

How to Rear your Child not to Become a Bully

Thomas P Millar BA MD CM FRCP(C) Child Psychiatry

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Is your worst parent nightmare that you might wake up to find your child afraid to go to school because he is being bullied? Believe me, there is a worse one: getting word from the school that your child is bullying the other kids and it has to stop or else.

There are many ways to remain immature; becoming a bully is just one of them. Two of the cardinal characteristics of immaturity are prominent in the child who bullies. The first is that he has, for his age, less restraint and less self-control than he should have acquired by the time he starts school. When he feels angry or hurt, he acts on his feelings immediately.

The second cardinal characteristic of his immaturity is that he has remained egocentric: he is like the toddler who thinks the sun gets up when he does, follows him around all day and goes to bed when he does. The bully simply doesn't see his target as having feelings or even pain endings.

How do you rear your child so he develops reasonable restraint and becomes less egocentric? Simply loving him won't do it. You have to train these qualities of maturity in the child.

When the toddler gets on his feet and into things, parents have to start saying no. "No, you can't throw things." "No, you can't hit your brother." "No, you can't scream if you don't get your way." And parents have to start reinforcing these "no's." "One more throw and you lose your Tonka truck for the rest of the morning." "Every time you hit your brother you are going to your room for four minutes." "If you don't stop screaming after you've been warned, you will receive a punishment."

Do that consistently, and soon your child will start contemplating a throw or a hit or a scream, but he will not carry through. He is developing restraint. It is the application of reasonable expectations, which that are reasonably enforced, that train a child to restraint and self-control.

Similarly, when a limit or expectation requires that he accommodate to another person, such as "take your turn" or "stop interrupting," and a systematic reinforcer is applied, the child will start to get the message. For example, you may set up an Interrupt Jar with chips in it. Each time the child interrupts, he gets a chip in the jar. Three chips and he gets a consequence: no Tonka truck for the afternoon, no chance to watch his favorite TV show that evening, or another reasonable but consistent punishment. In time, the child starts holding his tongue occasionally.

While this approach trains restraint, it also acquaints the child with the fact that other people have rights too, and it's time he learned to accommodate occasionally. This knowledge helps disillusion his egocentricity. In the case of the bullying child, he can, in time come to see his victim as a person with rights and feelings.

Why is it so hard to train some children along this path? Temperament is part of the reason. Some children are so energetic and intense that it is much harder for them to learn to wait and control themselves. Parenting them takes a whole lot more training than it does for temperamentally milder children.

The other reason is that many parents do not really understand how to train. Many child-rearing books will tell you that if you just love your child the training will take care of itself. Certainly there are children for whom a little mild disapproval is all that is necessary to get them to change their ways. But there are many others who require persistent, planned, and consistent firmness to bring them to patience and self-control, to lead them to accommodate rather than dominate.

One other common characteristic of the bully child needs to be discussed. When children grow up successfully, they cope, and that coping builds self-esteem. Since the bully child has been constantly failing to control himself and accommodate to others, he knows nothing but failure and disapproval. He develops no self-esteem.

Sometimes he solves that problem in a peculiar way. "I guess I cannot be good, but I can be the baddest, and that will make me somebody." He develops a negative identity and glories in his bad reputation. It is the only way he stands out. When this happens, punishment and disapproval have a quite contrary effect upon him. They build his negative self-image.

The child who has become a bully can be brought back to normal adaptive growth but the task is not an easy one. It requires remedial parenting. If you get that note from school, then it's time for a little such intervention. My book *The Omnipotent Child* addresses such remedial parenting.

The best thing, of course, is preventive parenting: that is, training successfully the first time around. Once parents see what needs to be done, many of them, even those with temperamentally intense children, can manage the job and can save themselves and their child a lot of heartaches later in life. My book *Rearing the Preschool Child* is all about such preventing parenting.

With a little help and guidance, parents can avoid their worst nightmares, and their children will grow up to be happy, caring, and mature, with good self-esteem and a concern for the welfare of others.

*For more practical parenting guidance, see *The Omnipotent Child and Rearing the Preschool Child*; information about both titles is available at www.omnipotentchild.com.*