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Verbal First Aid: Healing the Scars of Bullying

"She was beautiful," a female classmate of Phoebe Prince, the girl who was recently "bullied to death," reported to *People Magazine*. "She was bullied out of pure jealousy." Although bullying has always been with us, the advent of cyber-bullying has multiplied its ugly power exponentially.

How we combat the epidemic is a multi-faceted challenge. In this short article I'll offer six strategies to help the bullied child begin to recover from its scars. Vicious words cause much of the devastating harm of bullying, but words can also heal. This is where my specialty -- Verbal First Aid -- comes in.

Verbal First Aid is a protocol that my co-author and I introduced in 2002, teaching first responders and medical personnel how to talk to people in fear, pain and crisis to set a trajectory for recovery. The right words can actually shift the chemicals the body produces from those of panic and retreat to those that heal.

In a situation where somebody has been bullied, beyond physical and emotional injury, a negative impression is left in the spirit of the child. A hateful shove against a locker with a hissed "Irish whore!" hurts more than an accidental fall. The bruise lingers in the heart, as well as the injured arm.

Strategy #1: Pacing

Pacing means validating the impact of the experience, so that the child knows she's being heard and will be cared for and supported. Simple phrases like, "That must have been so difficult," or, "I can hardly imagine how painful it must have been for you when they said that," show compassion and affirm that what happened is not okay. If the bullied child is ashamed or too hurt to sort out the emotions, you might give words to the feelings: "Maybe you're feeling..." or even, "If I were you I would be feeling..."

When what you say fits, you'll see it in the child's body: a shift in posture, evading eyes glancing your way, shoulders relaxing. We're not trying to fix it here, just to offer the rope of presence a child can hold onto for support and hope. The panic of carrying the burden alone is diffused. Trust begins to develop.

Let the child know it's okay to withdraw for a while, offering time and TLC to come back to full strength. Having gotten through this difficult experience, he can tell other children how he did it. Of course, whenever a child seems really troubled, be sure to seek support groups and professional help.

Strategy #2: Role Models

Younger children like to hear concrete examples about people they know, evidence of real solutions. Uncle Henry stared the bully down. Mom found one friend, and they started a club at the church to help little kids learn to read.

For older kids, it helps to know that famous people were bullied as children and used the energy ("I'll show them!") to prove themselves worthy: Lady Gaga for being overweight and eccentric, Tom Cruise for being short, Kate Winslet for being chubby (nicknamed "Blubber"), Madonna dateless for the prom and Miley Cyrus locked by mean girls in the bathroom. Hearing these stories can help a bullied child feel that she's not alone and can help her understand the values of resilience and resolve. And the fact that she's gotten through the experience can make her a role model for someone else.

Strategy #3: Remembering Strengths --"The Placebo Effect of Attitude"

When we're frightened or ill, we forget our assets and see only our failings (often referred to as the "negativity bias"). But everyone has been brave at some time. If you remind bullied children of a time they overcame something, anything -- picked up a snake, raised her hand in class, stood up for something he believed in, or even balanced her bike without training wheels the first time -- they can remember how it felt in their bodies and call it up again.

No one teaches us the mechanics of dealing with psychic energy, but we are energetic beings. What we radiate is picked up, whether consciously or otherwise. Just as animals are said to be aware of the scent of fear, so bullies can sense our lack of confidence as they troll for weakness in others. Parents and teachers can reinforce the child's best picture of him/herself, consciously remarking on a proficiency at art, math, reading, complimenting wit or helpfulness. As we see ourselves, so we are; it's the placebo effect of attitude. Having a mental picture of your own personal myth, your heroic self or your strengths can provide you with the subtle armor you need.

Strategy #4: Fostering Compassion/What's The Bully Thinking?

When 10-year-old Jake was hounded by Brandon at school, his mother asked him what he thought might be going on in Brandon's home. Jake remembered that Brandon's mother hadn't picked him up from school in weeks -- that there was talk about divorce. "Maybe Brandon has nowhere to get rid of his bad feelings," Jake's mother suggested, "not even a younger brother to pick on." While it didn't excuse the bad behavior, it gave Jake pause. Maybe Brandon's acting out wasn't about Jake at all. And the times it is about the bullied child, that child can be reminded that bullies often feel bad about themselves and enviously strike out at someone who is cool and has admirable traits they wish they had.

Strategy #5: Imagination and Guided Imagery

According to the laws of wizardry, which every child who's read *Harry Potter* books knows, we can neutralize evil spells by mentally pointing a wand at villains and dubbing them "Riddikulus," while thinking of something funny. I recall a mean teacher I'd feared standing at the front of the class yelling at us, but in my imagination, I had him standing there in his ridiculous underwear! His power to frighten (if not discipline) me drained away before my

eyes. Exercises like this allow a child to connect safely with his/her own anger, offering a sense of control or power. Its opposite is depression (or anger turned inward), and these techniques can help bullied children deal with the real feelings instead of turning them against themselves. Guided imagery uses mental rehearsal. It can review a situation with a different, better outcome. It also offers techniques that can change the patterns of stress that hijack the brain into connections of calm and balance. Belleruth Naparstack wrote for *Huffpost* about these techniques in relation to Post Traumatic Stress.

Strategy #6: Future Pacing

In Verbal First Aid we talk to the body and imagine it physically healing. We imagine the doctor's surprise as we've healed more quickly than expected. We imagine the fun we'll have playing, when we're "as good as new." In the case of bullying, I watched a savvy pediatrician take down from the wall of her office a picture of a third grade class. "Which one of these kids do you think went to jail?" she asked. "This one, who used to pull my hair. And which one became your doctor?" The child couldn't guess. "This is me," she said pointing at an unexceptional-looking kid, someone who could possibly have been a victim of bullying. "You can't always see the future from here. But things do get better."

And this highlights one of the best things about life. Things keep changing. Children AND adults need to be reminded often that this is true for us all -- throughout our lives. These are only a few of the Verbal First Aid techniques that can help rebuild self-esteem after an episode of bullying. They may help children return to the path of their own unfolding before it was so rudely interrupted, and help them become the person they came here to be.

Please visit www.judithprager.com for more information
For information about our new book, *Verbal First Aid: You're your Kids Heal From Fear and Pain--and Come Out Strong*.

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