



Parent Pages



RESOURCES FOR CHRISTIAN PARENTS IN THE 21ST CENTURY

Life Together: Why Do Children Hurt Each Other?



Bullying is a negative behavior of aggression (physical, verbal or relational) that continues over time and involves an imbalance of power. Beginning in Genesis 3 with the fall into sin, and poignantly displayed in Genesis 4 with the murder of Abel by Cain, bullying is one manifestation of the wickedness of the flesh that we continue to struggle with to this day. Referencing this wickedness, Luther's explanation for the Fifth Commandment reminds us that we are to not only refrain from hurting others, but to extend a helping hand in order to reflect the saving grace of God.

We often think of bullying as including only two children — the bully and the target. In reality, almost all children are part of a bullying scenario at one time or another. In a bullying situation, children fit into one of five categories:

- **Bully:** This is the instigator of the aggression, the person who most often carries out the plan. Bullies are good at coercion and enjoy the display of power.
- **Supporter:** Supporters are children who hang out with the bully. They might carry out some of the aggression, and they usually cheer on the process. Supporters enjoy the feeling that they are a protected part of a group.
- **Bystander:** Children in this group witness the aggression but do nothing about it. What they see may horrify them or they may laugh, but they do not get involved.
- **Target:** This child is the recipient of the aggressive behavior. Targets are vulnerable and usually unable to defend themselves. A target is often different in some way. This difference may inspire others to think the target deserves mean treatment.
- **Upstander:** The rare child who is an upstander is one who witnesses the negative behavior and defends the target. An upstander also speaks out against such behavior and works to create an environment that shows acceptance of each person.

As Christian parents, we all want our children to be in the last category. No one wants to see his child a target, and no parent likes to imagine her child as a perpetrator or supporter of mean behavior. We want our children to be salt and light, preserving what is good and shining a light on what needs to be changed as a result of original sin. In order to move our children in the right direction, let us look at the motivations behind each category.

Bullying has its roots in original sin and manifests in the motivations of power, control and protection, but there is another emotion that motivates bullying: fear. It is easy to assign the emotion of fear to targets; after all, they learn to live in fear of the bully and his or her supporters. How does fear apply to the others? Here are some possibilities:

- Fear of someone or something that is different. As humans, we like to find safety in groups of people who are similar to us. It should not bother us when other people have different appearances, interests or abilities; but because of our sinful nature, it does.
- Fear of home life. Sometimes (but not always) a bully is being abused at home by a parent or sibling. Such a child may be using bullying behaviors as a way of staying safe outside the home.
- Fear of being outside the group. Outsiders feel rejected, and this fear propels them into behaviors they think will guarantee protection within the group.
- Fear of being the next target. Many children are quiet in the face of bullying because they fear association with the target, making them the next victim.
- Fear of punishment. Some children fear getting into trouble with teachers or administrators because of their



actions to defend other students. A school with a zero-tolerance policy for fighting does not discriminate between a bully, a target or a child trying to stop the fight. Even without such a policy, it is a challenge to distinguish between the bully and the defender. Bullies tend to have the ability to twist a story to their favor.

We might look at this list and decide that children who act as upstanders are those who are without fear.

However, this is not the case. Upstanders feel fear because they empathize with the fear of the victim. Children who take risks to defend another child do not do this because they have no fear. They do this because God works through them. If we want our children to be upstanders, we must teach them that God loves and protects them.

We must teach them empathy so they can see a situation from the perspective of the target instead of from their individual worries and fears. Most importantly, we must point them to the writings of Martin Luther in the Small Catechism on original sin and its effects and constantly continue to reinforce the examples of Jesus, Daniel, John the Baptist, Stephen and others in their demonstration of being an “upstander for God.”

This kind of training comes from God and is possible by the work of the Holy Spirit. God’s love is our best defense against fear.

“There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear”
(1 JOHN 4:18A).

For Further Study

Reading a book with your child can begin the conversation. For younger children, try *Chrysanthemum* by Kevin Henkes and *Bootsie Barker Bites* by Barbara Bottner. For older children, try *The Hundred Dresses* by Eleanor Estes and *Wonder* by R.J. Palacio.

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Writer: Kim Marxhausen Designer: Lisa Moeller

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