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**Dr Mark  
Dooley**



**MORAL MATTERS**

## Parents need to wrest control from bullies

**F**OR weeks, I have been suffering latent anxiety. It started just before Christmas, when one of my sons claimed he was being bullied at school. At first, it was mild intimidation, but soon progressed to physical and emotional harassment.

There is, of course, nothing unusual about schoolboy bullying. From time immemorial, bullies have preyed on their victims in the schoolyard. Lately, however, schools have endeavoured to become bully-free zones.

The reason for this is clear: bullying is not something people grow out of. It is a vicious habit which, if tolerated, will persist for life. Knocking it on the head at the earliest opportunity is vital if the schoolyard bully is not to become the office bully.

My son was in a particularly difficult dilemma. Not only were the bullies making his life a misery in the school-yard, but they also showed up at one of his extra-curricular classes. This meant he was forced to endure their taunts in a confined space after school.

How does a parent respond to such a situation? How can you protect a vulnerable and sensitive child from unjustified aggression by his peers? For the truth is that once a child's sense of safety is compromised, the emotional consequences could be catastrophic.

At first, our son did not want us to intervene, believing the bullies would soon tire and move on. They didn't. Before long, he was being assaulted while waiting for his extra-curricular teacher to arrive.

For us, it was a nightmare. The playground had become a 'prey ground' and our son was the quarry. As a father, my natural instinct was to catch the bullies in the act and haul them before the school authorities. School policy states, however, that bullying should first be reported to a teacher who will then take disciplinary action.

It is hard to know precisely how a bully is formed. Some argue it is family factors. Others say bullying suggests psychological immaturity. I believe bullying stems from a frustrated need to be affirmed and recognised. We all need affirmation and recognition. Unless we are affirmed and encouraged we will never mature confidently or achieve a sense of self-worth. That is why parental affirmation of children is a necessary stage in moral self-development.

Still, recognition of a person's self-worth cannot be forced, but must be earned. The child works hard to earn the recognition or affirmation of his parents and teachers through his

achievements. By mastering things and techniques, the child is recognised and applauded as an independent person.

A bully is chiefly defined by his refusal to earn affirmation. Like the rest of us, he needs and requires to be recognised. But when that requires hard work, you can forget it. It is then he seeks affirmation on the cheap.

By picking on another, the bully achieves a sort of counterfeit mastery. In his heart, he knows his victim would never freely affirm him. That is why he invariably surrounds himself with accomplices who cheer him on as he torments his prey.

If bullying becomes addictive, it is because the bully cannot live without the affirmation of his friends. At every opportunity, he seeks out his victim so his own needs will be fulfilled. Take away the victim, however, and the bully loses the respect and affirmation he so desperately craves. Starved of his power, he is no longer perceived even by his friends as master, but as someone totally reliant on that which he can never truly possess.

It takes courage to oppose a bully. But oppose them we must, even when we fear that such opposition will result in further intimidation. I learned long ago that once you deny a bully control, he very quickly retreats.

**L**A TE last week, unwilling and unable to endure anymore, my son asked me to intervene. That same morning, I gladly took the matter to his wonderful teacher who very quickly dealt with the culprits. To his great relief, he is now free to roam the schoolyard without fear.

If I report this story today, it is because parents must be forever vigilant when it comes to bullying. We must do everything we can to protect our children from this scourge, while also ensuring they do not themselves become bullies. And if that requires some extra hands-on parenting, it is a small price to pay in order to break an addiction which could potentially destroy a child's life.

Sadly, we now live in a world where bullies have almost unlimited scope. With impunity, they scour the internet in search of unwitting prey, their chatroom 'friends' spurring them on. It seems the bully has finally discovered a domain where his mastery can be perpetually sustained.

Not so, if we make it our business to monitor our children's internet usage. Again, it boils down to parental caution and vigilance, even when we are accused of invading their privacy.

After all, when young lives hang perilously in the balance, their privacy is one privilege they can ill-afford.

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