

Open Season on Bullies

There is no excuse for allowing children to be victimized.

By Joanne Kates

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To this day I can't figure out why they went for me. I thought they liked me. It was 38 years ago and I remember it as if it were yesterday.

After lunch, we are walking back from the dining hall to our cabin. One of those perfect summer camp days, when the sun glints star-bursts on the lake, and blue sky goes forever. The counsellors aren't around. Suddenly, my cabin-mates are standing way too close to me. Now they're picking me up and carrying me toward the beach. Now I'm being dragged in wet sand, my clothes being yanked off. I'm struggling, being thrown in the lake. They run away, laughing.

At 10, I was vulnerable but not ignorant of the rules of peer culture. I knew that the victim must not go to the grown-ups. Because if you do, reprisal will be swift and vicious. So I didn't tell the counsellor.

Bullying happens when six girls are sitting at a table in the dining hall and Girl No. 7 shows up: the girls spread out just enough so there's no room for her to sit down. Nothing is said. Bullying happens when, for the third time in a week, three guys walk out of the cabin together, without a word to Guy No. 4. Bullying is happening when somebody tells the whole cabin that one camper wets his bed.

When one person (or a group) is repeatedly hurtful to another, that's bullying. We grown-ups have not been very good at stopping it at school, summer camp, clubs or in the neighbourhood. Creative denial has been our strategy. Denial starts with dismissing acts of bullying as insignificant. We ignore little signs, we avoid making inquiries. Or we tell the victims to grow a thicker skin and stand up for themselves.

In the obvious cases, we label the bully a bad seed, a wicked or damaged child who should be removed from the situation. And then we fall silent again, because we don't know what to do, and because to admit that bullying is common would be to admit that our beloved children might be getting hurt and we aren't going to help them.

By our silence and inaction, we teach our children that nobody will stand up for them when other kids are leaving them out or hurting them. If we ignore it too much, we might end with violent acts of bullying, such as the beating and drowning of 14-year-old Reena Virk in Victoria. The difference between that and "ordinary" bullying is only a matter of degree. Our children deserve better, and we can give it to them.

When I began running Camp Arowhon a decade ago, I arrived with a shiny new tool called peace-making, a.k.a. conflict mediation. It's a technique for helping children talk through their conflicts and listen respectfully to each other. Whenever kids have trouble getting along, we've used our conflict mediation tool, and it usually helps. But not always.

Two summers ago, a teenage boy who was having trouble said to me, in response to my suggestion that his cabin have a peace-making: "It won't do any good. Those guys will say all the right things in the peace-making and after you turn your back they'll nail me again, only worse."

Adults have the power to make the world safer for children. In constructing workshops to train our staff, I borrowed from my favourite anti-bullying book (*Bully-Proofing Your School*, by Carla Jerrity, Kathryn Jens et al, published by Sopris West). I wanted them to learn three things.

- Every one of us has had experience with bullying — and it hurt.
- It happens everywhere.
- We can stop it.

I asked the counsellors to listen carefully when their campers told of being bullied, and to bring all the stories to me — promptly. If we could make it safe for victims to tell, then we could make the bullies stop.

Each time a counsellor told me a child was being bullied, we did a "bully intervention." The counsellor made a specific list of the objectionable behaviours (as in: "You called him a wimp.") Then the counsellor and I met with the bully.

The bully would protest loudly and innocently: "I didn't mean to hurt anybody's feelings." I'd say: "It doesn't matter what you meant. The effect is what matters." More protesting: "I was just joking." I'd say: "It wasn't funny." Still more protesting: "You're telling me who I should be friends with?" I'd say: "You don't have to be best friends with him/her. But it's not okay to exclude him/her the way you've been doing." The bully was always ready with excuses, but I wasn't buying. In a bully intervention, you telegraph a simple message: "Forget the excuses. I have zero tolerance for bullying."

The next step was to increase the supervision in that cabin to prevent reprisals and to check in daily with the victim. Sometimes the bullying stopped, sometimes it didn't. If it continued, I met again with the bully. Same conversation as before, but this time a consequence was added: Miss evening activity, or clean toilets, or muck out the horse barn. If small consequences failed, we'd use larger ones, including phoning their parents. Although it's not an instant cure, the bully interventions really helped. And it's so simple. Which infuriates me.

Why aren't more grown-ups standing up for the children? And who will they grow up to be, if we let them down?

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