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**“DID YOU KNOW . . .”**

That bullying is a learned behavior that can be unlearned? There are many factors that lead to bullying and many strategies to address it, but first, let's look at a definition and some of the statistics. If you Google the definition of bullying, you will find a dizzying array of intellectual variations on a definition, such as this one by Rigby, “Bullying involves a desire to hurt + hurtful action + a power imbalance + (typically) repetition + an unjust use of power + evident enjoyment by the aggressor and a sense of being oppressed on the part of the victim.” Confused yet? For our purposes, let's work with this general definition: bullying is a verbal or physical act done by someone with more power or social support, to someone with less power or social support, for the purpose of causing some form of harm. The forms of harm vary, from stress and social isolation to physical pain and injury. Now let's look at some statistics:

National Numbers

- 6 out of 10 kids are victims or witnesses of bullying on any given day
- 160,000 kids skip school on any given day because they don't feel safe in situations such as riding the school bus or going to the bathroom at school
- 1/10 drop out of school entirely because they don't feel safe
- 26 times per day is the number of times per day that kids who are gay or who are perceived to be gay hear anti-gay slurs. This equates to about every 15 minutes.
- 75% - portion of school shooting incidents that can be directly related to the perpetrators being bullied (Columbine is a prime example of this statistic)
- Females tend to be the victims of sexual harassment, such as having rumors spread about their alleged sexual activity and males are more likely to be physically victimized.
- Bullying has become such a worldwide issue for children that it is being addressed all over the world. The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, 1990, issued the statement that “Every young person has the right to feel safe at home, at school, and in the community.”

What to Do

Now that we have looked at the staggering numbers and global nature of the problem, a parent or educator may ask, what can be done about this phenomenon? It may surprise you to learn that the best answer is prevention, and that prevention starts in the home. Children's first role models are their parents, and parental attitudes and language can either encourage or discourage bullying. Parents who are quick to anger, who use yelling and hitting to correct a child, and who demonstrate anger and violence in the community, such as when driving, are only teaching a child that violence and domination are acceptable. Indeed, these are then seen by children as commendable traits that get people what they want, since oftentimes, people will back down in the face of such behavior. And the news gets worse. If antisocial behavior is demonstrated, encouraged, or at the very least, not corrected, there is a chance that it will have a negative impact on the rest of the child's life. Children who engage in antisocial behavior such as bullying have a much greater chance of having serious issues as adults, ranging from substance abuse to criminal behavior to mental health issues. Those who are victims of bullying experience stress that can result in depression and even suicide, both as children and as adults.

The message is clear: if you want your child to grow up to be a well-adjusted person who interacts with society in a positive way, you must make the effort. It starts with examining your own behavior. It is consistent with our values as Catholics and Christians? To use a popular

phrase, is it what Jesus would do? This is not to suggest that we all can be perfect as He was and never have a bad day, because we are humans and sinners. What it does suggest is that as adults who have a huge influence over the children in our family and community, we should be aware of our behavior and be honest with ourselves about our own areas for improvement. Even when we are not proud of our behavior, do we apologize to our children and explain that we will try to do better in the future? Being an adult doesn't mean always getting it right, for in reality, we are all a work in progress as long as we are alive. However, owning our behavior does two things for the children in our lives. First, it models a willingness to take responsibility and make changes as needed. Second, it gives us credibility when we ask our children to do the same.

Even when you already are modeling good social behavior, it is equally important to take advantage of teaching moments with children. For example, if you are watching television and you hear a racial slur, you can take that opportunity to talk with your child about how painful it is to be called names and why that is not acceptable in your family. If you are in the car with your child and someone cuts you off in traffic, accelerating rapidly, you can explain why you choose not to get angry or let that ruin your day. This will help your child to understand that we have more power than we think we do, in that we can *choose* how we will react to situations, rather than simply giving in and getting angry or making it worse by also behaving badly. It is also important to learn the lesson that not all things are as they seem, or as we perceive them to be. Maybe the person who cut you off in traffic just got an emergency call about a family member and is racing to get to the hospital in time. Of course, it is also possible that the person is simply behaving badly, but you can take that opportunity to thank God that the reckless driver is moving away from your car with every second of speedy driving. That makes you a little safer. Every moment like this is an opportunity to recognize the hand of God in your life, for staying behind a careless driver could mean a life-saving blessing for you and your child. Rather than react or judge, you and your child can say a prayer for the person and you can continue having a good day. Attitude, like faith, can work wonders!

### Bullying in the Schools

Now that we understand what is needed at home, what about school settings? How do educators protect the children in school from being bullied? The most important step that can be taken is for schools to have a policy and a plan. The policy should clearly state the expectations for behavior and the consequences of bullying, and it is crucial that all parents/guardians are aware of the policy from both sides, for the victim and the bully. Children who are victims have the right to be protected and children who bully should expect consequences. However, studies have shown that a policy alone is not enough, primarily because children will bully in spite of the rules and sometimes, just to challenge rules.

Therefore, once a policy has been established and communicated to all, then the real work begins. This is the time where the school staff must agree on how bullying is to be addressed and what consequences will be used. Furthermore, the more consistently those interventions happen and consequences are given, the more effective they will be in reducing the number of bullying incidents in a school. Preparation is the key so that when faced with an incident, you have a solid basis for the manner in which you respond.

### Intervention

When deciding how and when to intervene in an incident, the first thing to consider is what you want to accomplish with the intervention. It may be that you want to protect the victim, address the bully, teach the children better ways of interacting, create empathy, restore the

balance of power, etc., or a combination of many goals. The goals will help to guide your behavior so that you can intervene in an effective way.

However you choose to act, remember that the most important thing is that you do intervene. Failure to do so, when bullying occurs in your presence, signals to the students that you condone the behavior and that you will not stop a bully or protect a victim. Also, never underestimate your ability to change the climate or culture of your school, one incident at a time. If a child is being bullied, he or she may feel that the situation is hopeless, but if you intervene, the children get the message that you will not tolerate such behavior. For victims, you may become the one safe harbor in the midst of a difficult day. Intervention can be as simple as stopping a bullying remark, such as, "You're such a dummy!" The most effective way to address such statements is to make it about you, rather than the student. For example, if you say, "Don't say that because it offends me. I do not like seeing people being mean to each other and I don't tolerate name-calling." There is nothing left to argue and you have laid the ground rules that calling people names is unacceptable to you.

Your actions will also show kids that it is not okay to stand by and do nothing. Bystanders often fail to stop bullying because the bystander wishes to fit in. Particularly in the teenage years, fitting in is crucial and causes many teens to choose to ignore what may be going on right in front of them. Unfortunately, even standing by and doing nothing provides an audience for the bully, which encourages more of the same behavior. Another reason that bystanders choose not to act is out of fear that they will then become targets as well. Thus, it is evident that actions must be taken to prevent bullying as much as possible and to ensure the safety of all our children.

Kids get picked on for any number of reasons, from wearing glasses to being too heavy, too thin, being bad at sports or any reason that appeals to the bully. However, there is a typical victim for bullying—a child who is isolated (few friends), unpopular, physically smaller or weaker, anxious, insecure and lacking in social skills. It is important that such a child has an adult to whom s/he can turn for help. It is equally important that all students be aware of the consequences of bullying, as well as how to report being bullied. Children who do not receive help or intervention to protect them tend to become more withdrawn to the point of depression and even suicide. They can suffer from eating disorders, substance abuse, and/or choose to drop out of school due to the fear of further victimization.

Interestingly, bullies suffer many of the same end results as their victims. Typical bullies are those children who are raised with either very little discipline, or who experience harsh discipline. These children have very little emotional support from their parents and receive very minimal guidance or supervision. Sadly, bullying increases with age and in one study, as many as 60 percent of the kids who bullied had criminal charges by the time they were 24. Bullying is also correlated with decreased popularity in school, lower grades, and substance abuse even as teens. Clearly, there are no benefits for either side when bullying occurs.

Because of the potentially serious impacts of bullying on both the victim and the bully, it is important to intervene when bullying is witnessed or reported. Often, bullies choose to act at a time and place when adults are not around. Therefore, it is crucial for adults to take reports seriously and investigate what is reported. Support the victim, because either the child is telling the truth, or the child is seeking attention for another reason and either way, it is a child who is essentially asking for help. Those who bully also need education and redirection. One good activity is to have students do research on the topic and write reports to be shared in class. Another strategy may be to bring in parents of victims who experienced extreme trauma or even death due to bullying. Personal stories can have a great impact on children. For teens, the best

strategy is to utilize experiential curricula to educate them on the impact of bullying. As teens begin to experience how it feels to be a victim, they are less likely to continue the behavior. For those who are already utilizing violent forms of bullying, counseling and other resources, such as anger management classes, may be in order.

Finally, for those whose behavior has escalated to the level of criminal behavior, it is important to know that there are no specific laws in Massachusetts yet to ban school bullying. There is some legislation in the works, but at this point, it is not in place, which means that other laws may apply, such as assault and battery, or sexual harassment. However, what is most important is that laws or policies are put into practice. Words on a page are meaningless if no one acts on them. To prevent, reduce, or address bullying, remember these important points:

1. Be clear on what you wish to accomplish in setting the tone for your home or school setting.
2. Create a policy or practice that addresses bullying. Be sure to include the possible consequences of bullying behavior.
3. Communicate these standards clearly to everyone involved in the home or school.
4. Act on the standards! Intervene, do trainings, and model desired behavior. DO NOT be a bystander who silently condones bullying. If you feel that intervention is dangerous to you as an adult, seek assistance from an appropriate source, such as the principal in a school or police if you are in your home or community.
5. Listen to victim reports and take them seriously.
6. Be accessible to victims and bullies. The only way they will get the help they need is with adult assistance.
7. Utilize opportunities to teach desired behavior. Reward improvements in behavior.

There are no easy answers and no quick fixes for bullying, but if we work together as a faith community who values our children, we can make a difference. Even those who feel they are acting alone will model appropriate behaviors and create examples of Christ's love for all. Acting to restore confidence and security to a victim, or to help a bully to embrace more pro-social behavior, is doing exactly what Jesus would do. As His body here on earth, that is our duty and our privilege. Blessings to all who are doing this work!

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