

Parenting, Bullying, and Moral Development

The suicide of 11 year old Jaheem Herrera struck a cord that troubled me. The ruling by Judge Thelma Wyatt Cummings in DeKalb County that said bullying was not a cause because the only fight was “started by Jaheem”; angered me. As I sat back and examined my feelings I think what both angered and troubled me is the fact that Judge Cummings failed to recognize that verbal abuse as bullying is actually worse than physical abuse. For many years we as Americans have bought into the old adage that “Sticks and Stones may break my bones but words will never hurt me.” It is not true! Words do hurt and in the end often do more harm than any stick or stone. The adage should say “Sticks and stone may break my bones but words could cripple my life.”

There are two types of bullying physical and verbal. Physical is when a child is hit, tripped, pushed or beaten up. However, children have become smarter and therefore most bullying is now verbal abuse. Verbal Abuse is something we rarely discuss, yet it is the most damaging form of violence. We need to recognize that this type of abuse leaves the longest lasting and most severe scares. When someone uses words to attack others it is often overlooked as insignificant. However, hearing these words can get into our minds, hearts, and attitudes toward ourselves and others. These words leaves unseen marks on the psyche. Bullies tend to use words more than any type of physical contact. Verbal abuse and physical abuse come from the same place that of control and violence. When we as adults ignore this kind of abusive behavior we leave our children victims of this violence. This is what I believe Judge Cummings missed in her ruling. Verbal abuse is subtle because a whispered word in class, a statement made in the hallway, on the bus or via text message is often seen as kids being kids. This is not only dangerous for the kids being bullied but for the bullies themselves.

As I began to investigate bullying and the affects it has on children, adults and the community I found some surprising information. The first is that bullies have some negative effects that can scar them as well as kids who are bullied. It also greatly affect the quality of the educational environment. The information I found was from the American Academy of Pediatrics, the National Youth Violence Prevention Resource Center and Suicide.org. This article will focus on the effects on the children. The next article will discuss parenting and bullying.

The Bully

First, thing I noted is that children who have poor relationships with their parents are more likely to become bullies. I believe this correlates to a lack of moral development which we will discuss more later. What I find the most interesting in this area is that both parents who are permissive (pretty much allow the children to do what they want) and parents who are dictatorial (my way or the highway harsh and abrasive towards children) are more likely to have kids who are bullies. These two types of parents often fail to have strong and meaningful relationships with their children. Children are not taught respect for self or others in these families and that can lead to emotional immaturity.

The second area of interest is the belief that most bullies are anti-social is incorrect. In fact according to the fact sheet from safety.org the website of the prevention center stated most bullies are popular kids. However, they lean toward pro-violent behavior. In both boys and girls bullies are aggressive in cases of boys they can be more prone to physically violent behavior. Girls bullying tends to be in spreading rumors, gossiping and encouraging others not to interact with the victim. Name calling, maligning of character, rumors, gossip and alienation are all hallmarks of bullying.

The final area for looking at those who bully really surprised me. One report showed that children who were identified in grades 6-9 as bullies; 60% of them had been convicted of a crime by age 24. This startling statistic shows me just how important it is to deal with bullying not just for the sake of the children being bullied but for the sake of the bully's themselves.

The Bullied

5.7 million Children report being involved in bullying in some way. 13% admit to being bullies. 11% report being bullied; and 6% report being the bully and being bullied as well. It does not matter if the bullying is physical or verbal it can affect the self-confidence feelings of isolation and sadness in children. There are short term and long term effects to bullying that affect children and the quality of their lives.

Short term Effects

Most children at one point or another can be bullied. It is usually a short-term thing. The effects can lead to children who begin to feel less confident about who they are as people. This can be especially devastating for a child who already has a low self-esteem. Children need to feel valued not only by parents, teachers and other adults but, also by their peers. Knowing you have friends and others who like you makes an impact on how we feel about ourselves as people. Children who are isolated often feel they have less value because they are unliked or feel unworthy of positive interaction with their peers.

The second area of short-term effects can be that children who are bullied are often isolated by peers. This can lead to a stunting of being able to develop relational intimacy with peers. Relational intimacy is when there is a connection of heart, mind and soul that develops camaraderie due to this connection. Once a short-term bullying episode has ended children and teens begin to develop these peer interactions and fully develop the skills for relational intimacy.

The final area of short-term effects is depression. When someone is physically or verbally attacking you it can lead to depression. Children who are bullied can suffer from a mild form of depression. Sadness in life is normal. However, children who are bullied tend to feel not only down on life but themselves especially if they feel they should stand up to the bully but are too afraid. Often fear and low self-esteem are linked in the case of bullying. Depression can lead to all kinds of ill effects. However, short term bullying often ends quickly and children bounce back from feelings of depression. They learn to see the world in a positive light again.

Long-term Effects

The three short term effects can lead to long term effects that damage a person's ability to live a healthy adult life. The first is self-esteem In J. Juvonen & S. Graham, Eds., *Peer Harassment in School: The Plight of the Vulnerable and Victimized*. New York: Guilford Press. Shows that adults who have been bullied as children can show long-term effects of low self-esteem long into adulthood. These adults do not feel as worthy as the rest of the other adults in our country. This leads many adults to a life of low productivity, sadness, and a general sense of being unloved and unnecessary to society. The person becomes a worker bee and can fail to live up to the true potential within them. This in turn leaves our society worse off because who knows what this person may have been capable of producing with a feeling of full confidence.

The second area of short-term effects is the lack of relational intimacy and it is the saddest in my opinion to become a long-term issue. It is the ability to form relationally intimate relationships.

Adolescents who do not have a chance to learn to form these kinds of relationships have difficulty in developing bonds with other adults later in life. It becomes a lack of an ability to trust the motives of others. Those affected by this problem are often doomed to a life of loneliness, distant in their relationships and having a hard time developing close and committed personal interactions.

Depression can lead to the final and most devastating form of long-term effects. This is the act of suicide. One American Academy of Pediatrics study done in Korean Middle Schools by Kim, Koh, and Leventhal showed:

“All of these findings strongly suggest that the peer rejection and peer abuse that are inherent to school bullying may have a direct effect on the genesis of suicidal ideation and suicidal behaviors in children and adolescents, irrespective of nationality, culture, and other social environments in which the youths find themselves.”

This study showed that culture and society do not discriminate when it comes to people's reactions to violent behaviors. According to Suicide.org a website dedicated to the eradication of this practice. Bullying and suicide are such a dangerous practice that the US Department of Health and Human Services launched an anti-bullying initiative in March 2004. Many school districts in the country have worked to create an anti-bullying environment in their schools. The real issue is that if adults do not recognize the cause and work to help children develop the skills needed to prevent bullying or at least to help children to stop it when they see it.

What causes bullying?

The truth is that bullying is a result of lack of moral development. Moral development is the key to the prevention of all kinds of violence. It is also the least discussed of all the developmental aspects of children. Here is a short overview.

Moral Development- to develop empathy for others to the point of defending the less fortunate and the ability to decipher right from wrong.

According to research children learn moral character traits both positive and negative by age four. This includes the positive of loving, empathy, compassion, understanding, and generosity. It also includes the negatives of prejudice, fear, meanness, and vindictiveness. Children learn these beliefs by watching their parents and other adults. They also learn by what they are taught. These beliefs and attitudes are set by age 13. (Barna, 2004) This research shows us that teaching empathy and caring to our children between the ages of Birth to 13 is very important.

Moral Development in the past was thought to take place later in life. People believed that letting their children be selfish or impolite was really needed around the age of 6 or 7. Current research shows that to be a mistake. The purpose of moral development is to help children to internalize and build the character of a person who is able to have a sincere concern for others. These lessons are learned early in life.

Children around the age of two begin to show signs of empathy; they are able to show sorrow

and compassion on friends who are hurting. Yet, at this age they are more worried about being perceived as a good or bad girl or boy. They crave the approval of adults' and want to please them. These children are egocentric and are discovering self; but they can and do show some sense of empathy.

Children's outlook begins to change when friendships become important. Then moral development is about whether or not someone will be my friend. This stage can be seen somewhere between the age of four and when a child reaches Kindergarten. They are now more concerned with being liked by peers and making friends. They also still seek the approval of adults and want to be perceived as good.

The next stage is seen most strongly between the ages of six through eight. This is the rule conscious child. Children are very strict about rules during this period. According to this stage if this is the rule then this is the rule period! There is no room for extenuating circumstances or rule changes.

The final stage of moral development is to internalize and to be able to empathize with another person's feelings. There are two keys to this stage the first is to internalize the understanding that it is necessary to do right because it is right. The second is to genuinely care that someone else might be hurting and move to do something about the hurt.

This stage takes place between the ages of nine and thirteen. If moral development has been taught and emphasized in the formative years, children are less likely to participate in teasing, ridiculing or bullying behavior.

When children can recognize right and wrong g they will automatically work to make things right. Children inherently want things to be fair. If adults point out to kids that bullying is not fair and give them the tools to prevent it they will. I want to leave you with an example shown on the Oprah show it impacted me greatly.

There was a girl who went to a school where she was bullied. Her parent's sick of her being bullied changed her school. She went on a field trip with her class. Girls from her previous school were also there and began to tease her. Her new classmates surrounded her in a circle and said we don't have to listen to this and walked away with her in the middle of the circle of new friends.

We can teach our kids to protect themselves and each other from violent behavior. It is our responsibility to give them the tools they need to do it.