

Helping You Navigate Your Journey Through Parenting

Are You Raising a Bully?



BY KIM DeMARCHI

Inspired after reading a Huffington Post article recently, My Worst Nightmare - What If I Accidentally Raise the Bully?, I've pondered this question heavily. In a nutshell, the mother in the article

comes to realize that she was actually raising a bully! After diving right in and taking her child to task, both parties come out the other side and better for it. I think this is the minority case however and it disturbs me. In an age where parents care, micromanage and hover over everything from food to clothes to homework to friends, why don't we choose to helicopter over the important issues - social relationships?

Bullying has gained a lot of attention over recent years, but I think we need to pay closer attention to the subtle bullying that goes on under the radar. We are familiar with using physical aggression as a form of bullying. It is the use of force to physically harm others. Verbal aggression is the use of words (threats, name-calling, teasing, etc.) to taunt and harass others. Cyber bullying is basically the use of technology as a tool to be relationally aggressive. When a child is mean to multiple people or publicly posts a hurtful comment online that can be viewed by many, he/she is creating a repeated pattern of meanness, which can cross the line into bullying. Relational aggression, the more subtle form I'm referring to, is the use of relationships to directly or indirectly manipulate and hurt others.

Relational aggression is an act of emotional bullying hidden among networks of friends. Instead of using knives and fists to bully others, emotional bullies employ relationships, words, and gestures as their weapons of attack. Emotional bullying is often dismissed as a normal rite of passage, but it can be as harmful as physical aggression, with devastating, long-term effects. Name-calling, humiliation, exclusion, a simple rolling of the eyes and manipulation are some bullying tactics. Subtle rejection and ignoring

are sometimes worse than outright name calling... at least then you know you exist.

I want to distinguish the difference between being mean and being a bully. Not all hurtful behavior is bullying. There is a school in Wisconsin that helped their school community understand the different tiers of hurtful behavior:

- When someone says or does something unintentionally hurtful and they do it once, that's **RUDE**.
- When someone says or does something intentionally hurtful and they do it once, that's **MEAN**.
- When someone says or does something intentionally hurtful and they keep doing it - even when you tell them to stop or show them that you're upset—that's **BULLYING**.

So, intentionality and repetition are key factors in bullying. We must choose our words and actions wisely because they do matter.

How can parents avoid raising a bully? It is our job as caring, responsible parents to be constant teachers and role models when it comes to fostering empathy and positive social behavior. So if you don't want your son to be highly critical and judgmental of others, try not to criticize your neighbor in front of your kids. If you don't want your daughter to share with friends other children's confidences, don't gossip about your neighbor's personal life to your friends. Because we're all works in progress, we need to view our children's and our own social digressions as teachable moments through which we can learn from our mistakes and move forward. Many parents want to point the finger outward, instead of looking inward or at their own child. Some parents act like they took this job to be their kid's press agent, rather than shape and mold their character. Sometimes it seems we spend more energy on superficial concerns for our children than we do on building their character! Look...my kid got straight A's, made all district, has the lead in the school play... yes, that's great, but how do they treat people?

Kindness and empathy have to be taught. Having the ability to know what it feels like to be in someone else's shoes AND to have compassion for another's pain and suffering will serve children well. It's not about becoming best friends with everyone. It's about giving people a chance and not



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prejudging them. Tell your kids they need to treat everyone with respect. They need to understand that their actions, as subtle as can be, affect other people greatly. Encourage them to be nice to the new kid. Scoot down on the lunchroom bench and let someone fit in. Offer a friendly smile. The woman that wrote the Huffington Post article had the best analogy she explained to her annoyed daughter called the ATM Analogy. She explained that she had social bank to spare. She could easily make a withdrawal on behalf of the girl that was being annoying, risking very little. That's when that simple smile speaks a thousand words. Children also need to feel that other people's feelings have value and are worth their consideration. The more empathy and compassion children feel for their peers, the less room there is in their hearts for contempt and disregard for others' feelings.

Stay connected. Know your child. Accept them and love them unconditionally. Communication is key. Talk, listen, check in often, and keep tabs on the world she lives in. Is your child more likely to be the bully, the bullied, or the bystander?

Explore all sides of a story that feels off when your child claims to be a victim. One of the biggest disservices we can do to our children is to listen unconditionally to their side of the story and assume they are guilt-free without doing some due diligence. Model kindness in and out of your family and insist on it. Screen the media in your home- music, movies, TV, video games. When you hear or see something that doesn't align with your values, talk about it. Know that we all make mistakes - kids and parents alike. We

must hold our children accountable for their behavior. They need to take responsibility for their actions. Teach your kids how to make it right. If we are going to insist on being the Helicopter Generation, let's at least hover over the right areas.

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Kim's goal for you is to help reduce conflict, foster mutual respect, and create deeper communication and connections with your loved ones. She can be reached through www.EmpoweredParenting.com.