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School empathy first line against bullies

By Maia Szalavitz | April 4, 2010

WHEN I was bullied in junior high in the late 1970s, fatalism prevailed. Most parents and educators seemed to think ignoring it was the best solution. Back then, "telling" authorities seemed to carry at least as many risks as benefits: Even a geek as socially clueless as I was could see that getting the bullies in trouble would likely mean more trouble for me. Bullying was just an immutable part of human nature.

The tragedy of 15-year-old Phoebe Prince's bullying-related suicide is that today, we know much more about the lasting harm that can result from bullying and about how to minimize it.

Our nature as a species is to form and enforce social hierarchies, and bullying has been found in all cultures and throughout history. Yet this behavior is much more malleable than previously believed. Recent findings in evolutionary neuroscience suggest that although humans have our selfish and brutal aspects, we are as well adapted to cooperate as to compete. The key is to create situations that enhance our kind side and play down the darker traits.

That's not what's happening in many American schools. As in Prince's case, it's rare that teachers and administrators are completely in the dark; the schools with the worst bullying tend to be those that look the other way. So bullies operate with impunity. Worse, teachers and staff who have not yet worked out their own issues from adolescence can play at being "cool kids" — implicitly or sometimes explicitly enabling the exclusion and ridicule directed at the outcasts.

The climate set by school leadership can make the difference between a school that is hell on earth for the less socially adept and one that is at least safe and tolerable. This is because our brains take their cues about what kind of behavior is acceptable and what is inappropriate from the most powerful people around us. In a well-run school, those people are the administrators and teachers. If they tolerate bullying, so will everyone else.

The stress that results doesn't just hurt emotionally; it can impair academic performance. In high-stress situations, the higher cognitive regions of the brain actually shut down. "This makes learning much less efficient and sometimes impossible," says Dr. Bruce Perry, a leading child psychiatrist. "An educational climate that tolerates relational hostility and marginalization of children is doomed to be an academic as well as a social failure." (A disclosure: Perry and I co-authored a book.)

Even worse, the uncontrollable stress experienced by those who are bullied can be toxic to the developing brain, not just in the short term. Being bullied in childhood is associated with later depression, anxiety disorders, addictions, and even conditions like schizophrenia and bipolar disorder.

This association may not be fully causal; bullies tend to go after children who seem "different" to begin with. Then again, other forms of child abuse can increase the risk for virtually all mental illnesses and even physical disorders like heart disease and diabetes.

So how can schools reduce the toll of bullying? The Department of Defense recently funded a review of the research on "school connectedness," out of concern about the effects of frequent school changes on children of service members. It found that schools that create a caring climate not only have reductions in bullying and improved academic performance, but also have fewer alcohol and drug problems, less early-age sex, and even reductions in suicidal thoughts and attempts.

While "school connectedness" and "creating a compassionate climate" may sound impossibly fuzzy and utopian, administrators who emphasize kindness towards others and mutual respect in both their actions and their words have been able to make dramatic improvements. A recent review of the research on formal anti-bullying programs by a group called the Campbell Collaboration finds that on average, well-thought-out programs can reduce the number of bullying incidents by a fifth or more.

The most important element is system-wide determination — which starts from the top and permeates down — to support empathetic values. Staff must refuse to ignore acts of bullying and exclusion. “Without that, the zero tolerance or other anti-bullying interventions are drops in the bucket,” says Jessie Klein, an assistant professor of sociology and criminal justice at Adelphi University.

Districts must also avoid some common errors. “Simply putting anti-bullying programs into a distressed, overwhelmed, depleted school will not work,’’ Perry stresses.

And while bullies need to be punished, a general climate of “cracking down” and “getting tough” can backfire. Measures like metal detectors, sniffer dogs and locker searches can make a school feel more like a prison, not a place where people feel safe and respected.

The bad news is that our schools reflect our values — the way we view some people as worthwhile and others as losers. The good news is that we choose the values we express. And if we want not only to fight bullying, but also to reduce the risk of mental illness, cut drug use and teen pregnancy and improve academic achievement, we can start by creating caring, inclusive schools.

Maia Szalavitz is co-author of “Born for Love: Why Empathy is Essential — and Endangered.” ■

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