



RESPONDING ...TO A BULLY

Dear Barry,

Last week I learned that a boy reputed to be a bully is in my son's class this year. My boy is 11 and is on the shy side. He has those spider senses you talk about. He's got friends and does well in school but he's really upset and asked to be moved to another school. He won't tell me who the bully is or even talk about him but I think it might be the boy who picked on him at lunchtime last year and called him gay. Advice?

Cheryl in Calgary AB



Dear Cheryl,

Schoolyard bullying is much more insidious than boys being boys and can harm boys in ways they struggle to express. It is understandable that a bully could trigger immediate distress in your son.

Research shows bullying can have devastating effects: reluctance to attend school; fearfulness or unusual anxiety; sleep disturbance and nightmares; vague physical complaints -headaches, stomachaches; or belongings that come home ripped or are missing altogether. It goes without saying that learning is hindered when fear and anxiety are engaged.

Toronto's Board of Education found that one in five children are bullied regularly, often on school grounds. They also discovered that teachers are aware of only a small percentage of bullying incidents, making intervention difficult.

Even when there is caring, open and effective communication at home, boys particularly feel reluctant to talk about their troubles. While many fear getting into deeper troubles with the bully, boys who are sensitive and have spider senses tend to blame themselves.

The **Boy Code** teaches boys to be strong and independent and to avoid the social stigma of being labeled a fag or homo. The word gay is loaded with power in schoolyard politics and is clearly derogatory among boys. To prove his masculinity your son may be compelled to maintain silence and go it alone.

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Many boys who bully continue this style of behaviour in later life.

Fortunately, a safe and caring school will have staff that knows it is their job to create harassment-free learning, be vigilant and have a strategic bully response plan. They also know that to be effective they can't go it alone either and that anti-bullying strategies must engage everyone – students, parents, teachers, and the community – if they are to maintain an environment where learning flourishes.

On a practical level, supervision of potential areas of risk such as: playgrounds, hallways, washrooms, change rooms, secluded areas, school perimeters, trips to and from school, school busses, and use of the Internet are also critical.

Meanwhile, your most pressing task is to empathically respond to your son's reluctance to talk. Here are several suggestions:

1. **Listen as he describes his struggle without interruption or advice.**
2. **Let him know that bullying is NOT okay and you will help him find a solution.**
3. **Teach him that it's okay to talk about his emotions.**

Fathers and other adult males have an important role in modeling healthy masculinities – especially by talking about their own feelings and by inviting emotional support for themselves they give boys the green light to do the same. It is vital that boys learn their emotions are valued from the men and women they look up to.

4. **Ensure he understands what bullying is – where friendly and good-natured teasing stops and taunting and bullying begin.**
5. **Share your knowledge, wisdom while focussing on his resilience, strengths, and positive self-thoughts.**

As a caring adult you may find yourself wanting to fix his situation, but that's not always possible – nor productive. As he weathers this relational storm – most likely becoming stronger in the process – continue to listen, maintain open lines of communication and explore coping strategies with him. Through discussion and role-playing at home and at school he'll acquire literacy and action skills to feel more confident when confronted by the bully.

Help your son avoid situations or behaviours that expose him to bullying. If it occurs on the way to or from a particular part of the school playground at lunch, find an alternate route and arrange for an older child companion. Be sure he knows where to go for help when he is on route home.

A comprehensive school response provides guidance and support for the bullied, the bystander, and the bully.



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Despite your son's desire to keep his struggle private it is your responsibility to engage school staff if you believe the situation warrants it. Learn about their response to bullying but also be aware that a policy alone is insufficient. For example, I know of one school district's terrific anti-harassment policy, including preventative education and confidential reporting, but students cannot easily access the confidential reporting forms! Pay special attention to how your school puts policy into action – ensure that they walk the talk.

Once you are confident that the staff has a positive educative approach find someone within the school whom you can trust to discuss your son's struggle and together develop a response plan.

While the following typical 5-step Bully Response may offer students verbal and behavioural prompts, ensure that your son's action plan reflects his specific circumstances, and that the onus to manage conflict is not his alone. Be aware that your boy's sensitive nature may fuel feelings of shame if he is not easily able to implement the 5-step Bully Response, which works best when it is part of a broader comprehensive approach. Most approaches suggest he not fight back as it will likely increase his chances of further victimization.

Typical 5-step bully response plan taught to children

1. Stand straight and tall if faced with a bully.
2. Look the bully straight in the eye. Be polite but firm.
3. Tell the bully "Stop it, I don't like it. Leave me alone."
4. If at all possible, don't show you are upset.

Walk away if you can't hide your feelings and talk about them later.

5. Report events to an adult you trust. Expect action to be taken.

Finally, maintain a written record of incidents and who was involved, as well as communication with staff and suggested action-plans. You can also expect follow-through and for the situation to be remedied.

Canadian Safe School Network Website:

<http://www.canadiansafeschools.com/parents/overview.htm>