



The Middle Man – November 2007

One principal gives advice about how to curb bullying.

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by Mark Terry

Caution—you are about to read an opinion. Should you proceed, you will encounter my observations and opinions concerning the subject of bullying. As a middle-level administrator, you deal on a regular basis with bullying, the pecking order, finding one's place in the social order, or whatever you want to call kids picking on one another. Many individuals are making a generous living by talking about, presenting on, and writing about how to stop bullying in schools (especially in middle-level schools). We will buy anything that we feel will give us a chance at dealing effectively with bullying.

In my opinion, bullying cannot be extinguished. There, I've said what many of my colleagues have wanted to say for years. Let's just admit that bullying has been with us since the dawn of man and will not go away if we use the latest research or program. With that being said, I do not believe that we should just throw up our hands and forget about helping our young charges deal with the cruel words and deeds of their classmates. Nor should we give up on attempts to eradicate bullying. We have a legal and moral obligation to continually work to make bullying behavior extinct.

Although bullying cannot be eliminated, there are strategies that work for teachers, parents, and students in dealing with this age-old problem. Here are some ideas that have worked for our school:

1. Have a schoolwide program that clearly communicates your behavioral expectations for children and adults. We are currently using *Schools of FISH!*, a well-known program that espouses four principles that set a tone for the climate we want in our building. Our teachers are committed to making the *FISH!* philosophies an integral part of our school day. We know we are being successful when kids use the language every day and parents ask us what we are doing because they see the results in their homes. The program you choose should clearly spell out your expectations and should be incorporated in your school on a daily basis.
2. Confront bullying behavior immediately. We don't shrug off bullying behavior, thinking that it is a phase, and we don't accept the phrase, "boys will be boys." Our school operates on the assumption that behavior that is not addressed will continue and become worse. Reward good behavior and have appropriate consequences for bad behavior.
3. Make education about bullying a family affair. Parents' reactions about their child's bullying behavior vary widely. Some parents are in denial, some are shocked and concerned, some think you are overreacting, and some were (and may still be) bullies themselves. We offer education and resources to assist parents in recognizing bullying behavior—whether their child is the bully or the recipient. Counselor-led book studies are an effective way to educate parents. Schoolwide assemblies and programs targeting parents help send the message that our school is actively addressing this type of behavior.
4. Be aware of new ways that kids are bullying each other. Our school presented a program by our state's attorney general and Microsoft regarding the popular MySpace Web site. The main emphasis was on Internet safety, but we also learned from our kids about Internet bullying. We quickly found that many students were using Internet communication to threaten, ridicule, and bully others. This situation has led to more opportunities to teach our parents and kids about handling bullies and how to display proper social behavior. Look out for other creative ways to demean others. Bullying in the future will likely occur via cell phones, blogs, or a newer technology that we know little about.
5. Note that boys are more obvious in their bullying activities, but girls can be quite mean. As a middle-level principal you, or your counselor, probably spend a great deal

of time on girl-to-girl bullying. Middle-level girls are social juggernauts compared with our middle-level boys. We make a concerted effort to begin working on the social behavior of our female students as soon as they enter our doors in the fall and we continue until we send them off to the next grade level.

6. Offer a plethora of books and learning material to all involved. Here's a sampling of some books we have used for book studies and reference materials:
 - *The Wonder of Girls: Understanding the Hidden Nature of Our Daughters* by Michael Gurian
 - *A Fine Young Man: What Parents, Mentors and Educators Can Do to Shape Adolescent Boys into Exceptional Men* by Michael Gurian
 - *Queen Bees & Wannabes: Helping Your Daughter Survive Cliques, Gossip, Boyfriends, and Other Realities of Adolescence* by Rosalind Wiseman
 - *Odd Girl Out: The Hidden Culture of Aggression in Girls* by Rachel Simmons
 - *Cliques, Phonies, and Other Baloney* by Trevor Romain
 - *Working with Parents of Bullies and Victims* by Walter Roberts
 - *How to Change a Rotten Attitude: A Manual for Building Virtue and Character in Middle and High School Students* by Michael Loehrer

Any number of books and material from the [National Principals Resource Center](#) are helpful and they are right at your fingertips!

I know that there are many programs that you and your school have developed to address the issue of bullying. I'd love to hear about ways that you are effectively meeting the challenges of student-to-student behavior.



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