

Zero Tolerance, Not In My Experience

I can't tell you how many times that I have heard a teacher say, "Bullying doesn't happen at our school." From my perspective that is far from the case. Schools say that they have a zero tolerance policy for bullying, but is this really true. From what I have observed and experienced, it seems like schools just do not want to document incidents of bullying. With summaries of discipline reports often reported online or to the parents either quarterly or yearly, schools seem more concerned with creating a perception that bullying is not happening rather than actually creating an environment free from bullying.

To really look at the issue of bullying, we must first look at what it means. Not every upsetting encounter between groups of students is bullying. Schools and parents need to look at more than an isolated incident to determine if a child is being bullied. First, the behavior that the student is experiencing needs to be unwanted and aggressive. Also, the behavior is repeated over time. Finally, to really be bullying there need to be an imbalance of power which could be real or just perceived.

When thinking about bullying, many people envision the kid that is pushed around on the playground or maybe the student who has his lunch taken from him in the cafeteria. However, it is important to remember that bullying takes many forms. Not only are repeated physical or verbal attacks bullying, but also making threats. Purposefully excluding an individual from a group is another form. Even spreading rumors about another student can be considered bullying.

I think that if we are being honest with ourselves, every student would say that bullying has impacted their lives at some point during their school years. Maybe they were the student that was being bullied. They also could have witnessed it or provided comfort to someone that was being bullied. While hard to admit, some will have to look back at their school years and realize that they were the bully.

Schools supposedly offer training on preventing bullying. So why are they not acknowledging the incidents in their schools? Is the school personnel just unaware or do they not want to be bothered? Are they too concerned with public perception to own up to what is happening in their schools? All students should be provided with a safe haven at school where they can freely learn and grow. This will not happen until schools have a harsh reality check about what students are actually experiencing.

I look back at an instance of bullying that I experienced in middle school where the school did not respond. I was repeatedly verbally attacked on the bus. I did not want to tattle and felt telling would just make matters worse. However, after repeatedly going home upset and withdrawn, my parents were able to get me to open up about what was going on. My mom called the principal at the school who told her it wasn't their responsibility since it happened on the bus. She was told to call the transportation director. She asked him to move my seat on the bus immediately, but was told that they could not do that until they investigated. I was still being subjected to the bullying, but they were just worried about an investigation. Finally, the student that was bullying me was expelled from school. However, it was not for bullying but rather for destruction of school property. There was never any follow up from the transportation director to

see if the matter was resolved and my seat was never changed. I do have to question why a student who destroys school property is immediately expelled, but the same student who was reported for bullying did not face consequences.

Do schools really value their property more than their students? I have to believe that this is not the case, but that schools are not completely aware of what bullying is. Destruction of property or a fight, for example are more tangible offenses than bullying. Schools are easily able to see the result of the student's behavior and are often quick to discipline. However, bullying can be more subjective. What bothers and offends one student may not necessarily affect another student. School personnel needs to listen to their students and be aware of actions that are affecting them. Their job is to provide a safe environment for the students. If changing seats makes a student feel safer and more comfortable, schools should make it happen. They should not need an investigation to determine what the student's experience is before they provide the safest environment.

My experience makes me question how reports are handled. Schools say that they cannot address bullying if it is not reported. But what is the response when it is reported? It is not easy to go to an adult and say that you are the victim of bullying. You fear retaliation from the bully for telling. You do not want to be known as a tattletale or a snitch. From what I have seen, when a student finds the courage to speak up, they are often made to feel like they are to blame.

Students are often labeled to seemingly justify the bullying behaviors. A student that shows an emotional response to repeated verbal assaults or name calling is often told that they are too sensitive. Problems on the playground are justified by saying the students are just too competitive. A child who dresses uniquely or has an unusual hairstyle is labeled as too different. I can't help but feel that these labels are there to justify why bullying these students is not wrong.

The most frustrating advice that I have heard teachers or coaches give is, "If you do not give them a reaction, they will stop." This response applies the blame to the individual that is being bullied. There is nothing wrong with showing appropriate emotions, and a student that is being bullied should not be made to feel like there is. Do teachers really want us to internalize our emotions? Are we supposed to be robots?

Why should the responsibility to end bullying fall on the student that is being bullied? Every student should be free to be an individual. If a student is repeatedly attacked for the style of clothing that they wear. The response should not be to tell the student to just wear a different style. The behavior that needs to be addressed is the repeated attack. If there is a dress code issue, that should be addressed as well, but it does not justify the bullying behavior.

There are so many consequences to not addressing bullying. Treating students like it is their fault that they are being bullied makes the students feel like they deserve to be treated that way. When they do not feel comfortable approaching a teacher for help when they are bullied, they turn to other avenues to cope. Schools will discipline students for drug use, drinking alcohol, and cutting school. However, they do not often delve deeper to find out why the student chose that path. Schools seem content to dismiss this behavior as a poor choice made by a teenager, but I have seen students make these choices to cope with bullying. It seems way too

often that we turn the news on and hear about a teen suicide. Often times we find that the teen was a victim of bullying. They always interview the family and school officials. It seems like the families always say the school would not do anything to address the problem, but the schools say that they were not aware of the extent of the issue. Passing the blame around will not bring back the student. Schools need to be focused on how to prevent this from happening again.

In order to fix the issue, schools need a harsh reality check. I do not think that this can happen without honest feedback from the students. Based on my experience, students often feel that schools do not want to be bothered when it comes to bullying. They are made to feel like it is up to them to change, so that they are not bullied. Playing a blame game is not going to help. Schools need to take reports of bullying seriously. The first priority needs to be to make the student feel safe. Whether that is as simple as changing a seat or more complicated like changing a classroom, it needs to immediately be done for the wellbeing of the student.

Teachers need to be supportive of the students and not dismissive. They should be ready to help any student that comes to them with appropriate advice and be ready to stop any act of bullying in progress. Teachers should know the difference between friendly banter and aggressive and repeated assaults. There is no reason for it to come to the point where the student must go to the teacher. If the teacher is doing their job to create a safe haven for their students, they should be able to recognize the signs of bullying and act proactively.

More and more school work is computer based. We take state tests every year to evaluate what we have learned. Often, students feel like the school only cares about what score they got on the state test. Students should feel like they are more than a number. Why don't we take an anonymous survey every year to evaluate our experience with bullying, how free we felt to report it, and how the school responded? Students could safely express their opinions without fear of retaliation. I believe these results would be an eye opening experience for schools. This invaluable tool would provide schools with a more accurate picture of where their school stands with bullying. Armed with this information, schools would have the opportunity to truly provide an environment free from bullying.

With greater knowledge of what the students are actually experiencing, schools need to move forward. There needs to be more education for teachers, students, and other school officials on how to recognize the signs of bullying. There also needs to be a proactive approach rather than reactive. For example, school personnel needs to reach out to the withdrawn student, the one who is getting into fights, and the student that avoids joining the group. They cannot continue to dismiss these students as just an example of typical teenage behavior. Schools also need to reevaluate their reporting policy. I understand that there needs to be some investigation before any discipline decisions are made, but why aren't schools taking action to remove the student from the aggressive behavior of bullying in the interim. Furthermore, the blame game needs to end today. There is no justification for bullying. We are all individuals and should feel safe expressing that individuality. It is not up to the bullied student to change themselves, but rather up to the bully to change their behavior.