

Parents Can Assist Schools in Weeding Out Bullying

It is almost impossible to pick up a newspaper or magazine today and not come across an article about the pervasiveness of bullying in our American schools. Unfortunately, this destructive phenomenon cuts across economic, gender, religious, national, and international lines. Almost 78% of U.S. students in third through eighth grade reported being bullied (NASSP March 2002 Bulletin), with 6% of the bullying behaviors considered severe. This means that there are 4.8 million students in our country who are threatened either physically or verbally by other students. With the advent of picture phones, the Internet, instant messaging, e-mail, text messaging, blogs, and personal Web sites, the potential for even more harmful behavior increases.

Catholic schools are not immune to this social problem. As caring Christian parents and educators, we have a responsibility to work together to provide a respectful and physically and emotionally-safe environment for our young people. Together we can let our children and students know that bullying behaviors will not be tolerated.

In order to do this, there are several steps parents can take to assist the school in weeding out bullying. First, parents should be aware of the school's policy regarding bullies and bullying behavior. If a policy is not in place, approach the school, school board, or diocesan school board about establishing an effective, well-communicated policy.

Second, parents should keep their ears open to remarks made by their children. Avoid overreacting when you learn about a bullying incident. Look at bullying as an opportunity for growth for the young people involved and for the school as a whole. Start by getting the facts. Select a time to talk with your child when others are not around and ask these questions. Who is the victim? Who is the bully? When did this happen? Where did this happen? How many times? When talking with your child make sure that the incident under discussion is truly one of bullying and not an isolated incident of cruel teasing or rude behavior.

Bullying by definition is aggressive verbal or physical behavior toward another individual, defined as the victim, and occurs over a period of time. Bullying is intentional and intends to put the victim in distress. Cyber bullying uses information and communication technologies to support deliberate and repeated bullying of an individual or group with the intent to do harm.

Once you have determined that bullying is actually occurring, the way you deal with it depends on whether your child is the victim of a bully or observed another individual being bullied. If your child is the victim, provide strong emotional support and assure him or her that he or she

has done nothing to deserve this treatment, and that you will help him solve this problem. Encourage your child to choose one of several options: stand up to the bully by telling him or her to stop this behavior, talk with the teacher/guidance counselor (the age of the child determines whether you should attend this meeting), or contact the school administration. If, on the other hand, your young person is observing bullying behavior, encourage your child to stand up for the victim (this often defuses the bully), invite the victim to join his group to play, encourage others to stand up for the victim, and tell a teacher or administrator what is happening.

Oftentimes with an assertive stand by a few students, coupled with a clearly defined school policy, the bullying will stop. However, if it does not, make an appointment with the school administration. Explain the situation without exaggeration, sharing the interventions your family has attempted. Assure the school administration that you trust them to handle the problem and appreciate their efforts to date. Offer to serve on a committee to contact outside agencies to better educate parents and students about this serious problem. Remember to always take a Christian, non-accusatory approach when meeting with school personnel. Follow through on your offer of assistance and check back regularly with the school administration to monitor progress in correcting the problem.

Catholic school parents have a reputation for being strong supporters of their children and their schools. This is an opportunity for you to make a real difference on an issue of major importance. Together parents and educators can weed out bullying and provide our children the safety and respect they deserve as God's children.



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