# Sticks ’n’ Stones May Break Your Bones, but Words Can Hurt Too

Just because no one beats you up and rips off your lunch money doesn’t mean you haven’t been bullied.

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Privately, I’ve always thought bullied kids who’d committed suicide were weak little punks. But I also felt sorry for kids who had gotten beaten up. I’d think it was too bad they weren’t able to defend themselves, like the girl in the movie Carrie who had telekinetic powers. That’s how I felt, and I’m sure other people have had similar feelings.

Often, folks tell kids to defend themselves if someone bullies them. That’s because people believe that bullying is just a form of physical violence and the best way to handle it is to respond with violence. But I would like to expand your understanding of bullying and how to address the problem.

Recently, after seeing a friend on Facebook, I was reminded of a childhood experience I had. The experience wasn’t physical. As a matter of fact it wasn’t even verbal. But I had been bullied.

When I was in middle school, a group of my closest friends stopped talking to me for almost an entire summer. Yes, I know that sounds corny. But for a 12-year-old only child, it felt as devastating as getting punched in the chest.

When I’d ride my bike, I’d pass friends playing basketball or football, but they wouldn’t say a word to me. These kids’ silent treatment broke me down, and I got depressed.

It all came to head when my grandmother asked me how I was doing. (I guess she’d sensed something.) Anyway, grandmothers are the original lie detectors so I broke down and started crying.

She then told my parents, and all three told me they loved me. I was silly for letting the kids get to me, they said. They explained that over the course of my life I would meet many other people. But only a little of that resonated with me.

What helped me most was that my parents took me to my cousins’ house in New York. I stayed

with my cousins for a couple of weeks, and they visited me for a week or two. Before I knew it the summer was almost over, I returned to my neighborhood.

That's when a few of my friends broke the silence and started talking to me.

One of them said he had been influenced by another one of my friends. He said it wasn't everyone's idea to stop talking to me. I told him how it made me feel, and he told me he didn't know how much pain it caused me.

Later that school year, all of my friends who had given me the silent treatment began talking to me. The event became history.

But it changed me. The experience gave me a huge sense of independence. I considered it as a blessing in disguise because before I talked to my grandmother, I'd come the closest to suicidal thoughts I had ever come. The experience was unpleasant. I wish I'd learned the lesson another way.

Today, I've used my bullying experience to review some of the ways parents handle this problem and the advice experts give. I've digested what they recommend and developed my own suggestions—ones you can use if, God forbid, your child becomes the victim of bullying.

But in addition to my own ideas, I asked social worker Ali Malik, MSW, formerly a teaching assistant and school disciplinarian at George Washington School No. 1 in Elizabeth, New Jersey, how he advised parents to address bullying (George Washington School has a multicultural student body of more than 1,000 African-American, South-American, Puerto Rican, Dominican and Portuguese children). Here are our suggestions:

**Don't fight violence with violence.** Some parents put their children in karate classes so they'll know how to fight back if bullies approach them. And some parents feel that boys must to be able to fight or else they aren't men. But I have news for them.

Fighting may be something children can get away with when they're young. But when they fight after they become adults, it's called a crime.

Malik suggests parent have role-playing conversations with their kids to discuss bullying scenarios. "Parents have to engage," Malik says. "I suggest that parents teach their kids conflict resolution skills. These are social communication skills children should learn: how to talk themselves out of a situation."

To me, karate or any fight training that teaches aggression is a no-no. In fact, I think those classes produce people prone to provoking violence, not prone to simply defending themselves. I suggest that kids learn defensive martial arts, such as judo or wrestling. Both fighting styles emphasize defense rather than striking and attacking. I think teaching kids to be aggressive is what makes bullies in the first place. Instead, I think parents should teach their children how to not offend

people and to avoid knuckleheads.

**Talk to your child.** Many parents' normal reaction is to blame the bully. That may be an easy out for situations where the bully is physically violent, but it doesn't solve the problem when bullying is nonviolent. Nonviolent bullying is more psychological so these situations are more complex.

That's the case with cyber bullying, which is when kids use the Internet to harass other children or to start rumors that create animosity toward them. "That's big now," Malik says, "and we have to deal with it in the school system."

I think if your child is the victim of nonviolent forms of bullying, parents should shower them with love. Tell your kids how special and important they are. Don't wait for their birthdays to give them special treatment. If you can afford it, take your child away on a trip or mini-vacation.

Nonviolent bullying is often the kind that subtly affects children's self-esteem. Why? Because they blame themselves for causing it. When my friends stopped talking to me, I thought there was something wrong with me. I thought about suicide because I didn't think anybody would care. I thought my friends knew me the best. And when they dissed me, I thought I was worthless. When my family showed me they loved me, it made a tremendous difference.

But do bullies have a particular profile? Often we think of bully boys as being big-bruiser-type kids and bully girls as super-confident, mean-spirited types. But what creates a bully has more to do with a child's internal psychological development.

"The thing that we've got to understand when we're dealing with children is that they're going through developmental stages and learning about the world," Malik says. "Both kids who bully or the ones being bullied are trying to find themselves."

**Talk to school officials.** Many parents call the academic staffers to find out if they are aware of school bullying and get them to address it. But I think parents should also try to get the school staff's opinion on the bullying. Children are often only able to see what is going on from their perspective. When parents speak to a third party, this may help them better advise their kids about how to avoid the situation, or it may confirm if indeed bullying is happening

But if the bullying becomes unmanageable or takes place off school property, Malik recommends parents call the police.

**Contact the bully's parents.** Okay, this one may not exactly thrill you, but I think it should be considered. And I don't mean parents should "go Rambo" and handle the bullying situation for their children. What I suggest is that parents learn what the bully's parents may know about the situation. Sometimes the bully's parents aren't aware of their child's behavior or how your child is affected. The idea is to communicate. You want to make things better not worse.

According to Malik, the best way for parents to handle bullying is to advocate for awareness

prevention programs in their school systems and churches.

But I believe the best way for parents to do this is to communicate with their children, and don't just tell them things. Learn how to listen when your children talk. Often kids won't say they feel ostracized or alienated. But those feelings may give clues about what your children are experiencing, even if they don't always know that they are being bullied.

After all, look at me. I didn't know until 20 years later that I'd been bullied.

*Send your comments via e-mail to Yo Jeff, the "Hip Hop Dating Coach" at CoachYoJeff@gmail.com and check out his blog at realhealthmag.com.*

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