

Bullying

The Congregation's Responsibility to Address Bullying

*But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous. **Matthew 5:44-45***

The Gospel calls the church to be a part of reducing physical and emotional violence. For many, the thought of bullying prompts images of “playground scuffles.” This limited and naive view overlooks the pervasive nature of bullying, which also occurs in the classroom, workplace, homes, assisted living situations and nursing homes, and in the congregation! It affects people of all ages but is most critical when it involves children, youth, or those most vulnerable.

What is bullying?

Bullying is commonly defined as intentional, repeated, hurtful acts, words, or other behavior on the part of one or more other individuals. Among children or youth, bullying may be physical (hitting, or damaging possessions), verbal (name-calling or taunting), emotional (threatening or stalking), or social (spreading rumors or the imposition of isolation). In adults, bullying manifests itself primarily through on-going harassment and psychological intimidation that happens when one is ridiculed, insulted, degraded, threatened, or slandered.

The effects of bullying can be very serious. According to *ABC News* (Nov. 2006) 160,000 children miss school every day out of fear of attack or intimidation by other students. Research shows bullying is associated with depression, social anxiety, decreased self-esteem, anger, sadness, paranoia, stress-related health problems, and decline in school or work productivity. These symptoms are especially tragic when the bullying is perceived as being prompted by racial, ethnic or sexual preference intolerance. A recent study reports that nearly 90% of middle-school students polled reported regularly hearing homophobic slurs by their peers and over half report similar comments made by school staff.

In extreme cases of bullying, victims feel compelled to take drastic measures, such as carrying weapons for protection, seeking violent revenge, or even considering suicide.

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For the young aggressor, bullying often leads to greater and prolonged violence throughout life. Cyber-bullying or Internet bullying is the latest, most vicious trend in social cruelty. Web pages, e-mail, Instant Messaging, blogs, and online photo galleries provide a split-second vehicle for peers to taunt, ridicule, slander, or threaten victims and their families. Internet bullying often results in even more adverse physical and emotional consequences than “schoolyard bullying” because now, millions of online users are participants or witnesses to such aggression.

Bullying and the Bystander

What about the witness? In any given group the majority of the people are neither aggressor nor victim, but instead are bystanders to bullying. For some, the moral and ethical dilemma of being a spectator afraid to intervene or to report the activity can lead to feelings of guilt, shame, withdrawal, and even depression. Furthermore, bystanders often become yet another victim of the aggressor for not joining in as an accomplice.

The congregation is not immune to bullying. Sometimes individuals use bullying tactics against staff, congregation council members, or others in the congregation when a planning decision or vote displeases them. They threaten to leave the church or to stop contributions. Church bullies dominate meetings, engage in ridicule or abusive criticism, or manipulate conversation that silences and disempowers others.

A pastor recently recounted a time when she observed a committee member always position himself at the meeting directly across from the same adult. Realizing her role as a bystander in a blatant act of intimidation, the pastor confronted the first individual and named his bullying behavior. His anger toward the pastor lasted several months but the bullying behavior ended immediately.

Adults in the church have a responsibility to model for younger generations Christ-like conflict resolution and ways to hold each other accountable for their behavior.

What your congregation can do:

- Provide opportunities to address issues of bullying from a Christian perspective (such as children/youth ministries, midweek programming, adult forums, retreats, men's or women's groups or intergenerational events).
- Let the church be a place where young members know it is safe to talk about their role in the bullying cycle as the target, bystander, or even the aggressor. Involve staff, volunteer leaders, and parents in developing a policy to be included in your Children and Youth Ministry Handbook or other congregation-wide publications.
- Help parents and other church leaders spot warning signs of bullying and give them tips and tools for ending it. Ask the congregational council to model an assertive, yet pastoral, response to bullying among adults at church.
- Create codes of conduct for church meetings.
- Call upon the mutual ministry committee or staff support system to offer pastors and other staff the confidential opportunity to name any situations where they considered themselves to play a role in the bullying cycle.

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