



BAL BHARATI PUBLIC SCHOOL, NOIDA

Phone : 0120-2534064, 2538533 / e-mail : bbpsnd@yahoo.co.in

Website : <http://www.bbpsnoida.com>

BULLYING

(When School Becomes Hell)

As the incidence of violent bullying continues unabated, schools must adopt new policies to combat the problem.

The bell rang. The children packed their bags and rushed out of their class rooms. Just then somebody in the school bus noticed that Rahul, a fifth standard boy, was missing. Actually, Rahul hadn't been seen, since the mid day recess. Later, after a frantic search by many, the janitor found the terrified boy locked in a toilet.

For months Rahul had been taunted and teased by a classmate who shared his desk-for being a "favourite" of their teacher. It was traumatic for the boy, whose parents wondered why their son woke up crying at night and sometimes refused to attend school, although he was good at studies. Indeed Rahul's good grades and ability to make friends only added to the problem. On occasions, his books had been stolen, ripped and returned. Today, things had gone too far. "I'll teach you a lesson", his desk partner had told Rahul, earlier in the day, after falsely accusing him of stealing his text book. During recess, the bully saw an opportunity and bolted Rahul in the toilet, where he'd spent more than two hours waiting for help.

After Rahul's parents learnt of his ordeal, a teacher spoke to the other boy, who was persuaded to explain his behaviour. "My mother locks me in the toilet as punishment," he said. Following that, counseling sessions, which involved a teacher, both boys and their parents, brought peace between the boys, who are now friends. Rahul has returned to his normal, happy self.

Bullying is a major problem in India especially in Delhi schools and around the world. A Global School-Based Student Health Survey, done by UN agencies, found that between 20 and 65 percent of school going children reported having been verbally and physically bullied in the previous 30 days. There are a few Indian studies too. In one, involving interviews of 500 students aged 8 to 12 at rural schools in Maharashtra, bullying was reported by 31.4 percent of the children surveyed. Teasing and calling names were the commonest forms seen, according to the study published in a 2007 issue of *Indian Pediatrics*. Other forms of bullying – in descending order of incidence – included the use of bad words, spreading rumours, threatening, and causing isolation. Causing physical hurt was reported by 16 percent of the students who were bullied.

In another study of 500 children from five randomly selected schools, reported in a 2011 issue of the *Indian Journal of Pediatrics (IJP)*, the results are more alarming. As many as 60.4 percent of the students experienced similar forms of bullying, but only 39 percent of the victims' parents were aware of it.

Last April, the Parents Teachers Association United Forms (PTAUF) in Mumbai surveyed 150 schools in city and neighbouring Thane District. They found that 70 percent of students experienced bullying, but only 20 to 40 percent reported it.

Bullies pick on any perceived "difference" : shyness, being plump or clever or scoring poor marks, being attractive, being the "wrong" colour or religion – or simply being in the wrong place at the wrong time. "Bullied children complained of psychosomatic symptoms which are potentially harmful for development. Teachers must be adequately trained to tackle this problem. Pediatricians should always consider bullying as a causative agent for illness and plan for appropriate interventions," warns the IJP study-report.

A concerned president of the PTAUF, Professor Arundhati Chavan, points to the apathy of the authorities in this matter. "We presented our findings on bullying to the Maharashtra state education department, but to no avail. The government is very neutral and feels that these issues must be tackled by the schools themselves," she rues.

At least some private schools are taking cognizance of the problem. The affected party can complain, and school authorities try and find solutions, often with counseling. But government and aided schools don't do much. Most don't even acknowledge the problem.

Indeed, bullying may never be an issue discussed when education officers visit schools for inspections. What are teachers doing about the problem? Are the victims encouraged by teachers to speak up? Does the school have a stated anti-bullying policy that is communicated to teachers, students and parents? These are the questions, inspectors and parents should ask.

At his new school, every day, seven-year-old Chirag* of Pune was openly taunted, just because he spoke with a foreign accent, since he and his family had just relocated from abroad. Since he was also hyperactive, he'd become inattentive in class, which made matters worse. Other children nicknamed him Dopey. Once an enthusiastic swimmer, Chirag started to skip the sessions-something the school's coach noticed and discovered, after some prodding, the bullying Chirag was subjected to. The coach discussed this with Chirag's father, who revealed that the boy's school attendance too had become irregular because of "stomach pains" that he had likely been feigning.

After three sessions with Dr Nerille Misquitta, a child and adolescent psychiatrist who has dealt with many cases of bullying at Pathfinder Clinic, Pune, the problem was addressed. Chirag was counseled and his parents informed about how to approach the school authorities. Also, as advised by Misquitta, the parents discussed happenings, making notes for each school day. Soon, the bullying stopped. Chirag is now attending classes regularly as well as enjoying his swimming.

Parents or teachers can't solve the problem alone. Siddharth Sinha, founder of Delhi-based NGO Uddeshya (*Uddeshyaindia.org*), which aims at empowering youth, stress the importance of involving parents, teacher and peers to combat bullying. "At Uddeshya, we also focus on peer education-using workshops, we train and encourage youngsters, who may be bullies, to talk to kids in their own age-group and become peer educators," he says. "This has shown remarkable results".

Bal Bharati Public School, Noida has a code of conduct that also prohibits bullying. Every student and class has a copy, In addition, the curriculum includes a life skills education programme that is split into several sessions over the year and teaches children about anger management, empathy towards peers, instilling greater self-awareness and stress management".

Meanwhile, at Singapore International School in Mumbai, new pupils and parents are familiarized with its anti-bullying policy, an essential part of the school's handbook, which was framed with the help of a psychiatrist. Student council members are encouraged to act as mentors for the younger students, and help them resolve problems.

Abhishek Pillai, a house captain at the school talks of such responsibilities given to him and some of his senior peers. "Occasionally, we visit classes and check for problems. During lunch time, we make informal queries about any issues the students may have and try to solve them. Next year, we'll be mentors for the succeeding perfect body and help train the new batch by sharing our experiences".

It was during one such lunch hour last year that a couple of boys walked over to Pillai and the school's head prefect, Aryan Chhabria, and revealed that Akash*, a new boy in the eighth standard, was being bullied by classmates. "We were surprised, because a few weeks earlier, some of Akash's classmates had complained about him," says Chhabria.

"They had told us that they found Akash irritating, and wanted to have nothing to do with him," Pillai adds.

In the end, Akash too felt bold enough to come up and tell the older boys that he was being isolated and picked on. It seems Akash's attempt to make new friends had put off several of his classmates. He would playfully butt in when others were talking, or turn boisterous. It had begun mildly-classmates would ignore him and keep him out of shared activities. Slowly, the bullying worsened. They would make fun of Akash and say nasty things to hurt him.

"We told his classmates that Akash was only eager to make friends, not cross any lines, and explained how it was tough for a new boy to adjust to a new environment, and that this kind of exclusion was seriously hurting him," recalls Pillai.

While a few kids backed off, others continued to tease Akash, not taking Pillai's and Chhabria's intervention seriously. Matters improved after the old boys involved an adult, their school's upper division coordinator. Once she stepped in, classmates began to understand Akash better and stopped the bullying. "Today, Akash has many friends in school and is well-adjusted," says Pillai.

Counsellor Bhawana Pathak Mathpal discusses the strategies she uses when faced with a victim of bullying. "It's important to build the child's self confidence. I work with the children and help them in building their self confidence and assertiveness skills and encourage them to seek support to handle any bullying. I also seek the help of a few classmates who can support a child who is being bullied".

Divya Bablani, another counselor with an international school in Delhi, too stress on such confidence building. "It requires strength for a child who is bullied to talk about what he is going through. They should understand it doesn't make them weak if they speak up and report the matter. It's also vital for parents, teachers and children to understand this," she maintains.

Roleplay, workshops using games, and storytelling are two other antibullying strategies used in some schools. "We usually use storytelling for younger children. For instance, I'll build a story about two friends having a fallout because one has been hurting the other using real-life instances to help a young child understand how such behaviour can upset another," explains Bablani.

In England, where bullying is almost an institutionalized activity, especially at its boarding schools, two popular anti-bullying strategies have been tried. Known as Shared Concern and No Blame, they aim to establish ground rules that enable pupils to continue to co-exist within the school. Under a teacher's guidance the children involved – including the bullies, who are not punished-work out a solution. Often effective in "mild" cases, this has been less successful in cases of sustained, vicious abuse.

After boys in his primary-school class started picking on ten-year-old Henry, baiting him for no reason as “an infected gat boy,” even his best friends turned against him. Henry was excluded from every activity. Soon he began to believe he deserved to be shunned and truly was “the worst boy in the school”. His parents made an urgent appeal to the headmistress, and the school’s “no blame” policy was activated. Henry wrote down how he felt about being bullied; the bullies listened and discussed with the teacher ways to stop the behaviour.

Then an action plan was drawn up. “At first Henry’s former friends started inviting him round again,” says his mother Elizabeth, “while the boys who started it kept away from him,” But after a few weeks the name calling resumed. Eventually Henry was moved to another class. Says Elizabeth, “I question whether this ‘soft’ approach is capable of dealing with the really hard cases.”

“We do bullies no favour by excusing them,” agrees Michele Elliott, noted child psychologist and teacher, who is founder-director of the UK child-protection charity Kidscape. “They can end this before it gets worse. If younger children are not made to feel ashamed of bad behaviour, they’re likely to get worse as they get older. We see the results now, in secondary schools. Mini-gangs of both sexes are rife and more and more bullies are using weapons.”

For months, the parents and teachers of five-year-old Harsh* took a soft approach to the bullying he was facing at the hands of an aggressive classmate. The child of a couple going through a painful separation, the bully dealt with the emotional upheaval at home by doing such things as poking Harsh with a pencil, pushing him to the floor in the lunch area and punching him. “The boy also lived in the same apartment complex. So we would counsel him and tell Harsh to stay calm, use words and no his hands,” says Harsh’s mother Aditi. But that was only frustrating Harsh and making him helpless in the face of sustained aggression, which would dip for a few weeks after the counseling and then start again. “Finally, we even shifted homes in an attempt to distance the two”, says Aditi. But the bullying did not stop, even on the school bus, which the boys still shared. Finally, with the co-operation of the school, Harsh’s bus route was changed and all interaction with the other boys was ended. Harsh told his parents, “I don’t want to team up with him on any projects or sports, or be made to work with him under any circumstances. I don’t even want to sit next to him in class.” That’s what worked ultimately.

While experts concur that there must be no tolerance for bullying, they also add that bullied themselves are often victims, and aggressive disciplinary action or shaming may be counter-productive. “Research shows that the bully too has psychological issues that lat into adulthood and are passed on to his or her progeny. So bullies too need to be understood and treated accordingly,” explains Dr Misquitta.

Mansi Hasan, a Mumbai clinical psychologist and psychotherapist, agrees, “Bullies usually crave power, or have an inferiority complex. Often, they may have been bullied themselves and not learnt how to process their emotions. They may also want attention. Therefore both the bully and the victim are advised counseling.”

Sadia Saeed Raval, founder and chief clinical psychologist at Inner Space Counselling and Assessment, Mumbai, opines : “Disciplinary action needs to be taken against the misdemeanor, and boundaries should be enforced. But a bully needn’t be labelled-because he or she doesn’t know any better and also needs help.”

Counsellor Divya Balani believes that a soft approach and counseling works in most cases. “But in cases that take on more sexual or physical overtones, a harder approach may be necessary. Embarrassing or inculcating feat in the child may be required.”

Take the case of Trupti*, a 15-year-old 10th standard girl, regularly cyber bullied by a classmate, a boy, whose advances she had ignored. He even spread rumours about Trupti on Facebook. Although Trupti had to be treated for depression on account of what she endured, the cyberbullying was not acknowledged by the school, which, despite her complaints, did not even call in the boy’s parents for a meeting. The bullying finally stopped when the police were brought in after Tripti’s mother lodged a complaint.

It’s important to nip bullying in the bud. Classic symptoms and warning signs parents should watch out for are : frequent episodes of crying and anxiety, constant complaints of illness and a reluctance to go to school, torn clothing and missing belongings, loss of appetite, unusual moodiness or a tendency to be withdrawn, stomach problems and bed-wetting, deteriorating academic performance, sleep disturbances and nightmares.

Once any or some of these become noticeable, parents must act. They need to feel confident of being backed by their child’s school and getting effective help. Only when that fails must they seek outside help.

Every child has the right to a safe, protected school environment. The agony that so many children endure as a result of bullying cannot be ignored by any adult.

Compiled by : Asha Prabhakar

Acknowledgements

1. Internet
2. Reader’s Digest