

Give Bullying the Boot!

DR QURATULAIN ZAIDI of MindNLife discusses an all-too-common phenomenon found in schools (and, indeed, the daily life of adults) around the world, including Hong Kong.

Bullying is defined as repeated interpersonal behaviour, typically between children with unequal power, which is intended to do physical or psychological harm, and can lead to other negative outcomes for both the bully and the victim. It can start as early as age six or seven.

There are many different kinds of bullying. **Verbal bullying**, for example, is the use of words, statements and name-calling to gain power over a target, potentially leaving deep emotional scars. It can be confusing for someone to try and work out whether such name-calling is “banter” or bullying; in short, if it becomes persistent and regular, it’s bullying. It’s equally about how *you* feel too; if the words make you uncomfortable and you have told the person to stop but they persist, this is what we call verbal bullying.

Physical bullying is the most obvious form of bullying; it occurs when a

person uses physical force to gain power over a target. If you suspect your child is being physically bullied, start a casual conversation – ask what’s going on at school, during recess or lunch, or on the way home. Based on the responses, ask your child if anyone is being mean to them – and do try to keep your emotions in check. Emphasise the value of open, ongoing communication with you and with teachers or school counsellors. Document the dates and times of bullying incidents, the responses from people involved, and the actions that have been taken. Don’t contact the parents of the bully or bullies to resolve matters on your own. If your child continues to be physically hurt, and you need additional assistance beyond the school, contact local law enforcement – there are anti-bullying and harassment laws that require prompt corrective action.

10 signs your child might be being bullied

- #1 Unexplainable injuries
- #2 Lost or destroyed clothing, books, electronics, or jewellery
- #3 Frequent headaches or stomach aches, feeling sick or faking illness
- #4 Changes in eating habits, like suddenly skipping meals or binge eating, or coming home from school hungry because they didn’t eat lunch
- #5 Difficulty sleeping or frequent nightmares
- #6 Declining grades
- #7 Loss of interest in schoolwork, or not wanting to go to school
- #8 Sudden loss of friends or avoidance of social situations
- #9 Feelings of helplessness anxiety or decreased self esteem
- #10 Self-destructive behaviours such as running away from home, harming themselves, or talking about suicide

Relational bullying involves exclusionary tactics – deliberately preventing someone from joining or being part of a group, whether it’s at a lunch table, game, sport or social activity. With this kind of bullying, you need to watch for mood changes, withdrawal from peer groups, and a shift toward being alone more than usual. Girls are more likely than boys to experience social exclusion through nonverbal or emotional intimidation. The pain can be as strong as with physical bullying, and it can last even longer.

Again, you should make time to talk to your child and ask about their day. Help them find things that make them feel positive about themselves, and make sure they know there are people who love and care about them. Focus on developing their talents and interests in music, arts, athletics, reading and after-school activities so your kids build relationships outside of school.

Cyberbullying, or bullying in cyberspace, involves haranguing someone by spreading mean words, lies and false rumours through e-mails, text messages and social media posts. While overall trends show a decrease in recent years of bullying in the forms mentioned earlier,

from 2007 to 2016 the instances of cyberbullying have gone up.

What can you do as a parent? Watch to see if your child spends more time online (visiting social media pages such as Facebook and Instagram, for instance) but appears to be sad and anxious afterward. Also take note if they have trouble sleeping, beg to stay home from school, or withdraw from activities they once loved. Mean messages can be distributed anonymously and quickly, leading to 24/7 cyberbullying, so it’s important to first establish household rules for internet safety. Agree on age-appropriate time limits. Know the popular and potentially abusive sites, apps and digital devices before your kids use them, and let them know that you’ll be monitoring their online activities. Tell them that if they experience cyberbullying, they shouldn’t engage, respond or forward it. Instead, they should inform you so you can print out the messages, including dates and times when they were received. Report cyberbullying to the school and the online service provider. If the bullying escalates to include threats and sexually explicit messages, contact local law enforcement.

As parents, we need to know what’s going on in our kids’ lives and be part of it. And we need to be aware of the long-term consequences of bullying. A recent study in Finland showed that around 23 percent of kids who were victims of frequent bullying had sought help for psychiatric problems before age 30 – problems such as depression, anxiety disorders, schizophrenia and substance abuse. In addition, around 20 percent of people who were the bullies themselves as children had a mental health problem that needed medical treatment as a teen or young adult.

The statistics are likely to be similar in Hong Kong. Indeed, this is a place where people can feel somewhat entitled

to behave badly, not just at school, but in marriages, at work and professionally through an inflated sense of self. But we all need to stand up to bullies; just because they’re here, in this part of the world, they can’t get away with it.

THE MANY FACES OF CYBERBULLYING

Denigration: Spreading harmful, untrue or damaging rumours and statements online that will damage an individual’s reputation.

Exclusion: Excluding a person on purpose from an online group; this is considered an indirect form of cyberbullying.

Flaming: Fighting that involves sending angry, cruel, rude or vulgar messages to one individual or several individuals in a private or public online setting.

Happy Slapping: Attacking an individual physically as a “prank” or “joke” while others film the attack or take pictures to be distributed or posted online.

Harassment: Sending an ongoing series of hurtful, insulting online messages targeted to an individual.

Impersonation: Pretending and posing as someone else, then sending or posting material online with the intent to damage an individual’s reputation.

Outing: Sending or posting material (such as messages and images) online about a person that contains sensitive, private or embarrassing information.

Text Wars/Attacks: Hounding a targeted individual with a high amount of mean text messages and emails. *Ⓐ*



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