

## **Schools, Bullies, and Preventable Tragedies**

By Mike Tully, J.D.

The boy was small for his size, eleven years old and four feet tall. He attended school in Clark County, Nevada, and lived with his Grandmother. On September 26, 2006, he hid a knife under a bush on his way to school. Later that day, he retrieved the knife while walking home and stabbed two of his classmates.

He was a victim of bullying. After the stabbing, he told of teasing and physical brutality because of his small stature. He said he had fought with the two stabbing victims four days earlier and that an adult bystander intervened to prevent another fight the previous day. (*Las Vegas Review-Journal*, October 03, 2006.)

Across the state, in Fallon, Nevada, during the spring semester of 2006, a mother reported that her 10 – year old daughter had been attacked by five other girls who called themselves “The Lynch Mob.” They kicked her repeatedly while she lay on the ground. Another parent stated, “My child told me it doesn’t do any good to report things. He was told to stand on the wall for tattling.” (*Lahontan Valley News*, April 1, 2006.)

Victims of school bullying don’t always retaliate and don’t always survive. And bullying doesn’t necessarily involve beatings. Jeffrey Johnston, a high school student in Coral Gables, Florida was bullied for at least two years by a former classmate, but not in the traditional sense. The bully hunted him in cyber-space. One of our society’s tragic misconceptions is that bullying requires physical activity, that “names can never hurt me.” Jeffrey hanged himself on June 29, 2005. (*Southwest Florida News-Press*, April 2, 2006.)

There is a common theme here. The bullying behavior took place over a period of time. That is what distinguishes bullying from “rough play” and the occasional teasing incident or playground fight. Bullying consists of ongoing behavior and the victim of bullying behavior sometimes believes that there is “no way out” except extreme violence or self-harm.

The Columbine tragedy is the iconic example of what bullying can lead to. Unfortunately, years after Columbine, millions of students in the United States are involved in bullying behavior, either as bully, or victim, or both. According to a study by the American Psychiatric Association, an average of 160, 000 children avoid school daily because of bullying. Imagine how much more difficult it is to make *Adequate Yearly Progress* when schools have a poor attendance rate. Victims of bullying suffer from poor grades, physical symptoms, and poor attendance. They exhibit anxiety, depression, sleeplessness, and isolation. And some don’t survive.

When bullying take place at a school, one or both of these elements is present (usually both):

- The adults are unaware of the bullying.
- The victims don't report the bullying, because they don't want to be accused of "tattling," and/or because they don't think the adults will do anything about it.

Adults can and should be aware of bullying behavior in schools. Adults can change the social norm of the school to encourage victims to report bullying. Adults operate and administer schools, not the children. When adults abrogate their responsibility to keep their students safe by failing to address bullying, they place their students, and themselves, at risk. Who would want to live with the knowledge that one's negligence helped cause a preventable tragedy?

Here are components of a bullying prevention program:

- Canvass students, either through an anonymous survey (recommended) or through interviews, and learn about bullying in your school. Learn the extent of the bullying problem, where it takes place ("hot spots"), what form it takes, and whether students feel comfortable reporting it to adults.
- Create a school bullying prevention team to design a bullying prevention program that addresses the bullying problem. The committee should meet on a regular basis and train school personnel in bullying prevention methods.
- Encourage regular classroom meetings to discuss bullying at school and ways to prevent it. This process encourages students to become agents of change to discourage bullying by making it less attractive.
- Teach school personnel to recognize bullying behavior and deal with it immediately and effectively when it occurs.
- Involve parents and the community in the anti-bullying effort.
- Stay with the program. Commit at least three years to the effort. It takes time to change the social climate of a school.

These components are based on the *Olweus Bullying Prevention Program*, which has successfully reduced the amount of bullying in schools around the world. They work, they are doable, and they help establish and maintain a safe and secure learning environment.

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