

'Bully proofing' your school



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FAMILY MATTERS

Dear Jo Ann,

My 11-year old came home from school in tears saying that her best friends ganged up against her and have decided to exclude her from their activities. How can I help my daughter through this?

Alison L.

Dear Alison,

Ostracism is a form of emotional abuse called bullying. Unfortunately, this behavior is all too common, and takes a terrible toll on the egos of developing teens. Changing hormones, social expectations and academic pressure already make the pre-teen years challenging. They are frequently made even more difficult by emotional, verbal, physical or sexual abuse among peers.

In their book *The Psychologically Battered Child*, Garabino, Guttman and Seeley describe emotional abuse as the most difficult form of abuse for children to understand. It is an insidious form of bullying and must be viewed with the same seriousness as physical and sexual abuse. I recommend that you read *Nobody Knew What To Do — A Story About Bullying*.

The mass psychology to conspire against one girl can be very seductive to girls seeking power. How can a teen defend herself against a campaign of ostracism, whispered rumor, innuendo and sneers? I have treated many girls who, feeling helpless against this type of abuse often suffer in silence.

By writing to me, several important decisions have already been made. First of all, your daughter has decided to trust you to hear her and comfort her, and secondly, you have started the process of acknowledging your daughter and deciding to become her advocate. Your daughter is lucky to have you. You are protecting her and serving as a fine role model for activating change.

Help your daughter strengthen herself. She needs more tools. Get her permission to contact her school and speak to both her homeroom teacher and guidance counselor. They need to become your daughters advocate in the school setting and to implement programs of active parent education. Create a format for dialoguing between families, school and community. I recommend *Bullying Prevention Handbook*.

Is there an anti-bullying program at

her school? If there is not, speak to the principal about bringing the guidance counselors and PTA up to speed. Some national programs brought into schools are The Assist Program, Bully Proof, Bully Proofing your School, Creative Conflict Resolution. In Miami, contact The Melissa Institute to assist in bringing anti-bullying programs to your school.

On both ends of the spectrum, child victims and children earmarked early as bullies need counseling. Empathy can be taught. Recent history shows us that bullying behavior subsides as social skills, anger management and the development of empathy are learned. All members of the school need to be sensitized to the harmful potential of bullying and verbal abuse as they are to physical and sexual abuse.

The PTA may be called upon to enact a program designed to alert parents to the bullying problem in your school and suggest just what they can do to help in their homes and within the school. I've treated families over the years who have not received administrative support. Feeling helpless to enact a solution alone, they chose to withdraw their daughters and enroll them elsewhere.

To the degree that a child can achieve excellence in some area, they will be empowered, self-esteem will increase, and their sense of vulnerability will decrease. They will become more insulated to social stressors.

Help your child develop core values that respect themselves and others. Teach and model.

Strengthen your child's self esteem.

Get your children's school and PTA involved in educating parents, teachers, and all students.

Have your school develop a zero tolerance for bullying with known, severe consequences.

Teach humor as a tool to deflect the absorption of unpleasantness.

One young lady I treated became an excellent magician and performance artist, achieving power and recognition through her newfound skills. Another won spelling bees, another went on to become a fine gymnast. These external activities, also introduced these young ladies to a more expanded social circle. It just takes a good sense of self-worth and a few good friends to bully proof oneself.

Bullying behavior can be seen over the course of a lifetime and is not limited to pre-teens. Teaching your daughter now, will help her effectively recognize and withstand bullies in the workplace, social organizations, and in the neighborhood.