

The November 2009 SAI Report included an article about how parents can support their children if they experience bullying behavior from others. This article will focus on what parents can do to prevent their children from becoming “the bully”—or put a stop to it if it is already occurring.

Barbara Coloroso, author of The Bully, the Bullied and the Bystander, suggests that, “Bullying is not about anger or conflict, it is about contempt.” Contempt is an intense feeling or attitude regarding someone or something as inferior or worthless. Scorn may be an apt synonym. Coloroso further states, “Parents need to watch their own behavior. Contempt is learned, so be careful how you treat others, be it a store clerk or the cable guy. Sexist or racist jokes also send the wrong message.”

Children see contempt behavior in their parents and then tend to model it. Instead, parents need to model behaviors that provide dignity and respect to others. In turn, require children to make genuine, meaningful contributions to family members and others with whom they interact.

Bullying is not limited to one form; it can be physical, verbal, emotional, social or sexual. Today’s technology allows bullying not only to happen face-to-face, but also via the use of technologies such as social networking sites, texting, e-mailing, and instant messaging. This can make it difficult for adults to observe, and at the same time allow the youth doing the bullying to reach a large number of their peers very easily. These things can lead to the person being bullied feeling even more isolated. Another aspect that adults need to realize is that children/youth who bully come from a variety of backgrounds, races, income levels, family situations, religions and can represent either gender.

The Pacer Center, www.pacer.org, studied the research and found children/youth who bully typically have one or more of the following traits.

“They may:

- be quick to blame others and unwilling to accept responsibility for their actions
- lack empathy, compassion and understanding for others’ feelings
- be bullied themselves
- have immature social and interpersonal skills
- want to be in control
- be frustrated and anxious
- come from families where parents or siblings bully
- find themselves trying to fit in with a peer group that encourages bullying
- have parents who are unable to set limits, are inconsistent with discipline, do not provide supervision, or do not take an interest in their child’s life.

If you see these traits in your child or hear from others that your child is bullying, you may want to look into the issue. If your child is bullying, take heart. There’s a lot you can do to help correct the problem. Remember, bullying is a learned behavior—and it can be ‘unlearned.’ By talking with your child and seeking help, you can teach your child more appropriate ways of handling feelings, peer pressure and conflicts.”

Parents need to be diligent about their children/youth, and what they do and say. Take time to reflect on these traits, pay attention to what others say, who their friends are, and what they do with them.

Help Your Child Stop Bullying

Parents can help their children understand two personal attributes that have proven to be successful in “turning around” difficult children/youth and those who bully. These two attributes that need to be internalized by the child are:

Empathy - having the capacity to understand another’s feelings or emotions. It is compassion shown to another. It is to be aware of, and sensitive to, others, no matter what the relationship they share may be. It is “to walk in some else’s shoes”.

Cause-effect Relationship - having the understanding and related appropriate behavior that an effect, or outcome, is what happens as a result of a cause, or ones own behavior.

Successful programs do a variety of things to help youth internalize the attributes of empathy and cause-effect relationship. For example, for empathy, they may provide them with something they would want to take care of such as a turtle, fish, hamster or puppy. Then they observe to see if s/he shows any concern if the animal doesn’t eat, becomes less active or shows other signs of something being wrong. When they express concern for the animal, it is the first sign that empathy is starting to develop. Later, applications are made to others, such as parents, siblings, and peers.

As for cause-effect relationships, some youth today do not realize that many of the problems in their life are linked to their own behaviors. When youth fail to take responsibility for the fact that their behaviors (the cause) are creating their problems (the effect) they tend to develop the notion that the problem is “outside of their control” or external. Youth who have this mindset tend to blame other people and circumstances for the difficult situations that are actually a result of their own behaviors.

An example in a school setting is when a language arts teacher working with at-risk students challenged them to get at least a “B” on the same exam that will be administered to all students. The students and the teacher worked together to create a plan that included how to: study, ask questions, take many formative assessments, review and quiz in small groups. The result was ten “A’s” and two “B’s”. The highest grades in the past for the group were two “C’s”. In discussing this with the students, they said, “It was easy” or “I was lucky.” Typical of at-risk youth is the idea that I do not cause my failure, or in this example my success. The instructor then carefully discussed and elicited all of the elements of the cause. The students soon began to realize that their behaviors were the cause of their success.

Empathy and cause-effect relationships need to be clarified with many of our children. Once these attributes are internalized, they gain confidence; they become more caring towards others: they realize they can be proactive in their lives; and they contribute positively to others.

To prevent bullying or to stop the behavior we need to be very clear with our children and youth what empathy is - what it looks like, sounds like, and feels like. Further, learning cause-effect relationships – what they say, think, and do will result in either positive or negative outcomes.

The Iowa Parent Information Resource Center believes that productive development of our children and youth is shared by the family, the community, and the school. Further, we believe all parents have hopes and dreams for their children. It takes focused involvement and encouragement to help our children reach their dreams. By teaching empathy and cause-effect relationships, plus having high expectations, teaching by example, and providing corrective feedback, life will be better for parents and children.