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1:10 p.m. Tuesday, May 5, 2015 | Filed in News

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Bullying Policies Have a Long Way to Go

Every day, teenagers around the world are victims of acts of violence committed upon them by their peers. Most children are able to cope with the difficulty of their teen years without showing aggression toward others. Unfortunately, others take out their emotions on their peers, often in the form of bullying. I know firsthand how devastating bullying can be as I was a victim of repeated bullying throughout sixth grade. While I have moved beyond my experience, others are not so fortunate. Anyone who follows the news knows how devastating bullying can be, not just to the bullied child, but to families and even entire communities.



Sydney Levy, 7th Grade, Boca Raton Community Middle School

What makes bullying so terrible, and why it is the first thing that comes to mind when I think of youth violence, is that its victims so often suffer in silence. Emotional injury, in particular, does not leave visible scars and is far less likely to be recognized and treated than physical injury. Lack of treatment for emotional injuries can lead to mental illness, substance abuse, suicide and acts of physical aggression toward others. In rare cases, we have even seen bullied children commit horrible acts of murder in mass school shootings. Accordingly, when we think about violence and bullying, we must not focus solely on the bully, but on the

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violent acts that may be engaged in by his/her victims. In other words, we need to be mindful that violence can be, and often is, the result of prior violence.

Many of us remember the shootings that took place at Columbine High School and Santana High School. Evidence shows that both of the boys responsible in the Columbine High School shootings had been bullied in past years. Likewise, the murderer behind the Santana High School shooting had been tormented by his friends and bullied by his peers. However, not all victims of bullying direct their negative emotions towards others. Instead, some victims internalize their anger and, tragically, choose to commit suicide. In the horrific case of Rebecca Sedwick, cyber bullying led to the twelve-year-old Florida girl jumping off of the top of a building. Incidents such as these have led to the implementation of zero-tolerance policies in various schools across America. However, these policies only result in suspensions and/or expulsions. They cannot be expected to, nor do they, fully stop bullying. Moreover, zero-tolerance policies do not contemplate positive interventions or counseling, both of which are necessary to address the needs of bullies and their victims.

The school that I attended for sixth grade had a zero-tolerance policy. Despite that policy, I was physically and emotionally harassed by other students throughout almost the entire school year, including after I informed the administration that I was being bullied. At first, the bullying was subtle. It took me some time to realize that when I was being invited to my classmates' homes and to sit at certain tables at lunch, it wasn't because the people inviting me wanted to be my friend. In reality, they were just using me to help tutor them to get better grades because they knew that I was smart and did well in school. Once they got what they needed from me, I became invisible to them. When I ultimately realized that I was being taken advantage of, I tried to break ties with my supposed "friends." I started making excuses not to work with them on projects or sit with them at lunch.

Eventually, things came to a head and I was forced to admit to my "friends" that I knew I was being used and that I no longer wanted to associate with them. This made things much worse. For example, during PE, I was made the only target on my side in dodge ball. Also, my "friends" would intentionally throw basketballs at me and claim that I had been "hit by a rebound." My classmates would push me over, step on me, and then spit their gum into my hair. To make things worse, rumors were spread throughout school claiming that I talked about other girls behind their backs. I became very lonely at school and felt helpless.

Although I had very few friends at school, I had positive outlets in extracurricular activities as well as at home. I found that the exercise that I got from playing on my travel soccer team helped me to release my anger. Time away from school at soccer tournaments also helped me take my mind off of the stressful life that I had in school. I also found that in playing music, I was able to escape to another place. Most important to me, though, was the support that I received at home. My parents would always listen to my stories and try to make my school situation better. Unfortunately, however, I became so stressed as time went on that nothing

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DO THE WRITE THING: Sydney Levy, 7th Grade, Boca Raton Community Middle School

I need to change schools.

Following meetings with administration, I was accepted into Boca Raton Community Middle School, my first choice school. From the first day of this school year to the end of the second quarter, I have been in high spirits. I have made numerous new friends and I am so much happier. Albert Einstein defined insanity as doing the same thing over again and expecting a different result. This quote ties in with my past year. I would be insane if I expected to be happy with the same people, in the same negative school environment, and with an administration that didn't seem to care about what was happening to me. For me, leaving a negative environment was the best solution.

I am not suggesting that at the first sign of bullying, the right answer is to "jump ship." Instead, administrators, students, and parents all need to work together to identify and rectify the problem. Even if zero-tolerance policies were implemented, rather than ignored (as was the case at my former school), it would be foolish to think that a zero-tolerance policy can solve anything. Instead, bullying needs to be recognized (particularly when pointed out) and counselors need to work with the bully and the victim to address the root cause of the bullying and its effect. Children who are bullied also need to find a positive way to escape and to associate with optimistic, happy friends. In the meantime, however, when a student undergoes as much stress and unhappiness as I did at my previous school, then altering the environment might be the only choice.

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