

The Bully: Do You Know One?

Physical and verbal abuse is widespread among children — at home and at school. Dr. Kevin Leman shares the predicament of a mother who wrote to him. “Our secondborn nine-year-old son has always been big for his age, very strong and active. His firstborn eleven-year-old brother takes after my husband, who is slightly built and rather passive. My problem is that my secondborn has become somewhat of a bully. He pushes his older brother around, and I’ve also gotten notes from the school mentioning his bullying behavior with other children. How can we deal with this?” *Bringing Up Kids Without Tearing Them Down*, p. 283.

Dr. Leman says that the nine-year-old has learned that “I count only . . . when I’m the boss!” This is a learned behavior. He may have learned this at home or at school. He suggests that the mother talk to each boy separately. Encourage the older boy to stand up for himself and his rights whenever his younger brother bugs him. But, according to Dr. Leman, the bully is the one who needs help the most. Ask him, “Why do you feel the need to dominate your brother? How does it make you feel when you beat up on your older brother? Are you angry with him?” He advises, “Try to get the secondborn boy to open up and tell what’s on his mind. Also let him know what’s on your mind. Send him ‘I messages’ in which you express your own feelings very strongly but never attack his character. Don’t label him as ‘mean’ or ‘a bully.’ Instead, try to help him see that he can really be nice and get what he wants in life without

using force.” *Ibid.*, p. 284.

As you dialog, listen actively. Tell him how this behavior affects you. You might ask, “What do you think Jesus would say about this behavior?” “The greatest among you will be your servant.” Matt. 23:11, NIV.

Jeannie Moore shares her daughter’s experience as a victim of bullying at school. “Faith had been bullied verbally. But bullying can take many different forms of direct attack, ranging from actual physical violence, threats of violence, and stealing to name calling, teasing, taunting, and sarcasm.” She tells of her discussion with Faith and what she could do to rise above this behavior: “If you give them the satisfaction of seeing you upset, they will continue to bully you. Faith, for bullying to be stopped, you have to go to your teacher, principal, or playground supervisor. If adults don’t know they can’t help.” *Signs of the Times*, Oct. 2003.

A first step in helping a child who is being bullied is to build the child’s self-worth. Share “positive self-talk.” “Faith, when you are called names, repeat silently to yourself: ‘I know that what you are saying is not true. I don’t feel that way about myself.’” *Ibid.* Of course, all of this works best when the child has been given lots of affirmation at home.

Moore said that another defense strategy was to encourage Faith “to hide her emotions and not show that she was upset or frightened.” We talked about “holding her head high, making eye-contact, standing tall, and

speaking in a strong voice.” *Ibid.*

Rudolph Dreikurs, M.D. comments about the needs of the bully. “A bully is always a child who, as a result of initial discouragement, has assumed that one is big only when he can show his power. He is discouraged; not naughty and mean. We must distinguish between the doer and the deed. We must recognize misbehavior as a mistaken approach brought about through discouragement. . . . The helpful approach to this situation would be to avoid all the discouraging remarks. They don’t ‘teach’ anything.” *Children, the Challenge*, p. 50.

A child who is constantly picked on and bullied often becomes depressed. And long-term, this can become serious. Suicide is a leading cause of death among youth 10 to 24 years of age. If you think your child is depressed, get professional help. Don’t put it off. Perhaps changing schools could be a solution.

“Fathers and mothers, you are teachers; your children are the pupils. . . . Children imitate their parents; hence great care should be taken to give them correct models. Parents who are kind and polite at home, while at the same time they are firm and decided, will see the same traits manifested in their children. . . . In the family, fathers and mothers should ever present before their children the example they wish to be imitated. They should manifest one to the other a tender respect in word, and look, and action. . . . Fathers and mothers, when you can control yourselves, you will gain great victories in controlling your children.” *Child Guidance*, pp. 215, 217.