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Pain is present in mean boys and girls

[By Jane Clifford]

OK, you've seen your child do some things, little things really, but nagging little things. Being just a little too aggressive with younger siblings, a little too snarky on the phone about classmates, a little too intimidating with the kids in the neighborhood.

Do you continue to ignore it or do you follow your instincts and acknowledge that your child is a bully, confront your child and work on the problem?

We asked two experts in bullying to answer 10 questions parents might have about children's questionable behavior.

Ken Druck is a school violence expert, founder of the Jenna Druck Foundation and author of "How to Talk to Your Kids About School Violence" (Onomatopoeia, \$20).

Rosalind Wiseman founded the Empower Program, a national violence-prevention program, in 1992 and is the author of "Queen Bees and Wannabes" (Crown, \$24), which was the basis for the 2004 hit movie "Mean Girls."

- Why is it so hard to admit your child is a bully?

"No parent wants to hear or believe that their child has a mean bone in his or her body," Druck says. "We as parents are so self-conscious about our children growing up to have a good character, to treat people well and of course to reflect positively on their upbringing and their parents. So what does it say about us when the phone rings and it's our child's third-grade teacher calling to set

up a special parent meeting because our son or daughter has been relentlessly teasing, intimidating and/or outright assaulting another child physically or verbally?"

- Why do children bully?

"They honestly feel something's been done to them first that pushed them, forced them to bully," Wiseman says.

"A lot of it is loss," Druck says. "There's a vicious cycle between unprocessed grief and loss and violence. Some of us are so unaware of how deeply the losses of our lives have affected us that we become almost indifferent to the pain of others. It is that indifference, that lack of compassion or empathy that is our license to hurt other people with little or no remorse."

- What's wrong with chalking it up to "boys will be boys" or "you know how girls are"?

Druck says that's called minimizing. "And the parent who minimizes and dismisses their child's bullying behavior and tosses it off as what all kids do is most often trying to defend themselves from both their own feelings of failure and their own helplessness. They're saying to themselves, 'I didn't do it right. I raised a mean kid.'"

One of the trickiest things, Wiseman says, "is that most parents think their kids are telling them 100% the truth. Children, like anybody else, see their particular version of the truth. They, too, have a tendency to minimize their own behavior and justify that behavior."

- So, what can you do?

"Probably the most ineffective things parents do are the things we do out of desperation, shame and panic," Druck says. "Parents often get this call and run around with their hair on fire. How many parents at the point of finding out their child has been bullying somebody, the first reaction is anger - at the school, at the teacher, at the kid, at the spouse? We immediately search for someone to blame. This is the response that is not going to correct the problem."

Instead, Druck and Wiseman suggest these steps:

- Investigate. Listen to everybody's side of the story and verify the facts. Not with the intention of proving somebody wrong, but with the intention of finding the hidden gift in this ordeal that will help your child develop a stronger character.

- Help your child identify what happened, why he reacted the way he did, what options

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there were and how to be more effective in the future.

- Find out on a deeper level what's happening in your child's world that is causing him or her to intentionally turn mean. Because your child has chosen a primitive, inappropriate way to express hurt or sorrow - from divorce, a death in the family, difficulty with class work, being the victim of a bully - how can you bring out in that child more constructive ways of dealing with the underlying feelings that are driving the bullying?

- Tell your child what you have found and ask her what she believes should be the consequences.

- What should the consequences be?

Hold your child accountable.

"Even though the consequences may be hard for you to dole out and for your child to bear, there need to be consequences related to what they did," Druck says.

If it was social bullying, Wiseman says, where your child posted an embarrassing photo of someone or something said in confidence, "your child needs to post another e-mail saying, 'I lied' or 'I doctored a photograph.' They need to learn it's not worth it. You need to give your child the best chance to say that the punishment was so painful, they're not doing it again."

If a backpack was stolen or a bike was damaged, make your child earn the money by doing chores to replace or repair the item. If it's not something tangible, have your child wash cars and donate the money to the victim's favorite charity or volunteer time with groups that can build empathy.

- Is it important to apologize?

Crucial, both Wiseman and Druck say. Especially when your child thinks he was justified, because someone bullied him first.

"The real important lesson," Wiseman says, "is that it doesn't matter what you think. When you've hurt someone, your opinion is the least important in the room. If what you did is a problem to that person, it's a problem."

If your child won't apologize, Wiseman says, then you need to go up to the other child or the parents and say, "On behalf of my family, I apologize that my child did X."

- So the examples you set are important?

Wiseman says her two boys, almost 5 and almost 7, have seen her apologize for their behavior, and it's been a powerful message. Just as the opposite is true.

"Our children hear and see everything, whether it's the way we treat them, the way we treat our spouse, whether it's subtle or overt," Druck says. "The dad who takes his son to a Chargers game and ends up bullying somebody in the beer line or pushes his way to the front of the line or treats somebody wearing the visiting team T-shirt with venom is sanctioning that behavior."

- That's physical bullying. What about social bullying, often done by girls to girls?

Mothers who put other women down in front of their daughters are setting equally bad examples, Wiseman and Druck say.

Social bullying, cyberbullying, overall "mean girl" behavior, "calls for mothers to police themselves and to modify any form of gossiping, trashing, judging and shaming other women," Druck says.

"In girl culture, they have been taught it's OK to trash each other and that there's a viciousness that darkens girls' adolescence. Very few girls escape this."

- Can you do anything to prevent your daughters and sons from becoming mean girls and bad boys?

Yes, says Wiseman, by paying attention to their behavior. Observe your child when he or she is socializing informally. If you can, watch while you're in the car, after you've dropped your child off at school or when you pick him or her up from an activity.

Watch him while he's playing basketball with his buddies in your driveway, while you're waiting for her to leave her group after school. Is your child in the center of the group with friends all ringed around? Wiseman says, before you react, happily, that your child seems to be so popular, be aware that it's more than that. The child in the center is the child with the most social power, Wiseman says.

Parents need to communicate clearly to a child what his or her responsibilities are to other people because of that social power.

- How worried should you be?

Druck says it's important to remember that every person has the capability of being mean to other people. Some do it passively; some do it aggressively; some resist the temptation; some do it more than others.

Bottom line, says Wiseman: It's common if your child is mean. It doesn't mean you're a bad parent. It doesn't mean your child is a bad child.

"I'm always so mortified when my kids behave badly," she says. "It is OK to admit

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that it's horribly embarrassing ... and then get over yourself" and handle the situation.

"Be the parent your child needs to have."

SIDEBAR

Social reality

By Jane Clifford

Social bullying is increasingly common, especially among teenage girls, and it can be just as damaging as physical violence, says Ken Druck, author, school violence expert and founder of the Jenna Druck Foundation, a nonprofit organization for women and families named for his daughter, who died in an accident.

Social bullying usually takes place within groups - one child might turn an entire group against another person, he says. If that happens, it's important to remember that bystanders are just as guilty as the "leader."

Because social bullying is often subtle and hard to detect, educators and parents can

look for these warning signs, courtesy of www.howtotalktoyourkids.com:

- Spreading of rumors and gossip. Malicious gossip can spread very quickly. Even if untrue, it can destroy a child's reputation and make it very hard for him or her to gain social acceptance.

- Deliberate exclusion or shunning. Girls excluding other girls from social activities or forming cliques to reject or isolate former friends is a powerful and common method of social bullying.

- Verbal taunting or harassment. Taunting, as distinct from teasing, is meant to hurt or belittle and establishes an imbalance of power. Name-calling, rude jokes and calling attention to physical or social shortcomings all can chip away at a child's self-esteem, cause embarrassment and escalate to other forms of bullying.

- Hostile expressions or body language. Staring aggressively, making faces or derogatory gestures and taking hostile stances are subtle yet effective ways to

intimidate, alienate or reject others without making it obvious to teachers.

- Abusive e-mail or phone calls. Access to computers and phones allows social bullying to continue after school. This lack of escape causes further anxiety for the victim and may result in self-exclusion from social activities.

In many instances, social bullying escalates through peer pressure. Bullies love an audience. Tell your daughter that if her friends are pressuring her to participate in social bullying, they are not true friends. Teach her to stand up for what she believes in. If your son hangs out with other bullies, separate him from that group.

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