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Stop School Bullying: A Tale of Two Girls

The headlines were shocking: “Nine Teens Charged With Bullying in Girl’s Suicide.” The details were difficult to read and even more troubling to think about. Almost from her first day of high school in South Hadley, MA, Phoebe Prince, a 15-year-old Irish immigrant, was harassed and bullied unmercifully—all because she had a brief relationship with a “popular” boy. She suffered what has been characterized as unrelenting verbal assaults, threats, and vicious text messages. On the day she hanged herself, Phoebe was hounded by the clique of girls who had made her life miserable for 3 months. They made verbal slurs and threw drink cans at her. That night, Phoebe gave up in despair.

Phoebe’s mother had visited the school to complain about the torment, but apparently an attitude that “kids will be kids” and “we’ll look the other way” was part of the school’s culture. Staff seemed to believe that Phoebe’s treatment was just “normal” teasing. None of the adults in the school intervened, in spite of laws that require educators and others in authority to report abuse—and surely this was abuse. Nor did any of the “good kids” stand up to the bullies or offer Phoebe support. Now a young woman is dead, parents are devastated, and school administrators are wishing they had taken the advice of a bullying expert they consulted in the fall. Now nine students face criminal charges—two boys for statutory rape and a clique of seven girls for stalking, criminal harassment, and violating Phoebe’s civil rights.

Unfortunately, bullying behavior is not just an adolescent phenomenon. Patricia Shuler (2002) remembered being in a second-grade classroom when

a normally quiet boy screamed out, “Shut up! Stop humiliating me! Stop before I destroy you!” The eruption occurred because his classmates first teased him about reading all the time and then tattled to the teacher that he wasn’t doing his work—work he had mastered 2 years before in kindergarten. All too often, as in this case, it’s a gifted child who is a victim. Sylvia Rimm noted that when gifted kids are bullied based on their school performance, it turns their strengths into weakness and is a potential source of shame and feelings of inadequacy (Boodman, 2006). And, being intellectually brilliant doesn’t mean that a child is advanced emotionally. It’s just not true that “sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me.” In fact, negative comments applied to young children may stay with them throughout life.

Bullying takes many forms—name calling, physical assaults such as pushing or shoving, ostracism, and intimidation. Boys are more often physical bullies than girls, although girls resort to physical bullying as well. Preadolescent and adolescent girls often spread malicious rumors, and the Internet has made that easier than ever. Unlike the old “slam books” of another generation, a teacher can’t collect a computer and throw it away! Whatever form the bullying takes, it is cruel and painful and can result in emotional scarring. Unfortunately, gifted children are very often the target of bullying. To their peers, they are “too smart” or “too bossy.” Insults are painful to all children, but gifted children in particular may be wounded because of their hyper-sensitivity. Not only are they hurt by the insults, but they also feel more intensely the unfairness of it all. Or, if they

have perfectionistic tendencies or feel pressured to “be good,” they may feel it is “their fault” or that they should be able to control their own lives without help from parents or teachers.

As teachers and parents, we need to develop the skills needed to stop bullying before it ends in a tragedy like the one in South Hadley. When adults work together, they can help victims take control. Many good books and articles are available to help us (see resource list at the end of this article). Bella, a gifted sixth grader, shows how intervention can work. (Interestingly, some research indicates that bullying peaks in middle school [Rimm, 2008]. Peterson and Ray [2006] reported that by eighth grade, more than 60% of gifted children indicate they have been victims.) A “girl gang” made Bella’s life miserable in her classroom, on the playground, and even in her gifted pullout (GT) class. In GT class, some of the girls who had been her friends since kindergarten began to ignore her comments, roll their eyes, and wink at each other. None of her teachers seemed to notice, not even the gifted pullout teacher. On the playground, in spite of adults who were supervising, Bella was pushed around. On one horrible day, Laura, the leader of the bullies, teased Bella unmercifully about using “big words” and thinking she was “so smart all the time.” “I can’t even understand what you’re talking about,” Laura taunted. When Laura was on top of the monkey bars, she leaned over and “accidentally” spit on Bella. That same day, Bella’s “friends” didn’t make room for her at the lunch table. When Laura walked behind her, she leaned over and spit in Bella’s food. Like many gifted children, Bella is concerned with the “right” and “wrong” of life, and she couldn’t make any sense of the cruelty and aggression focused on her.

Fortunately, Bella talked with her parents. Their first step was to help

Bella understand what was happening and to reassure her that she had done nothing wrong. Together, they tried to develop a plan for how Bella could deal with the “mean girls,” a plan that did not require her to accept the bullying passively but rather gave her some strategies to solve the problem. Some of the things they suggested included ignoring the offenders, becoming interested in something else, and using “self-talk” and body language that projected being “in-charge.” Bella learned to look at her teasers, invade their space a bit, and use a firm voice when she had to “call them out.” The bullying got better when Bella used these strategies, but it didn’t stop completely, and Bella still felt lonely and anxious until she came up with a strategy of her own. A new girl, Claire, came to town and joined the gifted classroom. As Bella reached out to her, she realized that there were other girls in the group that she had been ignoring as she strove to be part of the in crowd. Before long, a new group had organized around Bella and Claire. This solution also helped Bella to recognize that she needed to be kinder and friendlier to others.

Bella’s mother spoke to the teacher, Mrs. Taylor, about the problem as well. The teacher got the counselor involved so she could be part of the solution to the sixth-grade bullying. About the same time, the American Girl company introduced Chrissa, the 2009 Doll of the Year. Chrissa is a contemporary character whose interests and concerns mirror those of girls today. Chrissa is a friendly, creative girl who finds the strength to speak out against bullying. Now Chrissa’s website (<http://www.americangirl.com/movie/chrissa>), a poster contest, and a “Stop the Bullying” campaign, in cooperation with the Ophelia Project, are helping girls like Bella “stand strong.” A few months ago, Mrs. Taylor involved the entire class in a unit on bullying using

the American Girl book *Stand Up for Yourself and Your Friends* (Criswell, 2009), as well as others. Just a few weeks later, the group of girls who had made Bella’s life miserable came to her and apologized. Although Bella told them she wasn’t quite ready to forgive them, I have a feeling she really already has. Bella can still be sensitive herself, but she has developed more empathy for others. She feels stronger as her sense of self-efficacy has grown.

Unlike Phoebe’s, Bella’s story has a happy ending. **GCT**

Resources

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- Ludwig, T. (2006). *Just kidding*. New York, NY: Tricycle Press.
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- The Ophelia Project. (2007). *The Ophelia Project*®. Retrieved from <http://www.opheliaproject.org>

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