



Adults Must Stand Up Against Bullies

DIANE DIMOND Crime and Justice

Have you ever been the victim of a bully? Ever stand silent and let a bully pick on someone?

Most people wouldn't consider bullying a crime — but it could be creating criminals right before our very eyes.

A study from a group called Fight Crime: Invest in Kids concluded that nearly 60 percent of boys whom researchers classified as bullies in grades 6-9 were convicted of at least one crime by the age of 24. And get this, 40 percent of those same boys grew up to have three or more criminal convictions.

In other words, today's bully could become tomorrow's criminal.

So, what can we do about it?

I'm a big believer in families taking responsibility for the actions of their children. But lots of boys and girls reserve their bullying for when they are away from Mom and Dad. That means other adults have to step up at schools, camps, sporting events and youth activity centers.

We need to tell parents when their children are being bullied. And we should teach all kids to refuse to join in the taunting. It is abuse, pure and simple. Children can be scarred for life by a bully. And, once robbed of their self-esteem, they can suffer from mental and physical problems, drop out of school and even commit suicide.

I'm not being dramatic here. It happens too often.

Case in point: In 2006, a Missouri girl was the victim of cyber-bullying by a former friend's mother and ultimately took her life. Thirteen-year-old Megan Meier hanged herself in her bedroom after believing a MySpace boyfriend had dumped her. In reality, there was no boy. A neighbor, 49-year-old Lori Drew, had concocted the online persona after Megan and Drew's daughter fought. Drew now faces criminal charges.

Newsweek recently featured a cover story on a gay teen named Larry King who was bullied for years and fought back by being flamboyant in his homosexuality. He was murdered by a 14-year-old classmate, shot in the head in an Oxnard, Calif., computer class in front of a teacher and a room full of students.

Many mature adults still get teary when recalling their humiliating days at the hands of the class bully, mainly because bullies don't operate alone. They pick up sycophantic disciples along the way, and that multiplies the victim's pain.

I don't usually recommend books in this space but I do now. It's called "Letters To A Bullied Girl: Messages of Healing And Hope," and it is dramatic in its simplicity. I recommend every parent buy it and read it with their children.

The real life backstory centers on Olivia Gardner, a Novato, Calif., teenager.

After suffering an epileptic attack at school she became the brunt of a horrific series of bully-fueled events. Her tormentors taunted her with hurtful names, dragged her backpack through the mud and after they created an "Olivia Haters" Web site on MySpace a group of them took to wearing bracelets declaring, "Olivia Shall Die." (Why didn't their parents notice?!)

The Internet ugliness followed Olivia to three different schools over more than two years. She wanted to kill herself until a newspaper story about her plight appeared in the San Francisco Chronicle and her life changed forever.

Two sisters in a neighboring community read the front-page story about Olivia and were compelled to action. Teenagers Emily and Sarah Buder asked friends to write letters of support to Olivia. More than 4,000 poured in.

The book borne of this Samaritan effort features letters from males and females who were mercilessly teased for being short, tall, fat, skinny, smart, having buck teeth, eyeglasses, bad skin or a big nose. Some letter writers revealed they had taken grief for being poor, having an alcoholic parent or because they were from a minority group. Many admitted they wept when they read about what happened to Olivia.

Some who wrote were contrite former bullies who admitted they did what they did because their own lives were out of their control. They told Olivia, and through her the rest of us, that bullies seek to humiliate to make others feel as insignificant as they feel.

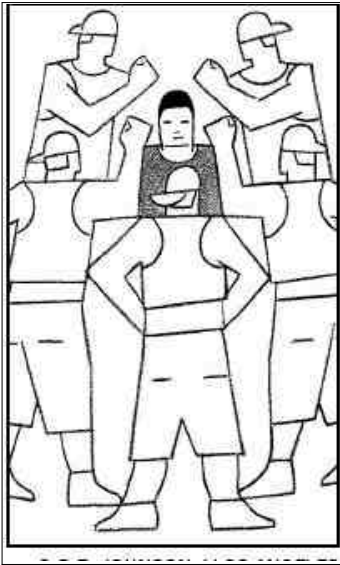
Many of the letters in the book offered words of wisdom for the young girl. One of the most touching is from "Joshua" who wrote to Olivia, "Please love yourself in the same way your family loves you. As you go through life, you will realize there are a lot more of 'us' holding you up than 'them' putting you down."

Simple advice for those suffering at the hands of a bully. Adults should pass it forward and step up when we see behavior that could be creating criminals right before our very eyes.

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