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How to Bullyproof Your Child

Written By Melissa Fay Greene

The secret? It's a game. THE ONLY RULE IS: IF you get upset, you lose.

"Insult me," says Izzy Kalman during our first phone call. "Go ahead. Insult me." Kalman is a school psychologist in New York City, leader of antibullying workshops, and the author of *Bullies to Buddies: How to Turn Your Enemies into Friends*. Depending on your view, he's either a pushy ideologue or the sanest voice in the fast-growing world of "bullyproofing" children. Or both.

Insulting a subject is not my typical interview technique, but Kalman uses role-play to teach kids about bullying and he wants me to learn something. "It's a game," he explains. "Your job is to insult me and my job is to make you stop."

"I bet you're not even a real school psychologist," I offer, unsure how to begin.

"I am too!" Kalman yells back.

His strong reaction surprises me — and spurs me on. "Your approach is so Psychology 101. How obvious can you get?"

"It is not obvious!" Kalman cries, with a catch in his voice. "It's really, really important stuff. No one's doing this."

"Oh, right. You're the only one. Oh, you and B. F. Skinner."

"You don't understand!" he cries again.

"Yes I do. I bet you don't even help any children."

"I do too! I help tons of children all the time!"

Suddenly Kalman breaks the rhythm. "Let's stop here. Okay, now tell me: Who won?"

"I did!" I say proudly.

"Why?"

"Because you got upset and you couldn't make me stop."

"That's right. By getting upset and trying to make you stop, I was actually making you continue. Did you have fun?"

"Well, yes." I reply. The uncomfortable truth is it felt good to sharpen ever crueler barbs and hone my voice into a tone of flat superiority I didn't know I possessed.

"It's fun to tease and insult, isn't it?" he says.

"Yes, really!" I say, amazed.

"Welcome," says Kalman, "to the human race."

What, exactly, is bullying?

I'll start off with some definitions. Bullying is intentionally hurtful, repetitive behavior — not a one-time or random act — and it usually involves an uneven playing field. A kid with greater physical or social power dominates a kid with less; think Biff Tannen, always shaking down George McFly for his homework in *Back to the Future*.

Researchers break bullying down to four major types. Physical bullying encompasses kicking, punching, shoving someone into a locker, and so on. Verbal bullying is all about name-calling and taunting, like my insult session with Izzy Kalman. Next comes social/relational bullying, as in the Mean Girls type of torture. A kid gets abused not by another kid but by an entire peer group. It's often a pack of girls, or "bully-princesses," as author Barbara Coloroso (*The Bully, the Bullied, and the Bystander*) calls them.

Like most people I know (at least, the most interesting people!), I did my time as a bullying victim. As a seventh grader in Dayton, Ohio, I learned that my late-maturing figure was wrong, my plastic turquoise cat's-eye glasses were wrong, my inability to return a volleyball was wrong, my good grades were wrong, and the way I looked in the snap-up flamingo-pink PE uniform was almost criminally wrong. Even my name was wrong. "Melissa?" the bully-princesses sneered. "Isn't that the name of the evil fairy in *Sleeping Beauty*?!" No, her name was Maleficent, but for my tormentors it was close enough.

Well, at least the Internet didn't exist then. The fourth and newest category of bullying is cyber-bullying, which takes verbal bullying and social bullying to almost unimaginable extremes. Taunts and rumors, unflattering photos, and compromising videos can be posted on the web anonymously and circulated endlessly, with shattering results.

I began researching this topic half-wondering if those bully-princesses of my childhood were all facade. You know, the cliché of the preening bully who covers up his low self-esteem with belligerence. But studies debunk this. In his groundbreaking 1993 book *Bullying at School* (based on research begun in 1970), Dan Olweus, a professor of psychology at Norway's University of Bergen, found that children tagged as bullies suffered unusually little anxiety. And research since then has only confirmed his findings.

"The highest self-esteem measured in children is in bullies," says my friend Marshall Duke, a professor of psychology at Emory University. "They're just feeling great!"

Duke says you can look at bullying through the lens of evolutionary psychology. "Bullying could be a vestigial behavior, a throwback to humanity's primitive origins. For example, our evolutionary cousins, the vervet monkeys, won't tolerate a troop member who screws up a verbal warning about an approaching predator. If the mixed-up monkey screams the equivalent of 'Jump out of the trees!' instead of 'Jump into the trees!' after sighting a snake on the forest floor, that monkey is killed." For prehistoric humans, a misfit — a poor spear-handler, a loud talker, a slow runner — may have put the whole tribe at risk. "But this is not the jungle," Duke says, "and this is not eight million years ago, and group survival is not at stake. We live in a civilization that says we need to suppress the primitive reactions we have to people who don't fit in, who can't keep up. Everyone has a right to life and to respect."

But everyone also should expect to encounter teasing — and learn how to deal with it. Kalman says we need to concentrate on the victim's behavior, not the bully's. "People have a knee-jerk reaction when they hear that," he admits. "They say I'm blaming the victims. I'm not blaming the victims, but I am saying they are the ones who have the problem. Bullies aren't the ones committing suicide and shooting up schools."

For me, the headline news is that a misfit's differences — like obesity, red hair, an accent, or plastic turquoise cat's-eye glasses — are not as important a factor in becoming a victim as kids and parents

think. The victims, Olweus found, were no more different than a control group of boys who were not bullied.

Funny, I've always assumed that I was bullied because of my hair/figure/braces/name, or any combination thereof.

I was wrong.

I was not bullied because of these external characteristics. I was targeted because of them. And there's a big difference. According to Kalman's research, I became a victim, a recipient of deliberate and ongoing verbal abuse and social exclusion, for one reason only: because I didn't know how to handle it.

The bad news first: School anti-bullying programs don't fix the problem.

These days, the primary way to combat bullying is through school-based antibullying programs. This approach sees bullying as a systemic problem, rather than as typical human behavior. Across the country, guest speakers, handouts, and posters declare schools to be "bully-free zones." Children are urged to report incidents of bullying to the school authorities.

Obviously, an adult should be summoned if physical violence, sexual or racial harassment, or criminal activity is involved. But social and verbal aggression, according to Kalman, don't merit the run-for-a-grown-up treatment. "Ratting out a classmate is guaranteed not to win you friends or respect and it certainly won't preserve you from bullying," Kalman says. On top of that, he says the happy glow engendered by antibullying assemblies evaporates quickly as kids discover that bullying continues. And, given the high self-esteem enjoyed by bullies, most don't recognize themselves as the bad guys portrayed in the poignant curricula.

Besides, there's no hard evidence that school programs diminish bullying. In 2005, researchers at the universities of Ottawa and London published a very dispiriting assessment: Most schoolwide programs "have yielded insignificant outcomes on measures of self-reported victimization and bullying, and only a small number have yielded positive outcomes."

In other words, they don't work — and Kalman accuses them of worse than failure. He charges antibullying programs with teaching children that they are entitled to a life in which no one upsets them, that they can't solve their own social problems, and that at the first sign of aggression they need to call an adult. As the director of an Atlanta private school confided to me: "Whole-school antibullying programs are most valuable in the reassurance they offer parents."

Now the good news: You can teach your child how to disarm a bully.

If antibullying programs can't stop the bullying, what can? Only the child — the target — himself. Or as Eleanor Roosevelt once said, "No one can make you feel inferior without your consent." Izzy Kalman puts it more concretely: "You get upset, you lose."

Back on the phone with Kalman, it's time for another round of bullying. "Let's play again," he says. "You start."

I jump right back into the fun. "This is such basic Psychology 101! You stole it all from B. F. Skinner!"

"Nice," he says. "You really know your psychology."

"And . . . and . . . you seem like a total fake!"

"Is that how I'm coming across to you?" he asks.

That stops me, but I recover. "Yes! And you probably don't even help kids!" I shout. "You just brag about it all the time!"

"Are you suggesting my time would be better spent if I worked more one-on-one with children rather than trying to share this approach with teachers and parents?"

"I . . . I . . ." I have run out of things to say.

"Who won this time?" Kalman asks.

"You did."

"Why?"

"Because you were so nice, I couldn't keep yelling at you."

"It felt foolish to keep insulting someone who stayed calm and friendly, didn't it?" he asks. I have to agree. It was fun to insult Izzy when he got upset. My cruelty was rewarded. But when he replied to me as a friend, the fun was gone and my bullying was extinguished.

A few days later, I tried Kalman's technique with my youngest son Yosef, who is 10. The teachable moment presented itself one afternoon when Yosef dragged in from the backyard sweaty and weepy. Older brother Daniel, 13, had once again teased and tormented him in front of other boys. Putting aside the question of how to deal with Daniel, I wanted to help Yosef see that he held the solution, not me. Kalman has lots of stories on his website (bullies2buddies.com; click on "free manuals"), so I modified one now. I reminded Yosef of our cat Waffle. "You know how she follows you around constantly, meowing at you until you give her a can of food — even though I've fed her already?" He nodded yes.

"And what do you do?"

"Sometimes I give her the food."

"If you never gave her food, ever, what would she do?"

"She'd follow me around the house meowing."

"For maybe the first day. Then what?"

He thought just a second, then said, "Meow at you?"

"Exactly! What if you didn't give her any food for a week, then she meowed at you and you fed her. What would happen?"

"She'd start meowing at me again, I guess."

"What happens when Daniel teases you?"

"It makes me cry."

"So it's kind of like you and Waffle. She meows, you give her food. Daniel teases you, you cry. You're giving him just what he wants, so he keeps doing it."

Yosef sat up, keenly interested. I used another metaphor of Kalman's. "You've given Daniel a remote control device to your brain. He has a magic remote control. If he pushes this button, he makes Yosef cry. If he pushes this button, he makes Yosef run into the house to tell Mom what happened. Do you want Daniel to have this much power over your brain?"

"No."

"Let's take the batteries out of his remote control." I pantomimed shaking out batteries and tossing them away. "Now when he teases you, is he pushing the button to make you cry?"

"No," Yosef said, emboldened.

"Don't cry when he pushes the button that says, 'Make Yosef cry.'"

Did the stories help? At the very least, Yosef understood a true dynamic of life, and he returned to the backyard determined to take matters into his own hands. I admit, it's hard for kids to conjure the poise and maturity to stay calm and friendly when being bullied, to be comfortable with who they are, and to learn to laugh at themselves. Yet that day when Yosef came crying to me, I felt like I'd given him a new tool that would work not only with Daniel, but with the world. Because what is the ultimate goal of empowering children to deflect bullying? To give them defensive moves for the rest of their lives. Adults are bullied too, by bosses, spouses, relatives, colleagues. Better to learn laughter, agreement, independence, and fancy footwork as a child than to trudge through life from one victimization to the next, longing for rescue.