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Strategic Intervention

Point 4

Engage the Bully in Constructive and Supportive Interactions

This is, as far as I am concerned, the most important part of this book. No matter what we do to help the victims of intimidation, no matter how much comfort we give them or how well we teach them the skills of assertiveness, *unless we give as much attention to the bully as we do the victim, we will never solve the problem of the bully-victim dyad.*

Bullies are kids, too. Like it or not, they need and deserve our full attention, just as much as, if not more so than, the victims they torment. That is not to say that those who intervene have to excuse bullying behaviors. Far from it. One of the main goals for bullies is for them to learn that they are accountable for their actions and that we intend to make certain that they are. But, as with victims, we have an obligation to get beyond the surface story and work to discover the inner saga of this troubled young person.

Bullies are not easy people with whom to work. In all honesty, they push our emotional buttons. As previously mentioned in Chapter 5, we almost instinctively respond defensively in their presence. It takes much willpower and self-control to work with those whom we want to believe have no redeeming qualities and who do not want to improve their station in life. The bully, aware of this psychological mind-set in adults, will often act accordingly and thus, perpetuate a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Readers may find it surprising that I offer the same basic intervention steps with the bully as I do the victim. My premise is that it is the bully's surface

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behavior that we find intolerable and that we must get beneath it if we are to understand the child who resides underneath. I characterize it as washing the mud off a child with a garden hose to reveal the real person beneath the yuck. Interventionists hold the hose. The hose and its stream of water represent the skills we employ to change the child's negative behavior (the mud).

Working with bullies is not an easy proposition. It takes a tremendous amount of patience and willingness to withstand bellicose behaviors. Like working with victims, a strategy may not work the first time. But unless we are willing to not give up on the bullies, there will be no change and the bullies will be doomed to assume that the same behaviors that they employ with their peers *now* will work with adults *later*. After all, in their minds, when they direct those behaviors toward us and we leave them alone, they get reinforcement that what they're doing must be right.

There are eight critical aspects that comprise Strategic Intervention Point 4:

1. Understand the rationale and logic of the victimizer.
2. Listen to the story that the bully tells.
3. Educate aggressors on boundaries and acceptable behaviors.
4. Take a team approach in reducing aggression, but work with aggressors as individuals during the accountability phase.
5. Contact the parents of the bully.
6. Make sure that effective bullying and teasing policies are in place—and enforced when necessary.
7. Provide violence prevention education, support, and positive initiatives on behalf of the individual aggressor.
8. Do not abandon the bully.

A detailed look at each aspect follows, to help us get inside the heads—and hearts—of bullies.

1. UNDERSTAND THE RATIONALE AND LOGIC OF THE VICTIMIZER

Like victims, the perpetrators of aggression do so for a reason. They may be aware of why they do what they do. They may also not be aware. In either instance, effective intervention will help to explore the basis for the bully's behavior.

Many of the things that make the bully tick can be found in Chapter 5. However, do not automatically assume that bullies are products of their immediate home environment. As previously noted, there are plenty of nonpoint and

floating resources to which kids are exposed today that encourage them to misbehave and act aggressively. Sometimes kids will tell us why they acted to way they did: "He dissed me in front of my friends so I hit him to put him in his place!" or "He made me mad, that's why!" Actions to avenge perceived slights are likely the number one reason that aggressors will give as to the reasons for their surface behavior. Because American society has always placed a high premium on its people's ability to take care of themselves—particularly men—revenge for perceived slights is one assumed way of "evening the score." This is true for both boys and girls. More likely, though, is this response to inquiries as to the rationale behind attacking others: "I don't know. I just did it." And they may truly not know why they behave in the aggressive manners in which they do. This is certainly true of children and adolescents who act impulsively or out of a foundation of anger.

Knowing the reasons behind a child's aggressive behavior serves as a foundation for designing a more effective intervention. It does little good to tell a young person to simply stop behaviors fueled by a deep, underlying need to deal with the frustrations created by the heavy-handed discipline meted out by parents. Until we know the real reasons for a child's misbehaviors and begin the efforts to deal with the roots of the thought processes, little we do will be effective. The counseling dialog in the next section will demonstrate how we can ascertain the bully's rationale.

2. LISTEN TO THE STORY THAT THE BULLY TELLS

Bullies and their targets share some amazing similarities. As with victims, bullies have a lot of stories to tell. As with their targets, bullies may never have had the opportunity to tell those stories. They probably have never felt safe enough to tell them. Even more likely is the possibility that no significant adult in their lives has ever asked or shown concern.

Bullies, like victims, have that surface story and an inner saga. Surface stories will revolve around the immediate stressors that caused the actions of the bully. This is where it takes patience and persistence to get beneath the veneer of "stuff." Most likely, we will already know the surface story by the time an incident comes our way. Amanda was caught sending threatening and slanderous text messages to Karla. That is what happened, but it does not tell us Amanda's reasons.

Intervener (I): Amanda, yesterday we dealt with the problem of you sending threatening messages to Karla, and we said that today we would spend more time trying to understand what was going on between you two. So, I have to ask, what were your reasons for doing that?

Amanda (A): I just did it. *[She says nothing else.]*

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- I: That's it, you just did it? Well, we know that, but my question to you is, what caused you to feel as if you had to do it?
- A: *[Long pause before responding.]* She just makes me so mad, that's all.
- I: So you were mad at Karla and that is what caused you to send her the messages?
- A: Yes.
- I: My hunch is that there is more to it than that. Is what was making you mad something that happened recently or long ago?
- A: It's been going on since elementary school. She spread some rumors between me and some other friends that caused us all to hate each other. I've hated her ever since.
- I: That's quite a long time to be mad at someone.
- A: Well, it was worth it if I got her back with those messages I sent.

Now we understand Amanda's logic for her actions. She was seeking revenge for what she perceived as the theft of friendships from elementary school. The basis for the messages is deep-seated: Amanda has never forgiven Karla for the rumors she blames Karla for starting years earlier. With this information, we now have some foundations on which to build toward analyzing Amanda's inner saga.

- I: That's quite a long time to be mad at someone.
- A: Well, it was worth it if I got her back with those messages I sent.
- I: So, the reason you sent those threatening messages was because of something that happened over three years ago. I see. You know, sometimes we go straight to "mad" when we are really experiencing some other feelings inside us, things like hurt and sadness. I wonder if what you really feel inside is actually more sadness and hurt because you feel as if Karla stole some of your friends.
- A: *[No response. She is deep in thought.]*
- I: Amanda, often it's hard for people to say what they may really be feeling because we live in a world where we're supposed to be tough and not admit that some things actually are hurtful to us. I don't know what's really going on in your head, about what's making you think the way you do about Karla. That's for you to decide. But I do know that it's not an admission of being a sissy or of being weak when we honestly talk about things like losing friends and how sometimes that hurts.

A: *[Still no response.]*

I: Why don't you think about what I've said and we'll meet again tomorrow to talk some more, if you'd like. I know that you and Ms. Principal have another meeting today to talk about all of this. You may have some more thoughts about this whole thing after today.

A: *[Leaves the room without saying anything and goes back to class.]*

In this scenario, the intervener is trying to be as nonjudgmental as possible in talking with the aggressor. Someone else will clearly be making judgments later that day—Ms. Principal—and whatever accountability is imposed is not the role of the intervener in this case. It is always important for kids to have **neutral third-party adults** with whom they can share their thoughts, adults who are not in the discipline loop and who will not be the ones handing down sentences for whatever the bullies have been accused. The intervener here also did not press Amanda for answers beyond what she was willing to talk about. The door was left open for her to think about what was discussed and to further explore it the next day if she chose to do so. So often when working on long-term and deep-seated issues, conversations of one day do nothing more than plant seeds for another day's harvest.

The next day, Amanda does come back to see the intervener, even before the intervener has the chance to touch base with her.

A: I've been thinking about what you said yesterday, about maybe I was really hurt and sad about what happened in fifth grade.

I: And . . . ?

A: You may be right. I remember I was really hurt that Karla had stolen my friends away from our group. And I was sad, too. But I was also angry that she did it the way she did.

I: Then it was all three of those emotions that you were dealing with—hurt, sadness, and anger?

A: I guess so.

I: And anger won out?

A: I guess. All I wanted to do was get her back for what she'd done to me because it hurt a lot. When Karla got that new cell phone for Christmas, I knew that I could get her back as much as I wanted to by sending those messages.

I: You just forgot that with each one you sent, your phone number went along with it and showed up on her caller ID!

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- A: *[Laughs.]* Something like that.
- I: Well, I'm glad you've thought about some other reasons why you might have done what you did. It's important to be honest with ourselves, even when the truth may be difficult to admit. So, I'm wondering, is this the first time that you've acted out of anger when you were really feeling something else inside?
- A: You know, I was thinking about that last night, too. I think that maybe there are a bunch of things that I've done because I was mad when really I felt something else.
- I: And if you had to put feeling words on those examples you are thinking about, what might they be?
- A: Well, one time I was babysitting my little brother and . . .

Amanda has accepted the intervener's invitation to explore other examples of her behaviors in the past and how she might have acted with anger instead of the real emotions she felt. The basis is now set for Amanda to begin major self-exploration on the motivations behind her bullying behaviors.

3. EDUCATE AGGRESSORS ON BOUNDARIES AND ACCEPTABLE BEHAVIORS

This is a very important aspect of interventions with bullies, particularly boys. Bullies need to know when their behaviors cross other people's interpersonal and physical boundaries. They need to be told explicitly that their aggressive behaviors are not welcomed and will not be tolerated in the school setting. Likewise, they need to get the message that their misbehaviors also may not be appreciated among their peers outside of school. Believe it or not, many aggressive kids have never understood the concept of boundaries, especially if they come from a home where everyone's boundaries are not respected or are entangled. **Enmeshment** is the equivalent of "everyone messin' in everybody else's business." If one member of the family has a problem, everyone becomes involved in either attempting to solve it or adding additional fuel to the fire to aggravate the situation. If misbehavior at school is not frowned upon at home, children likely perceive this as receiving tacit approval from their parents to continue such behaviors.

Let us take the easy one first: the explicit declaration that bullying behaviors will not be tolerated at school.

- Intervener (I): Toby, this morning Mr. Principal shared with me that you and some other boys were throwing rocks at Rick on the playground and that he was going to be meeting with you and your parents later today.

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- Toby (T): I guess. Whatever.
- I: Doesn't sound to me that you're too concerned about it.
- T: Nah, I'm not worried. It's not my fault he moved into the direction I was throwing the rock. We were just fooling around, that's all.
- I: Maybe so. But Rick's got a cut on his head from that "playing around," and I don't think he thinks you were playing. That's something that you and Mr. Principal will have to work out later. The only reason that I'm in on this is because, as you know from what's in the student handbook, if one of our students is involved in an act of bullying others, the policy says that I am to talk with them to see what's really going on before Mr. Principal makes a decision about what to do.
- T: Whatever. I really don't care what he does. I'm not scared.
- I: That's fine, Toby. That's between you and Mr. Principal. But I do have a feeling that you and I are going to be spending some time together in the coming weeks talking about all this.
- T: Whatever.
- I: I'm willing to help in any way I can to make this a safe place for everybody—including you, Toby. So, if there's something going on that I need to know about, I hope that you will share that with me or Mr. Principal later today.
- T: I won't be sharing anything with either of you.
- I: That's okay with me, but you and Mr. Principal will have to work out a deal as to how the two of you decide to get along. Again, I want you to know that if you ever want to talk to me about stuff, you can. But I have to make this crystal clear with you: At this school, we do not tolerate abusive behaviors to others. No one does. This school deals very quickly and firmly with students who bully and tease others, and if you continue to do things like you did today, Mr. Principal will continue to hold you responsible for what you do and each time that visit will likely get more unpleasant. Do you understand what I just said?
- T: Yeah, yeah, yeah.
- I: Then let me know in your own words what I said about your behavior in school.
- T: If I get caught bullying, you people are going to punish me and if I do it enough, you'll kick me out.
- I: Well, that's not exactly it, but it's a starting point for us to begin . . .