

## Back to School, Back to Bullying?

by Kathy Slattengren

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We certainly hope that back to school does not mean back to bullying! Unfortunately being bullied at school is the reality for too many children. According to the National Crime Prevention Council, "Bullying has become a tidal wave of epic proportions."

### Everyone's Role

In her book *The Bully, the Bullied and the Bystander*, Barbara Coloroso explains "Breaking the cycle of violence involves more than merely identifying and stopping the bully. It requires that we examine why and how a child becomes a bully or a target of a bully (and sometimes both) as well as the role bystanders play in perpetuating the cycle. A deadly combination is a bully who gets what he wants from his target; a bullied child who is afraid to tell; bystanders who either watch, participate in the bullying, or look away; and adults who discount bullying as teasing, not tormenting;"



### When Your Child is the Bully

If your child has bullied someone, it's important to help him build his skills so that he finds better ways of acting in the future. Punishing him by grounding him or taking away privileges may only encourage him to find ways to avoid being caught in the future.

Instead, ask him to write about what happened or discuss it together:

- What was the sequence of events that happened?
- What influenced your actions?
- What will you do differently next time so this doesn't happen again?
- What type of amends do you think you should make?
- How will you reconcile with the person you've hurt?

Struggling to answer these tough questions can help kids learn from their poor choices. While they may be tempted to blame others for their actions, the goal is for them to realize their own role in the situation and take responsibility for the results of their actions.

Children who bully often have been bullied themselves. One divorced mom told me how her 12-year-old son was beaten by his dad one day. The following week she received three calls from the school regarding her son bullying other kids. Since he had previously never been involved in any bullying activity, she connected it to his recent experience with his dad and helped him find better ways to respond.

### When Your Child is Being Bullied

If your child comes to you distraught because of being bullied, listen and show compassion. Work to understand your child's perspective on the situation without immediately trying to solve it. Make sure your child receives the message that you love him, believe in him, accept him and understand his feelings.

This is far easier said than done especially in the heat of the moment. Tina and Ron Meier tell the

devastating story of their 13-year-old daughter, Megan, coming to them upset because of horrible things a boy said to her on MySpace.

In an interview on CNN, Tina tearfully explained her reaction to Megan, *"This is the part I'll never forgive myself for because she was looking for me to help calm her down like I normally always did and be there for her. I was upset with her because I didn't like the language she was using and I was upset that she didn't listen to me and sign off when I told her to. And so I was aggravated about that and told her she knew better. She just said to me 'You're supposed to be my mom. You're supposed to be on my side.' and she took off running upstairs."*

A little while later Tina went upstairs to talk to Megan and found her hanging from her closet. Megan died the next day.

This tragic story can help remind all of us that children being bullied are in a fragile state of mind. They need love and acceptance now more than ever.

Unlike Megan, most children who are being bullied do not tell their parents. If you notice your child hasn't wanted to go to school lately or is exhibiting other behavior that has you concerned, you can bring it up with something like "I noticed that you haven't wanted to go to school lately. What's going on?" Keep asking questions until you feel you really understand.

If you find out your child is being bullied, other steps you can take are:

- Help your child think through ways of getting away from the bully.
- Meet with your child's teachers or counselor. Develop a plan for keeping your child safe, particularly during vulnerable times like lunch, recess and going to and from school.
- Find out your school's anti-bullying policy.
- Contact police or school resource officer if the actions are criminal.

The [Stop Bullying Now site](#) has many helpful ideas for both kids and parents.

### **When Your Child is the Bystander**

Children who watch another child get bullied are also affected by the bullying. They may not intervene on behalf of the victim because they are afraid or aren't sure what to do.

You can help your children think through these situations, feel empathy for the victim and discuss appropriate ways to help the victim. Developing the courage to stand up for victims isn't easy. Children who are raised to show compassion to others make the world a better place for everyone.

You play an important role in guiding your children to treat everyone with respect and dignity. Teaching children these values will help reduce bullying in schools.

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Kathy Slattengren is an internationally recognized, inspirational parent educator and founder of Priceless Parenting, <http://www.PricelessParenting.com>. Priceless Parenting offers online [parenting classes](#), [parenting presentations](#) and [parent coaching](#). Parents learn to effectively handle misbehavior while building loving relationships.

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