



**BULLYING? NOT
ON MY WATCH!**



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Every few months, it seems, there's another headline about the death of a child or teen as the result of bullying. That's terrifying, and it's also unacceptable. To some extent we expect to hear about economic woes, political strife, and natural disasters. We don't expect to hear about the premature (and preventable) deaths of our young people. And we shouldn't have to. According to Todd Patkin, it's past time for America

to realize that bullying is “the” problem of our day, and for parents and educators to lead the revolution on stopping this dangerous behavior.

If you’re skeptical, consider the following statistics from www.bullyingstatistics.org:

- Almost 30 percent of young people participate in bullying behaviors or are bullying victims.
- Every day, around 160,000 students do not attend school because they are afraid of being bullied.
- Young people who have been bullied are two to nine times likelier than their nonbullied peers to consider suicide.

Perhaps most concerning of all, a 2009 study indicated that every half hour, a child commits suicide because he or she has been bullied. And that trend is on the rise. “To put it bluntly, what we’re doing to combat bullying clearly isn’t working,” says Patkin, author of the new book *Finding Happiness: One Man’s Quest to Beat Depression and Anxiety and—Finally—Let the Sunshine In* (StepWise Press, 2011). “Suicides are still happening, and that’s not even mentioning the thousands of kids whose lives are destroyed or diminished—but not ended—by bullying.”

Yes, bullying is a big problem.

Patkin knows from personal experience just how devastating bullying can be. Being the target of several tormenters filled his high school years with much anxiety, and the effects of being bullied lasted into his adulthood.

“My tormenters verbally abused me, and they would also push me around and knock my books or drinks out of my hands,” Patkin recalls. “They caused me to often dread coming to school or attending social functions. My confidence and self-esteem took a huge hit. And looking back, I believe that the negative self-image bullying cultivated lasted well into my adult years and contributed to the anxiety and depression from which I suffered.”

Patkin isn’t alone. In fact, research has shown that the fear, social anxiety, shame, low self-esteem, and anger that bullying causes can rear their heads throughout adulthood, often at crucial moments, causing individuals who were once bullied to stick with “easy,” “safe,” or “defensive” choices instead of those that might prove most beneficial. There are definitive links between childhood bullying and adult depression.

Being bullied can also lead to anger management problems and aggression in adulthood.

“The importance of combating and preventing bullying should be obvious,” Patkin states. “By preventing a young person from being bullied, we may be freeing him or her from a lifetime of feeling inadequate and being haunted by horrible memories. We may even be saving a life.”

So, why isn't the current approach working?

Yes, bullying has gotten a lot of media attention, and as a result, schools and communities are providing more and more resources for bullied kids. They're encouraging victims to reach out for help, and they're also instituting zero-tolerance policies aimed at the bullies themselves. But too many victims are still slipping through the cracks. Why? According to Patkin, we're putting too much responsibility on the young people we're trying to protect.

“Schools put out a lot of rhetoric on dealing with and preventing bullying, but the problem is still rampant,” he points out. “That's because our current approach revolves around requiring kids to tell on each other—and it's not as effective as we hoped. For several reasons, young people just aren't reporting the bullies.”

First of all, kids who are being bullied often lack the self-esteem and confidence to stand up for themselves and let adults know what's happening. They also worry that turning a tormentor in will make them new targets, or intensify the former level of bullying.

“I certainly didn't ask teachers or my parents for any help when I was in high school because I was so ashamed of my weakness in dealing with my bullies,” Patkin admits. “Also, I was afraid that if my teachers or parents stepped in, their interference would just make my tormenters focus their efforts on me more. I'd be even more on the outside because I'd ratted out my peers.”

Patkin believes that many young people today feel just as powerless to speak up and “out” bullies—and he also points out that repercussions for them could be worse than those he might have faced due to cyberbullying. In other words, today's bullies aren't forced to stop once the school bell rings—their vicious and hurtful behavior can continue 24/7 thanks to social media sites, texting, and emails.

“How much longer are we going to let this problem go on?” Patkin asks. “Are we going to continue to allow more kids to become victims because, like I was, they're too scared to speak up? Not on my watch!”

Here's what our goal should be.

“We need to spark a culture-wide revolution to make bullying uncool—in fact, unacceptable!” Patkin insists. “There needs to be a palpable stigma attached to tormenting and belittling another person in this way.”

Patkin compares the bullying problem to drunk driving. Once upon a time, getting behind the wheel after a few alcoholic beverages was fairly common and casual, and was not seen as “that big of a deal”—just as, until recently, bullying was seen as “a part of kids growing up.”

Then an organization called Mothers Against Drunk Driving (MADD) took up the cause and dramatically changed the way in which Americans viewed drunk driving. Through publicity campaigns and a grassroots movement, MADD caused the public to view driving while intoxicated as something that is reprehensible, irresponsible, dangerous, and even criminal. MADD’s efforts also helped to enact stronger penalties against drunk drivers.

“Similarly, bullies need to lose the ‘cool’ image that comes with being at the top of the social pecking order,” Patkin says. “The public—adults and kids alike—needs to view bullying as something that brands you with a modern-day scarlet letter. Our current zero-tolerance policies are a good start, but we need to add another prong to our anti-bullying approach. In short, parents have to lead the way (along with other students) to say that we are no longer going to accept this behavior. It has to start in your house.”

What can parents do to change things?

“We as parents need to be more proactive in raising kids who are not bullies,” Patkin says. “If young people see bullying as something to avoid at all costs—something that they don’t want to participate in or allow to happen—we’ll be directly attacking the problem instead of treating the symptoms. Over time, this attitude will spread and will hopefully become just as ingrained in the public psyche as our negative views on drunk driving. The best news is, getting started is pretty simple.”

First, have the bullying talk. Talk to your kids about bullying, just as you would have the drug talk or the drunk driving talk. Most parents don’t directly address this topic, perhaps because nobody ever thinks it’s their kids. (Admit it; you’ve thought something along the lines of, My child would never make fun of someone just to be mean.) And as a result, many kids don’t have a full understanding of how serious bullying and its effects can be. It’s important to be specific in defining what bullying is (make sure your child knows that it can include physical abuse, verbal taunting, online harassment, or even passing on a hurtful message or rumor), and to explain just how

damaging certain words and actions can be to others—even if your child didn’t “mean” them or think they would have a lasting impact.

“You should also make a point to explain that when someone commits suicide because of bullying, many lives are ruined,” Patkin suggests. “As a parent, you don’t want a young person’s death on your head, or on that of your child.”

Patkin is also adamant that if your child is caught bullying, you must take it very, very seriously. If you caught your child lying or stealing, you’d come down hard, right? You definitely wouldn’t brush off the behavior as “just a stage.” You’d do whatever was necessary to nip it in the bud. Treat bullying the same way.

“I’m not here to tell you how to punish your child—consequences are your family’s business,” Patkin clarifies. “Just make sure that your child knows that bullying behaviors are not okay in your family. Talk to him about why he reacted the way he did, why it was wrong, and how he can better respond in the future.” Note to Editor: See accompanying tipsheet for more strategies on how to squelch bullying.

“Ultimately, this is one social change that will happen because ordinary parents are purposeful in how they’re raising their children,” Patkin concludes. “In the past, bullies have been seen as ‘cool’—they’ve even been glamorized in popular culture thanks to movies like *Mean Girls*. We have the power and responsibility to change this view, now that we fully understand the thousands of lives that bullying affects every day. And that change must start now.”

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About the Author:

Todd Patkin grew up in Needham, Massachusetts. After graduating from Tufts University, he joined the family business and spent the next eighteen years helping to grow it to new heights. After it was purchased by Advance Auto Parts in 2005, he was free to focus on his main passions: philanthropy and giving back to the community, spending time with family and friends, and helping more people learn how to be happy. Todd lives with his wonderful wife, Yadira, their amazing son, Josh, and two great dogs, Tucker and Hunter.

About the Book:

Finding Happiness: One Man’s Quest to Beat Depression and Anxiety and—Finally—Let the Sunshine In (StepWise Press, 2011, ISBN: 978-0-9658261-9-8, \$19.95, www.findinghappinessthebook.com) is available at bookstores nationwide, from major online booksellers, and at www.findinghappinessthebook.com.



Anti-Bullying 101: 14 Strategies to Squelch Bullying Tendencies in Your Children

One of the best ways to prevent bullying is to raise kids who don't participate in or tolerate the behavior. According to Todd Patkin, here are 14 things that parents can do in order to not raise bullies.

Have “the talk” about bullying. The truth is, nobody ever thinks their kid is a bully. It's always someone else's child who is calling other kids hurtful names, pushing them around on the playground, and sending nasty texts. But according to Patkin, even if you don't believe your children have even thought about crossing the line, talking to them about bullying is crucial. Have a specific discussion with them about what bullying behaviors look like, and make sure your kids know that these behaviors will not be tolerated in your family. (Think of it as having “the talk” about not using drugs, for example.)

Make sure your kids know that bullying is hurtful. Especially when they're younger, kids might not have the emotional maturity to make the connection between their words or actions and how they make another child feel. Explain to your children that bullying can have devastating effects on others (even if that wasn't the bully's intent) and on the perpetrators themselves.

Share statistics with your children. If you feel it's age appropriate, take a few minutes to research bullying statistics with your child. A quick internet search will reveal a large number of disturbing facts. For instance, according to www.bullyingstatistics.org,

- Almost 30 percent of young people participate in bullying behaviors or are bullying victims.
- Every day, around 160,000 students do not attend school because they are afraid of being bullied.
- Young people who have been bullied are two to nine times likelier than their nonbullied peers to consider suicide.

Seeing these statistics can prove to your child that bullying isn't just something that Mom and Dad are needlessly worried about—it's something that is happening at their schools and to their peers.

Teach your kids to intercede. Teaching your kids not to participate in bullying behaviors is a good start, but it's also important that they not allow their peers to be tormented. Encourage them to step in if they see another child being treated badly—if they are comfortable doing so. If not, make sure your child knows to talk to a teacher or other authority figure when another child is being tormented. Even an anonymous note on a desk can open an adult's eyes to a bad situation.

Be involved every day. It's tempting to think that the best thing we can do for our children is to provide a good life for them, to include not only the basics of food, clothing, and shelter, but also a good school, weekly piano lessons, and an everybody-plays sports team to participate in. No, those things aren't at all bad, but they also can't take the place of what's truly the most important thing in a child's development: his parents. Patkin is adamant that no activity, program, or hobby can replace time with your kids. Being involved in their lives on a daily, nitty-gritty basis will allow them to stand the best chance when it comes to making all the right choices (not just

avoiding bullying). Don't leave your children's development in the hands of others or up to chance.

Don't be afraid to discipline. Patkin isn't advocating "spare the rod; spoil the child"—but he is saying that kids need to be aware of boundaries from a young age. They need to know that if they violate the rules, there will be consequences. Period. It's important to squelch bullying behaviors the moment they appear instead of writing them off as a "stage" or "normal part of childhood." For instance, if you see your daughter being nasty or overly bossy to her younger brother, tell her that she needs to play more nicely. Pre-determine consequences that will be enacted if the behavior doesn't change and make sure your daughter knows about them. Then stick to your guns.

Explain the why. Making sure your children know the rules of good behavior—and the consequences when they step over the line—is a good first step. But if you want those behaviors to "stick" when you're not around (not to mention after your kids leave home), it's a good idea to make sure they understand why the rules are there in the first place. For example, explain why you don't make jokes about the way somebody looks—because it hurts feelings!

Be a good example. You can't hold your kids to one standard of behavior and then flout those rules yourself. Make sure that your own actions are friendly, compassionate, and courteous. Say "please" and "thank you" to wait staff, for example, and resist the urge to browbeat that snarky salesperson into shutting up and helping you more quickly. And if you do slip up, be sure to admit your mistake and point out to your kids how you could have reacted differently.

Encourage empathy. Look for teachable moments that you can use to help your child consider how others are feeling. Getting kids into the habit of considering others will cut down on the chances that they'll bully someone else. When your kids are young, look for children's books that illustrate how badly others feel when they are left out or teased and read them together. You can also use family movie night as a starting point—after all, very few films are free of harsh words, taunts, or nasty behavior (even if they're PG-rated). Press the pause button and ask your child how he thinks the character who is being treated badly feels. You can also do this as you go about

your day (for example, if you see a customer treating a cashier rudely at the grocery store).

Help your children understand “different.” Many children who are bullied are somehow “different”—from a different culture, a different socioeconomic group, handicapped, etc. As much as possible, expose your children to “different” people to promote understanding and friendship. For example, check out a library book about another culture’s religious holidays and read it together. Sign your family up to participate in a walk for autism. The more your kids understand the world around them—and the more they learn that “different” doesn’t mean “less than”—the less likely they’ll be to target other groups.

Teach them to lead selflessly. It’s an understatement to say that our society encourages kids to be leaders. Everything around them practically screams, “Be number one! Climb as high on the ladder as possible! Do everything you can to be successful!” It’s important to teach kids to achieve those goals by earning the respect of others—not by hurting others. Explain to them that yes, you can reach the top of the pecking order by putting others down and intimidating them—but these tactics will ultimately cause you to be unpopular, despised, and alone. Talk about how people who work with others to achieve common goals are ultimately happier and more successful.

Talk about technology. Within the past generation, technology has made bullying much more prolific; after all, taunts no longer have to stop when the school bell rings. Plus, the relative anonymity of an online identity makes kids much bolder than they might be face-to-face. Have a frank discussion with your kids about what is and isn’t appropriate for email, texting, social media, etc. Make sure they understand what’s said online can be just as hurtful, and that it’s much more public and permanent than what’s said in the school hallways. Also, talk about the fact that even passing on a text that originated with someone else makes you guilty of bullying.

Encourage them to spend time with positive people. While no child wants to hear from her parents that she’s hanging out with the wrong crowd, you can encourage her to spend time with people who approach life with positive attitudes and healthy perspectives. Also, pay attention yourself to who your child is hanging out with. If you identify a bad influence, don’t be afraid to limit the time your child spends

with him or her. Yes, as a parent you're the biggest influence on your child's development, but don't forget that her friends will also have a huge impact on her behaviors and beliefs.

Take every opportunity to build their confidence. Many bullies pick on others because they themselves have low self-esteem, and putting down others makes them feel more powerful. By helping your child be confident, happy, and fulfilled, you reduce the chances that he will be a bully.

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For more information, please visit www.findinghappinessthebook.com.