

## HELP YOUR CHILD DEAL WITH BULLYING

By Carrie Smoot

As one who spent her junior high years as 'the cootie bug' because of a congenital eye problem, I have long followed the school efforts to curb bullying. However, they are often geared to figuratively wrapping victims in bubble wrap to protect them, rather than giving them the tools to deal with those who taunt them," says Ann Cameron Siegal, who lives in the City of Alexandria.

She didn't want her two daughters, who inherited her eye condition, to react with tears or to automatically run to teachers and administrators when confronted with similar teasing. In fact, Cameron Siegal recalls that when her eldest was in third grade, she was teased a lot about her Velcro tennis shoes when everyone else had graduated to lace-ups. But no one said a word about her eyes.

Bullying didn't get the best of her daughters or beat them down because she gave them the understanding of why people bully and the strength to deal with it. "It's important to define what bullying is. It goes beyond getting your feelings hurt. But adult intervention is needed when there is an assault," Cameron Siegal says. "We also talked about why other kids bully—that they have low self-esteem and don't have enough to do. Most of all I tried to teach them that the teasing isn't about them and doesn't define them, but says more about the person doing the taunting." Her daughters learned that using positive body language—looking people in the eye, standing straight and tall and not cowering—usually stopped any comments. She says humor and saying something nice about the other person are good tools for deflecting teasing, taunting and comments.

"My eldest, now 24, attended both public and private schools [and learned] to take the taunter aside, explaining the problem



with her eyes. That seemed to throw the [bullies] off guard, and usually my daughter ended up earning their respect," Cameron Siegal says.

"My youngest, now 15, is homeschooled, an environment which is quite lacking in bullying activity. Not because these kids are naturally nicer, but because when they are together, the variety of ages involved makes the need for establishing a pecking order much less than among those sequestered all day with only kids their age. She has countless group activities and attends courses at community college in Alexandria—and nowhere has anyone made fun of her eyes or her speech delay. She enjoys several leadership positions and has earned the respect of peers and adults alike. Protecting my girls with feel-good programs would not have helped them develop the delightful confidence and independence they both have today," she says.

Donald Ashburn, principal of G. W. Carver Middle School in Chesterfield County, instituted a 24-hour-a-day voice mail bullying hotline at the school where students and parents can report incidents quietly. Some students are afraid to come forward because of retaliation. The hotline is checked daily, and Ashburn follows up on each call himself. "Ninety-nine percent of bullying occurs in the hallways, the cafeteria and other areas of the school, not in class. So we have to be extra vigilant."

Ashburn says that a student may try to ignore a bullying problem, but that won't make it go away. Many times the student

won't tell parents or other adults until late in the year. "But had I known earlier, we could have done something about it sooner," he says. "The person being bullied can say to the other student: 'Stop this. I don't like what you are doing, and I'm going to report it.'" This action, he says, puts the ball in the bully's court and asks him or her to make a choice to do the right thing.

"In middle school you get a wide range of maturity levels, and that brings kids into conflict," he says. "By high school, students tend to have matured further, and there may be a lot less. Every principal has to implement a needs assessment for bullying prevention programs, and the principal takes the lead on the effort." Partnering with a local agency, Ashburn authorized a school-wide bullying prevention program that began in January 2007 called Second Step.

Ashburn points out the reasons for and styles of bullying. He says boys tend to be physical when they bully, but that girls bully psychologically. They leave other students out of activities, ignore them, ostracize them or call them names. "Girls hide bullying well. It's necessary to look deeper to help them solve problems."

Ashburn says students are generally respectful and understanding of special-needs students in self-contained classrooms. Inclusion brings a greater chance of bullying incidents. To create a positive atmosphere, Ashburn encourages all students to take an active role within the life of the school. "Make diverse friends and reach out to everyone," he urges. "Don't be a loner. Bullies pick on isolated people. Socialize in groups. That way, friends can intervene and help if there is conflict. But even more important, parents need to be involved in their children's lives, to know what's going on at all times and to be sure that their friends are positive influences."

“Really hear what your child is saying about his or her experiences at school,” adds Ellissia Price, elementary counseling specialist for Fairfax County Public Schools. “Talk with them. Pay attention to the words he or she uses to determine whether there is a bullying problem, and then take steps to solve it by going to the teacher, guidance counselors or administrators. The school is a partner in preventing bullying.”

Price notes that Virginia has a state-mandated K-12 character education program intended to build respect, empathy and caring among all students and their schools. Along with that are voluntary K-12 bullying prevention programs. Working with students in classes, in small-group activities and individually through counseling, teachers and counselors lead discussions about bullying, why it occurs and how to prevent it. Learning and practicing social skills is also part of the training.

Price talks with students about the various forms of bullying. They include physical contact, spreading rumors, ostracizing other students, writing negative things about someone on the Web, or sending nasty e-mails or text messages about someone. “It is unacceptable for anyone to be bullied,” she says. “You need to report it. Everyone

deserves to be treated in a respectful way. And in a school with the foundations of respect, empathy and caring, bullying is much less likely to happen.”

She says students being bullied can also fight back by using “I” statements (i.e. I think or I would like) or by trying to deal with these students in positive ways. “Many times, bullies just don’t know how to express feelings verbally,” Price says. Although assertive, confident body language is important, when teaching coping skills, she says it’s important to be culturally sensitive and aware. In some countries, for example, looking someone in the eye is considered rude or seen as a challenge. Price acknowledges that even bullies have good points, but their abilities must be channeled in positive ways with appropriate limits. “If a bully has a group following him or her, that indicates leadership skills,” she says. “The ones who are creative with name calling could be great writers, actors or artists. But behavior is not changed overnight.”

Especially for students with disabilities, it may be a good idea to get the whole class involved in disability education and learning appropriate behaviors. “A disability does not go away, but permeates the student’s school and home life. Depending on the nature of

the disability, many students miss important social cues,” Price says.

“Parents, teachers, guidance counselors and even the students, if they have the ability, can work together to talk with the class, explaining the nature of their disabilities and answering any questions. Price remembers a third grader with autism with whom she once worked. None of his classmates liked it when he would touch their papers or yank them off their desks. Name calling, yelling and teasing occurred. But when the class gathered with teachers and guidance counselors, learning what autism was and how it affected their classmate, behaviors improved. All students learned how to communicate better with him, set boundaries and learn positive behaviors. “Once the student with autism saw that his actions weren’t pleasing to the other kids, he stopped. But it took several times for students to patiently explain why they didn’t like this behavior before it stopped completely.”

Ken York of Falls Church raised four children who don’t have disabilities. He observes, “as important as it is to teach disabled children how to deal with bullying, it is more important to teach nondisabled children to respect disabled children and others who are less fortunate and not tolerate any bullying towards them.” ■

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## DEFINITIONS

The Fairfax County Public Schools bullying prevention program defines bullying and related behaviors in these ways:

**Bullying** - Physical, verbal, social or emotional teasing or intimidation over time.

**Harassment** - Repeated emotional abuse that may be verbal or physical. It can also include bullying or theft of personal property.

**Sexual harassment** - Unwelcome sexual advances, requests for sexual favors, inappropriate touching, verbal or physical actions of a sexual nature.

**Hostile environment** - Any unwelcome conduct that interferes with a student’s school performance, or creates an intimidating, hostile, negative environment for the school.

## BOOKS

*The Bully Free Classroom: Over 100 Tips and Strategies for Teachers K-8*, Updated Edition, by Allan L. Beane, 2005.

*I Didn’t Know I Was a Bully!* by Melanie Richards

## RESOURCES

**Pacer Kids Against Bullying**  
[www.pacerkidsagainstabullying.org](http://www.pacerkidsagainstabullying.org)

**StopBullyingNow!**  
[www.stopbullyingnow.hrsa.gov/index.asp?area=main](http://www.stopbullyingnow.hrsa.gov/index.asp?area=main)

**Virginia Center for School Safety**  
[www.virginiaschoolsafety.com](http://www.virginiaschoolsafety.com)

**Teaching Tolerance**  
[www.TeachingTolerance.org](http://www.TeachingTolerance.org)

**Can We Talk?**  
This is program of the National Education Association’s Health Information Network.  
[www.neahin.org/canwetalk/index.html](http://www.neahin.org/canwetalk/index.html)

**The U.S. Department of Education’s press release on bullying and people with disabilities** -  
[www.ed.gov/PressReleases/07-2000/0726\\_2.html](http://www.ed.gov/PressReleases/07-2000/0726_2.html)