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Bullies are made, not born

By Ann Rosen Spector, Ph.D.

Why do people bully other people? In the best-case scenarios, they merely swipe your dessert from your lunch tray and you just chalk it up to a day in the life of a kid. But, as we see all too often, bullying is now linked to more extreme behaviors, including suicide. We've come a long way from "hellipand names will never hurt you."

In ye olden days, there would be a taunt or two but with electronic mass communication, it's endless. Buzz, Twitter, Facebook – many teens are texting 100 times per day. For teens especially, it can feel claustrophobic. They can feel trapped forever in a smear campaign that makes it hard to breathe and, apparently, to live.

Parents, teachers, and administrators often don't acknowledge and act on the threat these forms of adolescent harangues are wreaking on our children. We're so far beyond a note passed in class. Pre-everything electronic, a teacher with any vision at all would inevitably intercept said hate mail and the note writer(s) would be punished. The humiliation of the teacher reading the note would be just the start of it; there would often be detention, or at least a short visit with the vice principal.

Today, administrators have less time for what they consider to be petty nuisance crimes. Parents and students may disagree with what is considered acceptable behavior. Parents may say, "Those people deserve it" but also "Don't say that about my kid."

In addition, the electronic tsunamis are outside the boundaries of the schoolyard and they're 24/7. No place for a victim to hide.

The Anti-Defamation League has a program called "No Place for Hate" and it's used in many schools, not just in Eastern Pennsylvania where it was developed but also throughout the country. It's a program "to challenge all forms of bigotry in communities and schools by providing a model for responding to and preventing acts of hatred and for developing projects that enhance an appreciation for diversity."

Locally, it's supported by some of the major media and endorsed by a coalition of religious, educational, law enforcement, ethnic and community groups, including the Philadelphia

Commission on Human Relations.

Doesn't it seem like a good idea, to teach people to get along? Isn't that what we want? Yet, there are many schools whose Boards of Education won't allow it because, no matter how they phrase it, they want to keep some of the hate. You know, for those kinds of people. Not for US, but for THEM.

As the song from "South Pacific" (written in 1949) said, "you have to be taught to hate and fear, it has to be drummed in your dear little ear, you have to be carefully taught."

In Wheatland, Wyo. early this year, the School Board tore down the No Place for Hate banners because it would include protecting the rights of non-heterosexuals. They could tolerate the program's anti-bullying messages and pro-tolerance message only so far.

About a month ago, Phoebe Prince hanged herself, reportedly after intensive cyber-bullying by fellow students at South Hadley High in Massachusetts. According to prosecutors, the teachers and administrators knew but dismissed the mother's concerns. And the parents of the students arrested? Their children did nothing wrong.

If these are the adults running the show, what chance do their children have to be open-minded?

If people, big and small, feel good about themselves, they can tolerate and even embrace diversity. What actual negative effect does your being different have on my life? But when people feel small, they respond with what is known as Reaction Formation – an immature defense mechanism people use to hide from unacceptable emotions, like inadequacy. Reaction formation is identified not only by its exaggerated polar opposite behavior but by the inflexibility with which it is maintained.

As any social psychologist will tell you, the fastest way to unify a group is to create a common enemy. Hence, the use of stereotypes, scapegoats, and any form to target the Other. Arizona's new anti-illegal immigration law permits police to question anyone who looks, I don't know, non-Arizonian, whatever that means. Wouldn't the only people who qualify for exclusion from that law be the Native Americans who were there first?

Why live in a country that was founded as a haven for all people and then complain because the Real America is just us and not them?

Because, at least for the moment, it bonds us with other scared people and makes us feel big…an illusion and a delusion.

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