

## CHAPTER ONE

# Every Parent's Nightmare— and *Yours*, Too!

It is one of every parent's nightmares: what to do when a child faces a problem that the parents do not think they know how to help solve. One dilemma that figures in many parents' nightmares is their feelings of helplessness when a child reports to them that he or she is being bullied. Parents cannot accompany their children 24 hours a day to guide and protect them through all the travails of life. Even if they could, to do so would be debilitating in the long run. Children must learn to interact with their peers successfully, and they must learn how to interact with those peers whom they find difficult. However, children also need adult assistance during those times when they do not feel as if they have the resources to solve their own problems with peers who are difficult.

Parents often grow frustrated when they turn to educators for advice and counsel about what to do in instances when a child is bullied. One simple recommendation, which has been offered for many years, is to give back in kind what one is receiving. This may well be the advice that was passed down from the parents' own mothers and fathers, which, of course, was the solution from *their* mothers and fathers and so on down the genealogical tree. We know, of course, that this simplest of recommendations is not always the one that works best. Returning in kind the same treatment that one receives may solve a problem for the immediate moment, but it will likely only create additional long-term problems as soon as the bullies regroup. Bullies are creative in their abilities to up the ante when challenged. They are not likely to let a victim have the last word in an interaction, particularly in a public confrontation in which the bully or the bully's companions lost the challenge. The only thing worse for victims than being confronted by bullies is encountering a mob that has been embarrassed by the target of its aggravations.

Parents and educators must remember the Number One Cardinal Rule of Being a Kid: *I will come to adults only for advice in the most dire of circumstances*. This rule, of course, becomes more stringent as children become adolescents, when the

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definition of “dire circumstances” equates with things like plagues, fires, and frogs raining down from the heavens. So, if this is the playing field in which children navigate, educators must create their own Number One Cardinal Rule of Being an Educator: *If a child comes to me with something viewed as a problem, then I need to pay attention because it must really, really be a problem because I know about the Number One Cardinal Rule of Being a Kid!* And while we’re making up all sorts of cardinal rules, let’s make a corollary to the last one. We’ll call it the Number One Cardinal Rule of Educators in Dealing With Parents Concerned About Bullying: *I promise that I will try to do what is within my power to work with the parent on this problem, no matter how many buttons of mine this parent pushes.*

### **WHO WILL BENEFIT FROM THIS BOOK?**

This book is written for educators to help them accomplish two goals. First, it is intended to provide workable ideas to help educators of all stripes—be they classroom teachers, administrators, school counselors, paraprofessionals, or even day care providers—communicate with parents about the difficult topic of bullying. Second, it is designed to give educators tips to help parents work with their children at home in dealing with the problem. I sometimes use “we” and “us” in this book. That is because I too am still an educator. My personal educational journey over the last 30 years has led me from the K–12 classroom, to the school counselor’s office, into private practice as a licensed professional counselor, and now into higher education as a professor—but my heart and soul is still that of the practitioner. I believe that, too often, those of us in higher education lose sight of what is most important about our work: the practicality and usefulness of the knowledge we impart to those who will ultimately be applying it. I hope you will find the information here helpful in making life better for all concerned—you as educator, the parent who is concerned about a child, the child, and, ultimately, society as a whole.

Bullying is not just a problem for those who receive it on the ends of their noses or in a screeching defamatory Web site posted for all the world to see. Bullying is an educator’s problem too. It diminishes a child’s ability to learn, and, in this day of testing anything that moves, some will ultimately draw the conclusion that the child’s low standardized scores are the teacher’s fault. For both the teacher and the administrator, bullying can lead to accusations of negligence that, with a savvy lawyer, can end up in court (Dawson, 2006; National School Boards Association, 2005; Rispoli, 2006; Schultz, 2004). For the parents, it can cause tremendous anxiety about their children’s health and safety when they drop them off on the school grounds each morning. It can even lead to marital discord when one parent believes that ignoring the problem is the best thing to do and the other believes that doing “something” (usually contacting the school) is the proper way to proceed.

Bullying, as well as other forms of intimidation that our children experience, is *everyone’s* problem. Although bullying will never be prevented or stopped in all instances, its incidence can certainly be reduced by increased adult supervision combined with the implementation of curricular strategies that enable children to find solutions to their own dilemmas when adults are not around. In the end, the

ultimate goal of education must be giving children the tools and information necessary to make sound decisions on their own.

## THE HIGH COST OF IGNORING THE PROBLEM

Educators must accept their roles as critical players in the bullying solution process. For far too long adults in supervisory positions have made excuses for *not* getting involved in the bully-victim dyad. It is an inarguable fact: attempts to address the issue have been feeble at best. It was only when our kids started killing themselves and others—literally—as an outcry from the bullying that they had been receiving for years that we begrudgingly agreed that well, yes, maybe intimidation in schools is a problem after all.

Yet, a decade following the school shootings at Columbine, with the 2007 event at Virginia Tech in which another young adult in an educational setting who felt victimized lashed out violently against his tormentors, we see that the problem still exists. Consider some recent examples of the effects of bullying that our children continue to tolerate :

- 2005, Tonganoxie, Kansas: A federal jury awarded \$205,000 to a male student who had been sexually harassed at school for years. School personnel were held responsible for failing to intervene on the student's behalf in spite of widespread knowledge within the school that the maltreatment was ongoing.<sup>1</sup>
- 2005, Colorado Springs: Three high school females were suspended after posting a defamatory Web site about two other females. More than 70 students had access to the off-school Web site. One of the posts included the comment, "If they can break my best friend's heart then I can just as easily break their necks."<sup>2</sup>
- 2006, Suwannee County, Florida: A frustrated and angry grandfather of one of two second-grade girls who had been tied to the playground monkey bars with their shoelaces by three older second-grade boys called the school and threatened to come with his shotgun and straighten things out his own way. The threat put the entire school district in security lockdown mode.<sup>3</sup>
- 2006, Warroad, Minnesota: Internet chatter among students intimidated by bullying escalated into threats of shootings at school. Administrators canceled classes for protection until the threats could be investigated and then suspended six students pending the filing of charges as the investigation continued.<sup>4</sup>
- 2006, New York City: A bus driver was charged with encouraging 11- and 12-year-old students to bully other students on his bus in order to comply with his self-designed 12-tier ranking system. The ranking system was to be enforced with the admonition, "Mercy will not be tolerated."<sup>5</sup>

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- 2006, Green Bay, Wisconsin: Three high school students, aged 17 and 18, were arrested before they could launch a Columbine-style massacre at their school. They had planned the attack for years, stemming from their frustration at being bullied and harassed, one because of his weight and special education status.<sup>6</sup>
- 2006, Cazenovia, Wisconsin: A 15-year-old student in a rural school shot and killed the principal, who had recently suspended him for illegal tobacco use. The student claimed that he was also angry about being called “fag” and “faggot” by his peers and felt as if no one was listening to him.<sup>7</sup>
- 2006, North Pole, Alaska: Six seventh graders plotted to kill classmates on their hit-list of classmates who had been bullying them. The plan was developed over a series of months and was to take place in school.<sup>8</sup>
- 2006, Riverton, Kansas: Five high school males were arrested within hours of beginning a school assault on the seventh anniversary of the Columbine massacre. At least one of the five had revealed the plans during a Myspace.com chat. Those targeted included individuals who had bullied the conspirators and called them names.<sup>9</sup>
- 2006, Joplin, Missouri: A seventh-grade student fired an assault rifle into the ceiling of his middle school after being confronted by the school principal. His mother reported that he frequently came home from school with injuries inflicted by other students. “He would come home crying, begging us not to send him back to school,” she said.<sup>10</sup>

Clearly, we have much work to do.

## **HOW EDUCATORS HAVE OVERLOOKED PARENTS AS PARTNERS**

To a large extent, the success of the work we all must do to protect our children and prevent bullying depends on bringing in an overlooked and neglected piece of the solutions equation—parents. Unfortunately, parents, for the most part, are often not well versed in how to be a part of that equation. Truth be told, educators are frequently reluctant to include parents in most of the educational domain. Educators sometimes feel that parents are a part of the problem, whatever the problem *de jour* is. Parents may be viewed as overreactive, overemotional, and biased. Parents sometimes seem to wear blinders, lacking peripheral vision when it comes to their child. They are seen as whiners, complainers, and, in the end, as just not knowing what is best for their own child. We educators always know what is best. After all, *we* are the educators, right?

Parents, in turn, may have their own misperceptions about educators. Often those complaints revolve around our own type of restricted vision. We are sometimes viewed as arrogant and as not listening—to both them and their child. We are seen as focusing only on the child as a test score and not as the total little

emerging human being that he or she is. Some parents, remember, are “invited” to come to school only when there is a problem with their child.

There is probably a little bit of truth in both sides of the equation.

Is there any wonder that parents and educators have a history of poor collaboration? Such uneasiness, if not outright defensiveness, by both parties often dooms conferences and needed collaborations from the get-go.

We all—parents and educators—simply have to get over and beyond all of this mistrust if we are going to work toward mutual solutions on behalf of the children we claim to care so much about. That means we have to have mutual respect, we must acknowledge that we each hold different parts of the puzzle, and we must be willing to work around our differences and our biases for the sake of our kids. When it comes to solving the problems of bullying, Smith and Myron-Wilson (1998) said it best: “Parents need to be brought in as part of the solution” (p. 414).

To that end, let's start by dispelling some of the *misinformation* that characterizes educators' views about parents' perceptions of educators. That's right, many of the things that we *think* that parents believe about us are simply *not* true!

Analyses of data from 2002–2003 by the U.S. Department of Education's National Center for Education Statistics (NCES; 2005, 2006) contradict many of the myths held by educators concerning parental attitudes about school personnel.

- In 2003, 58% of parents of children in Grades 3 through 12 were “very satisfied” with their child's school and academic standards, 59% felt the same about their child's teachers, and 60% gave the highest marks for the order and discipline in the school (NCES, 2006, Indicator 38, “School Characteristics and Climate”). These percentages were equal to or higher than the same indicators for the years 1993 and 1999. In fact, 71.4% of parents with children in the third to fifth grades in 2003 rated themselves as “very satisfied” with their child's teachers!

Do those statistics reflect the image of parents spending all their time at home conjuring up spells and sticking pins in a voodoo doll with the label “My Child's Teacher” on it? Hardly. Yet, although these data do not indicate that the “vast majority” of parents think that educators are doing a “horrible” job teaching their children, they do imply that 40% of parents are floating around out there who do not rate us as splendid. That does not mean, however, that the only other options available after “very satisfied” were “wretched,” “miserable,” and “hopeless.” Quite to the contrary, those other categories were “somewhat satisfied,” “somewhat dissatisfied,” or “very dissatisfied” (NCES, 2006, Indicator 38, “School Characteristics and Climate”). And how many of those parents fell into those aforementioned pin-sticking-voodoo-doll categories? Contrary to our opinions, not very many.

- In 2003, 32.5% of parents rated themselves as “somewhat satisfied” overall with their child's school, 6.7% were “somewhat dissatisfied,” and 3.2% were “very dissatisfied” (NCES, 2006, Table 38–1, “Percentage of Children in Grades 3–12 With Parents Who Were Very Satisfied With Various Aspects of the School Their Child Attends, by Selected Characteristics: 1993, 1999, 2003”).

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Doing the math on those last two categories comes up with a whopping 10%—that's right, *10%*! Let that figure soak in a minute. Contrary to all the talking heads who like to bash education—and our *own* assumptions about what we *think* that parents think about us—only 10% of parents indicated that they were dissatisfied with their children's schools. The misperception that leads us to be skittish in our interactions with parents because we *think* that they don't like us often supports *our assumption* that parents are difficult to work with, when quite the opposite is likely to be true!

### HOW TO USE THIS BOOK WITH PARENTS

Educators play an important role in bridging this miscommunication gap, and that is exactly what this book is designed to help educators do. In addition to giving background information, each chapter has lists of talking points and approaches that educators can suggest to parents when they approach the school for help.

The ideas in this book will negate parental perceptions that (1) school personnel have nothing to offer in the fight to reduce intimidation in educational settings and (2) that they—the parents—are totally dependent on school personnel for solutions. Educators and supervisory personnel might well want to create a hand-out of the suggestions found in this book to give to parents (all I ask is that you cite the source!). Additionally, this book is written so that educators can help parents understand how school systems work in solving bullying problems in educational settings. The book is written for both educators and parents to level the playing field of understanding and increase the chances of better communication in the parent-educator collaboration toward violence prevention.

What we want to create is an **educator-parent partnership** in solving the problem of bullying within our schools. Such an alliance is based on the belief that *both* the parent and the educator possess solutions to the problems that *both* groups are concerned about solving. It means that *both* parties understand that by working *together* they increase the chances of finding the solutions necessary to improve student behaviors and help children learn. In the end, it is important to remember that children need us to act like adults in order to help them learn by example the lessons about problem solving. They must learn that the best problem solving emerges when people put aside any differences they may have for the common good.

So, let's get started! First, it will be important to review some of the basic dynamics of intimidation and cite several examples that will remind us of the repercussions that bullying has for its victims and our society.

### NOTES

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