

Bullying Prevention Month: Redefining the Conversation

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If you're anything like me, your eyes start to glaze over when you hear the word "bullying". Over the past few years, stories of bullying have been splashed all over various news media, and programs to prevent and punish bullies have sprung up in schools across the country. The way bullying is defined varies in school handbooks, laws, and personal opinion. "Bullying" has become a catch-all term for all sorts of behavior. A word that is used to describe physical violence, stalking, and harassment is also used to describe any action or word that might hurt a child's feelings or offend her parents.

There are two main reasons I think we should change the way we talk about bullying. First, bullying lends itself to black-and-white or good-guy-vs.-bad-guy language. We often talk about the bully and the victim, prescribing total malice to the bully and total innocence and helplessness to the victim. The real world is rarely that clean. Often Kid A does something mean to Kid B and then Kid B does the same thing to Kid C. So is Kid B a bully or a victim?

Next, focusing on taking something away (bullying) doesn't mean that what is left is what we want. I believe that stopping bullying is a secondary goal to creating healthy communities. If we have a community based on mutual respect, compassion, and healthy problem solving, then bullying naturally becomes an unacceptable behavior in the community. But how do we create such a community? I believe the answer starts with each of us as individuals.

A Pastor friend of mine often says, "We teach what we know, but we reproduce who we are." In our families, church communities, and schools, we teach people what we know, but the behaviors and values they are most likely to internalize and repeat are the ones we live, not the ones we talk about. For example, if a parent tells his child to be kind and compassionate to all people and later that night is spewing angry, hateful language at the TV because of "those people" (and "they" could be a political party, racial/ethnic group, celebrity. . . anyone really), what did that child really learn? If we tell our children that at school they need to solve their problems in a healthy, respectful way, but at home conflict is ignored, how will that child learn the problem-solving skills he needs at school?

Standing up to discrimination, injustice, and the hateful treatment of any person must start with the adults, so the children see what it looks like to treat all people with compassion and respect and to accept others who appear different. Preventing bullying, violence, and harassment and creating a safe environment are not solely the job of the school; it is the job of the home, the workplace, the community, and the church. Anywhere we are present, we have the opportunity to teach the next generations how people should be treated. Because as much as we try to teach what we know to be right, we will always reproduce how we actually live. That new community built on mutual respect, compassion, and healthy problem-solving starts with you and me.