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## Empathy: An antidote to bullying

### *Preventing bullying behaviour starts at home*

By Libby Simon, MSW, RSW

Eight-year-old "Jason" is not looking forward to the first day of school as he enters grade three. He remembers too many hot dog days last year when older students would corner him on the playground at morning recess demanding his lunch money.

"Jenny" should have been excited about going into her first year in high school but she felt sick in the pit of her stomach. A group of girls have been harassing her for over a year now. It started with name-calling and escalated into a terrifying experience of swarming after school one day. The next time they set her hair on fire. Still, she told no one. She was too humiliated, ashamed and afraid.

## What is bullying?

According to Statistics Canada's *Census at School*, from 2005 to 2009 about 25 percent of students were bullied. [1] Other studies have shown that upwards of 15 percent of students admit to bullying, while over 40 percent of students who have been involved in bullying incidents have been both targets and perpetrators. [2]

Bullying involves an imbalance of power where aggression is asserted through physical or verbal actions or social exclusion, according to Canada's National Crime Prevention Strategy. [3] Every day, thousands of children experience the distress of being terrorized, tormented, ridiculed and intimidated with no escape hatch. In the past, bullying was seen as a "normal" part of childhood, if unpleasant. When bullied children did report, the incidents were dismissed as being part of growing up. As more and more horrifying stories reached the public, however, parents and educators were forced to acknowledge bullying as a serious issue.

This has spawned reams of literature in attempts to understand, inform and seek resolutions. In *The Bully, The Bullied and the Bystander*, author and bullying expert Barbara Coloroso describes the three parties in the book title in terms of their roles, reasons and the influence of parenting style, with the democratic approach as the most likely to foster positive behaviours. [4]

The democratic parenting style is characterized as warm, supportive and communicative and offers supervised boundaries with clear explanations and expectations. Coloroso, like many of the experts on the subject, offers a number of suggestions on managing bullying. Programs such as conflict resolution, peer support, anti-violence school policies and local police input, many of which are already incorporated in local, provincial and school divisions across the country are part of the solution.

However, while these programs are valuable and necessary, they are generally focused on situations which already exist. This begs the question of how these children who bully got to this point in the first place. What seems to be missing in bullying behaviour is an absence of conscience - of empathy. In fact, the literature abounds with the recognition that one of the main characteristics of bullies is a lack of empathy or remorse for their victims.

### **Developing empathy as a response to bullying**

What exactly is empathy? The dictionary defines it as "the action of understanding...and vicariously experiencing the feelings, thoughts and experiences of another." Marvin W. Berkowitz, Psychology Professor at Marquette University in Milwaukee, writes that empathy has been identified as one of the core moral emotions involved with conscience - that uncomfortable feeling of guilt that guides us between right and wrong. [5] But how does one develop empathy? What went wrong with those who do not appear to have it?

Psychologist John Bowlby with Mary Ainsworth in *Attachment and Loss* points to the significance of our first relationships with parents in the development of empathy. This has been well researched and supported by many others. The first bond is the foundation for caring about others throughout life. It translates into the ability to take another's perspective and to correctly identify another person's feelings. He adds that the most consistent cause of childhood antisocial behaviour is the lack of a secure attachment bond in infancy resulting in the failure to develop a conscience. [6]

Berkowitz also emphasizes the importance of parenting, and adds that parents can be taught the building blocks of empathy. These are then integrated with other characteristics such as intellectual development.

### **Preventing bullying starts with parents**

These building blocks simply mean that parents explain the "whys and hows" of their behaviours. This provides the child with reasons for choosing a particular behaviour and how that behaviour impacts another person. It directly connects the moral reasoning (cognitive process) with empathy (emotional development). It also nurtures mutual respect, which is at the core of interpersonal relationships. And like Coloroso, Berkowitz also found that a democratic parenting style was most likely to produce compliance, moral reasoning and conscience. Rather than parent education programs that concentrate on eliminating problem behaviours, he suggests parent training programs be designed for all parents, which focus on enhancing parent-child relations by teaching these building blocks.

This antidote to bullying is likely to have far-reaching effects because empathy addresses many other issues of antisocial behaviours such as aggression, violence and racism. We cannot inflict pain on another without feeling the same pain. "They" become "Us."

Prevention needs to begin at birth with the first parent-child attachments. We need to nurture its growth in a democratic environment where explanation, mutual respect and modelling behaviour will foster moral development. This, in turn, will not only create a safe and secure environment for the thousands of "Jason's" and "Jenny's," but will impact the bullies, the bystanders and beyond to the whole community.

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## Endnotes

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[1] The Evangelical Fellowship of Canada. (2012, April). By the numbers: Rates and risk factors for bullying. A brief examination of Canadian bullying statistics. Ottawa: The Evangelical Fellowship of Canada Centre for Faith and Public life, p. 8.

[2] By the numbers, (2012), p. 9.

[3] Bullying prevention in schools (2011). Public Safety Canada. Retrieved [here](#).

[4] Coloroso, B. (2003). *The Bully, the Bullied and the Bystander*. Toronto: HarperCollins.

[5] Berkowitz, M. W. (1998). Fostering goodness: Teaching parents to facilitate children's moral development. Retrieved [here](#).

[6] Bowlby, J. (1969/1982). *Attachment and Loss, Vol. 1: Attachment*. New York: Basic Books.