

Coping with Bullying



Christopher News Notes

THERE'S NO QUESTION THAT BULLYING CAN BRING OUT ALL KINDS OF NEGATIVE EMOTIONS.

From anger, to frustration, to depression, bullies have a knack for pushing our buttons, no matter how old we are.

No longer just a problem for children, bullies can pop up in many areas of our adult lives, too. So what is the best way to respond? In that moment of dealing with a bully, what is Christ calling us to do?

The Pain of Bullying

The first step is to acknowledge that bullying is painful to experience. At its most basic level, bullying behavior is an attempt to shame, ridicule, or push someone around. As children, many of us experienced bullying in a social environment, where kids would make fun of, put down, or physically intimidate children who didn't fit in. The scars from childhood bullying can last a lifetime, leaving even well-adjusted adults struggling with self-doubts and feelings of shame, asking questions such as: What did I do to deserve that? Why didn't anybody stop to help me? Am I really weak and worthless?

As Christians, we know that sin and evil don't have the last word. Experiencing it can be traumatic, but God can bring good out of any situation. Take the story of Lizzie Velásquez, for example. Lizzie was born with a rare congenital condition that affected her health and made her look very different. As a child, she faced severe bullying, and she struggled with how mean other children were being to her. Today, at age 29, she is a popular motivational speaker, the subject of a documentary (*A Brave Heart: The Lizzie Velásquez Story*), and an anti-bullying activist with over 800,000 subscribers on YouTube. Her messages focus on strength and kindness.

In an article in the *National Catholic Register*, Lizzie recounted how her faith helped her accept her condition and move forward with her life's work of embracing and loving what made her different—and helping others see and embrace the beauty in themselves. In a very real way, the bullying she experienced helped launch her career and allowed her to help countless others.

Lizzie said: "When I was younger, I blamed God for 'making all these bad things happen to me.' ...I realized I needed to stop doing that...Putting my hands up and saying, 'I surrender all my worries and fears' made me feel different...Before, I was so hurt. Now, I feel sorry for [bullies]. I don't know their backgrounds, and I don't know who their examples are. I can't be mad—that may be all they know. If I continue doing what I'm doing,

A Father's Remarkable Response to Bullying

When Aubrey Fontenot found out his son was being bullied, he had the natural reaction of being upset. However after learning more about it, he chose to help his son confront the bully with compassion. In a story shared on *Good Morning America*, Fontenot explained their approach. They got to know the boy and found out that he himself was being bullied for having dirty clothes, ultimately because he was homeless. The old adage that "hurt people hurt people" applied here.

The boy who was doing the bullying needed some positive experiences. Fontenot explained, "I took him shopping and bought him some clothes. I talked to him about morals and principles, and having self-respect. He's not much of a talker, but I got him to open up." Fontenot set up a meeting between the boy and Jordan. "They each got to talk and then I said, 'Shake hands and from now on you are brothers and you protect each other.'" The dad wanted his son to know, "Every war isn't won with your hands. It's easy to react to first emotions but sometimes you have to outsmart a situation."

maybe I can be the person who shows them that they can channel that pain in another way, and it doesn't have to be by hurting someone else."

The rise of cyber-bullying

Bullying today can take many forms, but one of the most pernicious is the rise of online bullying. Mean and hurtful comments, posted on social media sites, can make the victim feel like the whole world is against them. People can be much crueler behind a keyboard than they are face to face, and the public nature of online bullying means that a hurtful tweet or post will be seen by many peers. There are numerous stories in the news about children and young adults driven to despair over bullying that has spilled over onto social media.

Beth Anne Patrick, a writer whose children have experienced bullying from both sides (as both the victim and the instigator), noted at *Aleteia* that bullying is "about peer groups and their enormous power on adolescents who are trying to form their own identities. The only way to steer young people through either situation—being bullied, or bullying someone else—is to keep listening to them, and to keep reminding them that they don't have to follow a group. They don't have to take in what bullies say, and they don't have to say things that are unkind just because their friends do."

Patrick adds, "Educate children about the right and wrong way to use those [technology] tools. While this may not protect them from all mistakes, if they know you're cognizant of digital bullying, they may feel more comfortable coming to you with problems."

The truth is that many of our modern technological tools can quickly be turned to a negative use. Sometimes the best way to prevent or stop the damage of bullies is to not engage on those platforms. This is especially true for children who are at sensitive points in their self-development.

How to Help a Bullied Child

Seeing your child being bullied is a painful experience for a parent. It's hard to comprehend why anyone would be deliberately cruel to the child you love. More than anything, you wish you could swoop in and fix the problem. But more often than not, these things are happening outside of the view of adults and authorities, and you have to teach your child strategies for coping with the bullies they will inevitably meet in life.

Of course, if you feel your child's safety is in danger, or if he or she has been hurt, that moves beyond bullying, and you must step in to inform authorities and protect your child. But in the cases where the bullying is the kind when someone is trying to hurt another's feelings, social skills edu-

tor Brooks Gibbs offers some advice in a video that is getting widespread attention online.

He shows how bullying in schools is about an imbalance of power and a push for social dominance. Writers Małgorzata Rybak and Matthew Green summarize his approach. "The key to disarming the bully is not to try to out-do them with insults (which could actually be counter-productive, leading to an escalation from verbal to physical abuse)," they write, "nor to protest that the bully is 'hurting your feelings' (which is exactly what the bully wants to do). Rather, victims need to learn to react with calm and self-confidence, without letting the bully get under their skin."

The way to beat a bully, in other words, is to not give them what they want, or to double down and be mean back—don't react to what they're saying, no matter how cruel the insult. Is it easy? No. But it can work, especially for children. It's fighting fire with water.

Gibbs says, "These are skills that everybody needs to learn, because there are mean people and jerks everywhere. I've found that when you empower kids three things happen: they grow in self-esteem, they grow in self-confidence, and they grow in self-worth. Every victim of bullying deserves the right to be taught how to solve their own social problems."

Forgiveness is the key to healing

Like with many hurts, forgiveness is the ultimate key to healing the effects of bullying. In a heart-

 **"It's better to light one candle than to curse the darkness."**

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wrenching piece titled *Forgiving Bullies: A Letter from a Lamb to the Wolves*, writer Elizabeth Scalia recounts her experience being bullied in elementary school. Her family life had come apart through a series of traumas, and the adults in her life were not functioning well. As the youngest child, she went to school dirty, unkempt, and meek—and was easy prey for the schoolyard bullies.

The effects of their taunts and jeers wounded Scalia in a way that kept coming back years later. One day, when praying in front of the tabernacle, she decided to forgive them through a letter. She writes: "In the letter I said that I almost understood why a dirty kid with greasy hair who was stumbling through the day...like a battle-addled combat vet, might seem different enough to get away with [other kids] hating [her]. I wrote that my condition at the time was really no one's fault; my family had been torn asunder as fully as a village might, that had been struck by missiles and—while no one was to blame—the wreckage on view was precisely the sort of rubble children romp on in ignorance, and so, I forgave them. I forgave them for not having, at that age, the compassionate ability to look at me and think, Someone needs to take care of that kid."

She finished the letter and placed it by the tabernacle. It was, she writes, "a plea for mercy for myself, that by letting go, by forgiving, I might be healed of those old wounds and forgiven for all of my own human failings at love—my own failures to recognize other wounded sheep, and offer protection from wolves. And that I might not become a wolf, toward anyone, myself."

Pope Francis has similar words. The healing of bullying has to come from Jesus himself, the divine physician. "Let us ask the Lord to give us the grace of God's compassion," Pope Francis said. "He is the One who has compassion on us and helps us to move forward."

"Insecure people only eclipse your sun because they're jealous of your daylight and tired of their dark, starless nights." —Shannon L. Alder