

CLOSE TO HOME



DEALING WITH
bullying



Talking the Fear Away*

My name is Tyler and I am in grade three. It all started one day at lunch. I was wearing the jersey of a hockey team from a different city. A fifth-grader, Butch, swore at me and insulted my jersey. I was a little scared, so I just walked away.

A week later, Butch kicked a soccer ball at me—so hard it knocked me down. While I was getting up he came over and swore at me and when I got up he grabbed my arm and pushed me down again. This time I was really afraid he would hurt me. I didn't want to fight back because he was bigger. I was also scared to tell on him, because then he might get mad at me and hurt me.

Soon Butch was picking on me at least twice a week. Sometimes he would push me into the mud and the other kids would laugh—even my friends. I felt really stupid. Once I saw the playground teacher watching, but she just looked away. When my mom asked how my clothes got dirty, I would tell her I was just playing.

One night, I came home with scratches on my arms. My parents asked why I looked sad, and I finally told them about Butch. My mom said she would email the principal the next morning. We prayed before I went to bed. I felt a bit better, but I was still worried that the principal wouldn't do anything, or that Butch would find out.

The next day, the principal called me to the office to tell her what happened. She was really nice and listened to my whole story. She said that I didn't deserve to be bullied. Nobody did.

She talked to Butch and then she talked to us together. Butch said he would try not to be mean to me anymore. The principal said

that if Butch bullied me again, I should tell her immediately.

I felt a lot safer and I'm not so scared of Butch anymore. He still gives me dirty looks, but I just look him in the eye and I try to smile. Once, it looked like he was going to push me, and I just said, real loud, "Stop,

When my mom asked how my clothes got dirty, I would tell her I was just playing.

Butch!" That surprised him, so he stopped. And I was surprised at myself. Maybe God gave me a bunch of courage.

I know that bullying is not my fault, and that I can learn not to be afraid. If I have problems, I know now that I can get help from teachers and parents.

Tyler's mom's story

We were surprised to realize our son was being bullied at school. Tyler is a gentle boy who often helps other children who need friends. And he can usually speak up for himself. We felt bad that he was afraid to tell anyone, and that it didn't seem that teachers cared. He needed us to alert the school staff.

Fortunately, the principal was very helpful. She not only met with Tyler and Butch, but also lectured her staff about bullying. As parents the best way to protect our children from bullying is to have close communication with them, so they will feel okay about telling us of their problems.

* This is a composite of two true stories

Understanding bullies and bullying

Bullying is a power game in which people use hurtful behavior or words to increase their own sense of strength. This pamphlet focuses mainly on bullying among children and youth. However, it is a common problem in adult relationships as well (see sidebar, page 6).

According to the U.S. Health and Human Services Administration, bullying is “persistent harassment and abuse.” A Canadian group defines bullying as “repeated behavior intended to cause harm or distress.” Instead of respectful ways of relating to people, a bully uses power, contempt, and manipulation.

Parenting expert Barbara Coloroso writes that bullying always includes four elements: the imbalance of power, the intent to harm, the threat of further aggression, and terror. She also sorts bullying behavior into three types: verbal, physical, and relational. Boys are more likely to bully physically, while girls tend toward relational bullying.

The results are similar to those of trauma. In the long-term, being a target of bullying can lead to anxiety, depression, and even suicide.

In Canada, one out of every seven children under the age of twelve is a victim of bullying once a week or more. American statistics are similar. Bullies are not only those with poor social skills. The “good kid bully” is a powerful, successful student who puts on social airs and ostracizes his or her victims.

Bullying behavior can often be traced to one or a combination of causes: modeling in the home (see sidebar, page 5) and social environment; personality; genes; and emotional stress or trauma.

Cyber-bullying (on the Internet) affects about a third of online teens. It amplifies the trauma by reaching—usually anonymously—into a person’s privacy. Cyber-bullies may:

- forward private messages or photos without permission, intending to embarrass
- send aggressive messages
- spread false rumors
- ignore and exclude others.

Online, it’s harder to spot and identify a bully, but the results can harm relationships—and unfortunately, there is almost nothing that the victims can do to stop it. Some social networking sites now employ officers to identify and control inappropriate content.

Bullying starts at home*

Children who bully are more likely to live in homes where there is:

- a lack of warmth and involvement on the part of parents
- overly permissive parenting (including a lack of limits for children’s behavior) or harsh, physical discipline
- a model for bullying behavior. Sometimes the models are in the extended family network.

* Source: U.S. Department of Health and Family Services.

Bullying, the Bible, and the Christian story

In the book of Acts, the young religious leader Saul took pleasure in persecuting people who had joined the Christian church. He witnessed and approved the stoning of Stephen, a strong Christian leader, then went on to persecute anyone who claimed to be a disciple of Jesus Christ. He used his connections with the authorities to carry out his harassment of believers. In many ways, he was a bully.

On a trip from Jerusalem to Damascus to arrest more disciples, Saul encountered Jesus in a blinding light (Acts 9). In Damascus, he waited for Jesus' instructions. Meanwhile, Ananias, a disciple in Damascus, encountered God in a vision. God asked him to go and help Saul. Ananias met his fear with prayer and gained courage to do what at first seemed impossible: visiting someone known for bullying people because of their faith. When Ananias met Saul, he saw how God had made Saul into a friend. God can do surprising things with people; nothing is impossible with God.

Throughout Scripture we see a God who takes the side of people who are unjustly treated by others. God also calls us to care for people who are oppressed. Proverbs 31:8 says, "Speak out for those who cannot speak, for the rights of all the destitute." People of all ages who experience bullying need support and intervention by caring adults or peers.

Resist, but not with violence. Jesus' instruction not to resist an evildoer (Matthew 5:39) has been misused to encourage people to be passive in the face of violence and oppression. Biblical scholar Walter Wink says the original word for *resist* was understood to mean violent resistance; a more correct trans-

Adults are bullies, too—even at church

Diane and Jane (fictional names) were both on the pastoral care committee. Diane's loud voice and intimidating manner often filled Jane with self-doubt and she considered quitting her service in the church.

Once, when they met to discuss an area of disagreement, Diane told Jane that her involvement had caused the whole church to falter. She claimed people were praying that Jane might see the error of her ways. She also criticized Jane for giving children communion. (In fact, she'd given the children unleavened bread in a lesson on the Passover.)

A talk with her pastor helped Jane gain perspective and she decided to go on with her ministry. The pastor also offered to talk with Diane about deeper issues that might have led to the aggressive behavior. Jane learned that: 1) she did not have to allow Diane to define her self-worth; 2) she could seek help from a trusted mentor, counselor, or someone skilled in mediation.

lation would be "Do not resist an evildoer with violence." Whether we are victims or bystanders, we can explore creative, non-violent ways of standing up to bullying behavior (see page 8).

Jesus even teaches us to love our enemies (Matthew 5:43-48). This means seeking their well-being and eventually, perhaps, winning their friendship. The Bible shows that we have power not only to resist the power of evil and violence, but to work for positive change.

Bullying is based in fear. The bully, bystanders, and victim are all afraid in their own way. Scripture is filled with the assurance that we do not have to live in fear. "Do not fear, for I am with you, do not be afraid, for I am your God; I will strengthen you, I will help you, I will uphold you with my victorious right hand" (Isaiah 41:10). Scripture assures us that when we respond to God's nudging, God will give the courage to face our biggest fear.

Steps toward wholesome responses to bullying

If you observe bullying happening among children or adults, you can intervene effectively. Intervention must address both the victim and the bully. Victims need to learn how to change behaviors that make them easy targets. Bullies need to gain empathy for others, learn relational skills, and recognize the consequences of their behavior.

How to avoid being bullied

A bully will decide in seven seconds if you are a good target, so:

- Walk tall and keep your chin up.
- Act confident (even if you don't feel confident).
- Stand up for your values and learn to say "No!"
- Never fight a bully, especially one with a weapon.
- Make eye contact but stand a bit to the side of the bully.

When you see a bully coming

- Pray, and trust that God will help you think clearly.
- Do something unexpected, like skipping.
- Walk away.
- Shout for help.
- Say loudly, "Leave me alone!"
- Blow a whistle.
- Talk in a quiet, calm voice.
- Laugh or make a joke.
- Go limp or act sick.
- Ignore his or her behavior.
- Say that you refuse to fight back.

1. Learn about bullying and teach your children about it. The skills needed to deal with a bully will be valuable assets for use in future relationships. Effective teaching programs are available in many communities. You may also consult resources such as those recommended on pages 10 and 11.

2. Confront it for what it is. Whether bullying happens on the playground at school, or among adults at church, name the issue. Bullying is a form of abuse, and it must not be tolerated.

3. Develop consistent consequences for bullying behavior. If a parent or teacher observes bullying behavior regularly but intervenes only when bodily injury is involved, it may encourage more subtle and deeper forms of abuse.

4. Be positive. Modeling empathetic relationships in front of bullies can show them a different way of relating, and can thus help to prevent bullying.

5. Create a safe place. Assure children of your support as they deal with bullying. Send a clear message that they must tell an adult if they experience or observe bullying. This is not tattling; it is about stopping hurtful behavior.

6. Encourage children to pray and seek God's help. Guide them to trust God for the courage to do what is right, rather than living in fear. Tell stories of how God has helped others.

7. Teach children to stand up for others being bullied. Some children may be able to do this on their own; others can learn to do so, or to evaluate what they're seeing and then seek help from adults.

For further awareness

For children

Cox, Judy. *Mean, Mean Maureen Green*. New York: Yearling, 2001.

Polacco, Patricia. *Bully*. New York: Putnam Juvenile, 2012.

Thomas, Pat. *Stop Picking on Me*. Hauppauge, New York: Barron's Educational Series, 2000.

Webster-Doyle, Terrence. *Why Is Everybody Always Picking on Me? A Guide to Handling Bullies*. Boston: Shambala/Weatherhill, 1999.

For Parents and Teachers

Coloroso, Barbara. *The Bully, the Bullied, and the Bystander*. New York: Harper Resource, 2009.

Cram, Ronald Hecker. *Bullying, A Spiritual Crisis*. St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2003.

Haber, Joel and Jenna Glatzer. *Bullyproof Your Child for Life*. New York: Penguin, 2007.

Kraizer, Sherryl. *Ten Days to a Bully-Proof Child*. New York: Marlowe & Company, 2007.

What you can do to stop your child from bullying*

- Take it seriously; another child is being hurt.
- Find out why he or she is bullying. Does your child feel sad, angry, lonely, or insecure? Are changes at home or school bringing on these feelings? Is he or she struggling with school work or having trouble making friends? Ask how you can help.
- Talk to your child about how it feels to be bullied.
- Ask yourself: Is someone at home bullying your child? Often, bullies themselves are being bullied by a parent, family member, or another adult.

When you respect yourself and other people, you don't bully.

* Adapted from National Crime Prevention Council.

Websites

www.stopbullyingnow.com

www.cyberbullying.org

www.opheliaproject.org

www.lfcc.on.ca/bully.htm

www.apa.org/topics/bullying

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CLOSE TO HOME

**Local resources for help with
bullying:**

**For more information on other Close to Home
titles, go to:**

www.mennomedia.org/closetohome



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