



Letter to Parents

Lesson 2, Counselor Resource

To the Parent or Guardian:

Greetings!

We've opened the door on this significant subject with both your children and you. Hopefully last week's lesson and your conversations at home have evoked some stimulating chats. This week's lesson delves a little more deeply to the whole "psychology" behind bullying. A word is introduced that is really a crucial component of bullying. That word is **justification**.

When we are teaching about bullying we almost always spend a great deal of time asking the kids to think about what might make a child a target of bullying. Kids have no trouble brainstorming a long list of characteristics that might make a certain student vulnerable to a bully. They'll tell you that kids are picked on due to their size, their ethnicity, their religion, their income brackets, etc. The list could go on and on and it will vary by demographics. Sadly, the targets start to believe that their "flaw" is the reason that they are being bullied. The adolescent ego – already fragile and vulnerable quickly accepts the fact that their flaw may in fact deserve this humiliation; maybe there really is something wrong with them. As you can imagine, this doesn't help the self esteem of that child.

This lesson's central point is so insightful, however, because it challenges that belief. "No ", the students are told, "it isn't the "flaw" that is the cause of the bullying. That is simply the bully's justification of their behaviors." The bully is just exercising their power in an effort to humiliate or dominate another human being. When you ask a bully why they are engaging in this hostile manner what kind of answers do we usually hear?

- "They're just so annoying."
- "No one really likes them."
- "Everyone notices that about them and makes fun of them."
- "They're just weird."
- "It's just funny."

Frankly, I hear the word "annoying" used by bullies more than any other word. Kids are quite quick to label someone as annoying and feel justified to pick on them or isolate them based on that one characteristic. I bet you can just hear that word come out of your child's mouth! In fact, as parents, we are often perceived as "annoying." Siblings quite often find themselves on the "annoying" lists as well. What I want you to really think about, though, is that quite often kids convince themselves that kids who they perceive this way deserve what happens to them. I've even seen a group mentality set in where really good kids follow the lead of bullies and are mean to another student for just this reason.

Let me share a story. I had a student who was in a strength and conditioning elective PE class. This student was one of just a few girls in the class. It came to our attention that the young lady was being routinely teased, subjected to humiliation and hurtful personal comments. After a long time she couldn't take it any longer and went to her parents and to

me to get some help. The young lady was a lovely, athletic, strong and kind person; she had friends and had found great success in the athletic arena. For some reason, however, a few boys decided that she was “annoying” and proceeded to create an atmosphere where targeting her was the norm in that class. Only two boys out of a class of 30 stood up for her – the rest either joined in or ignored the situation. Why? When I debriefed with the boys I heard comments like:

- “She just got on my nerves.”
- “She just couldn’t take our kind of competition.”
- “We were just kidding around. We thought it was funny.”
- “I didn’t say anything to her ever.” (But I didn’t defend her either)

What was lacking? **Empathy.** Somehow when kids are in the midst of a gang kind of bullying situation they switch off the empathy channel of their brain. They don’t allow themselves to think about what it might feel like to be in the shoes of the target. So – if you’re looking for some conversations starters this week try these!

1. Imagine that a new child was in your class next week and no one sat with them at lunch. What do you think that would feel like?
2. What if a child was consistently harassed on the bus because of their size (ethnicity, culture, sexual preference) – what do you think that would be like?
3. Have you ever felt afraid that kids might laugh at you or make fun of you? Maybe that has happened. What was that like for you? Can you even imagine?

Keep in mind that quite often kids won’t tell their parents if they’re being bullied. They won’t tell often because they’ve bought into the sad concept that their “flaws” make them less desirable and deserving of being harassed. They don’t want you to know that because they are embarrassed and fear that you might pity them for this rather than help them. That’s why this whole concept of **justification** is so important. We need to absolutely convince our children that they are beautiful wonders of creation and completely deserving of respect at all times. Bullies may try to justify their actions – but we can refuse to accept that justification.

Best regards,

Chris