never provide an appreciative audience for bullying at home. Have you ever been with another family when one sibling makes a sarcastic dig at the other and the parents laugh? Too often, bullying at home is written off by parents as “sibling rivalry” or “the way brothers or sisters are,” and thus left unaddressed.

Yet several recent studies confirm what, deep down, we all know that when a child bullies a sibling or other relative at home, he or she is more likely to bully other children. Don’t let your kids get away with bullying behavior at home. Instead, make sure that they are hearing messages from you like, “You should stick up for your brother. Helping him is one of very important things you do in this family.”

5. Don’t rely on other parents to tell you. This is all fine and good, you may be thinking, for other children. After all, my child is fine. My child doesn’t have these problems. My child is not a bully! But, I’d like to ask, with all due respect, how do you know?

Don’t rely on what other parents, or even teachers, tell you. I am struck time and time again that other adults are loathe to pass along negative messages about an others’ children. More importantly, who wants to know their children only through second-hand reports? Make sure you are spending enough time with your kids and their friends to assess their behavior yourself.

Raising a child who is compassionate and kind—a child who is not a bully—takes some specific attention. Hopefully, this week we’ve got you thinking about what you are doing at home. Join us next week to learn what else is on this list!

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