

## **Family Living Connection**

**Julie Keown-Bomar, Family Living Educator**

### **Aggressive Peer Relationships**

In the last few months, I have talked with several parents who are very concerned about their son or daughter's peer relationships. Some have indicated they want to help build up their child's self-esteem, and some are looking for practical ideas on how to help their kid deal with bullies or cope with cliques.

The fact is all kids can feel left out and abused by peers at one time or another. Typically this scenario is only situational and does not last, but sadly a small minority will become the targets of other kids' jokes, insults and mind-games. By about third grade, children are getting clear messages about their social standing. Those who are rejected can suffer from serious bouts of depression and loneliness. Peer rejection is consistently associated with emotional and behavioral problems in adolescence and adulthood (Estroff 1998). Fortunately, parents and caregivers can help foster the qualities and skills kids need to develop their social competence and sustain healthy peer relationships. This newsletter will delve into the world of early adolescence and share some tips for parents of boys and girls who might be wondering if they are the odd kid out.

### **Is This Bullying?**

How do you know what constitutes bullying? The key markers to watch out for include: an imbalance of power, intent to harm, repetition, and terror. A person is being victimized when he or she is exposed repeatedly to negative actions by one or more persons. Bullying is intentional. It is meant to cause harm and/or fear. The common stereotype is that bullying is physical in nature, but it can be verbal or even relational. When kids spread gossip

and lies to alienate or ruin friendships their behavior is harmful.

Normal conflict includes teasing, arguing and disagreements. But teasing and taunting are very different in motive. Swapping roles is common in teasing situations and it's usually innocent in nature. When the person being teased gets upset or objects, then the teaser stops.

Play fighting is also different than physical bullying. Choice is an important factor



with play fighting. Are the kids free to participate? Does their body language indicate they are having fun or going full force into this battle? Remember in any situation--whether it's flirting, play fighting, or school locker rooms--one-sidedness, power imbalances, and unsolicited behaviors are indicators of bullying.

Warning signs of being bullied include:

- lack of interest in friends
- refusal to go to school
- withdrawal from school activities
- drop in grades
- hiding clothes or other personal items
- making a beeline to the bathroom when arriving home

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If you notice a behavioral changes ask your child what's going on in their social world. Many kids won't tell if they are being bullied because they are afraid of retaliation and they don't think anyone can help them, but they need to know adults are concerned. Whether your child is being bullied or just having friendship troubles, check in with them. Talking is an important first step.

### **New Classes At Family Resource Center!**

#### **Cat Fights or Girl Bullying? Peer Aggression Among Girls**

Sometimes relational aggression between girls, both physical and social, is downplayed and cast off as something that girls just do to one another. However, spreading rumors, alienating friends, and threatening to ruin relationships can be emotionally and even physically damaging and should be taken seriously.

June 22<sup>nd</sup>, Thursday, 6 pm, FRC

#### **"Boys Will Be Boys?" Reconsidering Bullying**

Bullying is not a fact of life and all students have the right to feel secure at school and not be troubled by offensive and humiliating treatment--no matter what their gender or their status amongst peers. Find out what constitutes bullying, what factors are linked with bullying, and what concerned adults and kids and do to prevent its occurrence.

June 27<sup>th</sup>, Tuesday, 6 pm., FRC

Classes are free! Childcare provided upon request. Call FRC at 833-1735 to register.

### **Building Healthy Peer Relationships**

Parents need to get a good picture of their child's social world. Use conversation starters such as:

- Who did you play with today?
- Who do you like in your class?  
What do you like about him or her?
- How did things go today with other kids?

Demonstrate that you have time to really have a conversation. Turn off distractions like cell phones and TV. Nod in response to your child's feedback. Ask for further information with sensitivity. For example, "tell me more about how you felt when the kids said that to you." Take this information seriously. If your child says, "no one wants to play with me," this information is given to you because they trust you. Don't try to persuade them that this just can't be the case.

Having at least one **good** friend and being a friend to others are antidotes to bullying (Zierl 2005). Help your child build healthy relationships by making time for their friends. Meeting new friends by joining clubs or athletic teams may open up other social worlds.

Lastly, research gives us a fairly clear indication that children who have good self-confidence and are sure of themselves are less likely to face peer aggression. Talk with school teachers, counselors and administrators if you are concerned about your child's relationships with his or her peers. Committed adults can help make a difference.

#### **References**

[Why Doesn't Anyone Like Me: A Guide to Raising Socially Confident Kids.](#) Hara Estroff Marano. 1998.

Bullying, Power Point Presentation, by Lori Zierl, Family Living Educator, Pierce County, WI.

Bullying is Not A Fact of Life. US DHHS. 2004