

F A L L 2 0 1 1

OCTOBER

NATIONAL ANTI-BULLYING MONTH

MOVING STUDENTS FROM VICTIM TO VICTOR!

MY OLDEST DAUGHTER JUST BEGAN HER SIXTH-GRADE YEAR IN A NEW PUBLIC MIDDLE SCHOOL. AS PART OF THE “GET TO KNOW YOU” SCHOOL LESSON DURING THE FIRST WEEK OF SCHOOL, SHE WAS CHARGED TO PRESENT A COLLAGE TO HER CLASS, SHOWING IMPORTANT THINGS ABOUT HERSELF. SHE TYPICALLY JUMPS INTO THIS TYPE OF ASSIGNMENT BECAUSE SHE IS ARTSY AND SHE LOVES TO TALK ABOUT HERSELF. AS SHE WAS SHOWING MY WIFE SOME OF THE IMAGES THAT REPRESENT HER AS A SIXTH GRADER, MY WIFE NOTICED A DISTURBING IMAGE. IT WAS A MILITANT FIST OF A WHITE HAND THAT COULD IMPLY “WHITE POWER.” AS MY STARTLED WIFE INQUIRED AS TO THE PICTURE’S SIGNIFICANCE, MY DAUGHTER INNOCENTLY DESCRIBED THE MEANING OF THE PICTURE AS A SYMBOL OF “ALL OF THE TIMES I’VE BEEN BULLIED.”

MY WIFE GENTLY ASKED HER WHAT SHE WAS REFERRING TO, TO DESCRIBE HER EXPERIENCES WITH BULLYING. SHE DIDN’T REALLY HAVE AN ANSWER—SHE JUST GENERICALLY SAW HERSELF AS A VICTIM OF BULLYING.

HMM. AS MY WIFE AND I LATER PROCESSED THAT INFORMATION, I GREW CONFUSED AND FRUSTRATED. CONFUSED BECAUSE OBJECTIVELY SPEAKING, I CAN SAY WITH CERTAINTY THAT MY DAUGHTER HAS NOT BEEN A CONSISTENT TARGET OF BULLYING. I AM CERTAIN SHE’S NEVER BEEN BULLIED BEYOND A SPORADIC JABBING OR VERBAL DISCONNECT WITH A PEER. I FELT FRUSTRATED BECAUSE SHE THINKS SHE HAS BEEN A TARGET OF BULLYING, EVEN THOUGH SHE CAN’T SPECIFY WHEN OR WHERE. WHERE DOES THIS VICTIM BELIEF COME FROM?

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ALEXIAN BROTHERS PARISH SERVICES

ALEXIAN BROTHERS PARISH SERVICES IS A MINISTRY THAT SUPPORTS LOCAL COMMUNITIES THROUGH SPIRITUALLY INTEGRATED THERAPY, SCHOOL OUTREACH AND PARISH SUPPORT, WHILE SEEKING TO BRING HEALING AND HOPE. OUR MISSION IS TO:

- **NURTURE** -- THE INDIVIDUAL, COUPLE, FAMILY AND SMALL TEAMS, BECAUSE EVERYONE HAS UNIQUE GIFTS TO CLAIM AND SHARE;
- **COLLABORATE** -- WITH EACH OTHER AND OUR PARISH PARTNERS IN INVIGORATING AND CHALLENGING WAYS, AND
- **SERVE** -- BY INTENTIONALLY MEETING THE NEEDS AND GOALS OF OUR COMMUNITIES.

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AS A SCHOOL COUNSELOR, I KNOW THAT SCHOOLS HAVE A RESPONSIBILITY TO PROVIDE THEIR STUDENTS WITH A SAFE ENVIRONMENT TO LEARN ACADEMIC, SOCIAL, AND EMOTIONAL SKILLS. HOWEVER, I AM GROWING MORE CONCERNED ABOUT THE INCREASED RESPONSIBILITIES PLACED ON SCHOOLS TO PROVIDE EVERY STUDENT A HEAVENLY UTOPIA WHERE CONFLICT IS RESOLVED PERFECTLY AND NOBODY CAN "NOT LIKE" ANYBODY. AS THE MEDIA HAS FOCUSED MORE ON THE TRAGEDIES THAT TAKE PLACE WITH VICTIMS OF BULLYING, LEGISLATORS ARE CREATING LAWS THAT ARE WELL-INTENTIONED, SHORT-SIGHTED, AND HURTFUL TO STUDENTS IN THE LONG-RUN.

AS I SPOKE WITH MY DAUGHTER, WE CAME TO THE CONCLUSION THAT SHE BELIEVES SHE IS A VICTIM OF BULLYING BECAUSE OF HER PREVIOUS SCHOOL'S ATTEMPT TO PROVIDE THE PERFECT "BULLY FREE ZONE." "BULLY FREE ZONE" POSTERS ARE ALL OVER THE HALLS AND IN EVERY CLASSROOM. THERE IS A "BULLY BOX" WHERE YOU CAN ANONYMOUSLY REPORT A BULLY. SCHOOL COUNSELORS AND SOCIAL WORKERS TAUGHT ABOUT VARIOUS BULLYING SCENARIOS AD NAUSEUM, OFTEN TEACHING THAT THE BEST WAY TO GET RID OF BULLYING IS TO TELL AN ADULT. THEY EVEN REGULARLY RECITE "NO BULLY" SONGS AND PLEDGES. SO NATURALLY MY DAUGHTER IS EQUATING RELATIONAL CONFLICT WITH BULLYING. FURTHER, AS SHE HAS OVERCOME SOME OF THE SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL WOUNDS THAT COME WITH BEING A KID, SHE IS NOT EXPERIENCING HERSELF AS A VICTOR, OR AS A STRONGER GIRL, OR A GOOD KID THAT NOT EVERYBODY THINKS IS AS GREAT AS HER PARENTS DO. INSTEAD, SHE SEES HERSELF AS A VICTIM OF BULLYING.

AS A SCHOOL COUNSELOR, I SEE THESE SCENARIOS FREQUENTLY IN CONVERSATIONS WITH STUDENTS AND WITH THEIR PARENTS. STUDENTS WILL GO TO AN ADULT, SAYING, "HE DOESN'T LET ME PLAY WITH HIM" OR "SHE CALLED ME A LOSER!" OR "HE PUSHED ME AS I WAS GOING THROUGH THE DOOR!" ALL OF THESE LAMENTATIONS ARE PRESENTED WITH THE EXPECTATION THAT TEACHERS, PRINCIPALS, AND SCHOOL COUNSELORS WILL FOLLOW THROUGH AND

CORRECT. WHEN THE BEHAVIORS DON'T CHANGE, TEACHERS, PRINCIPALS, AND SCHOOL COUNSELORS RECEIVE PHONE CALLS FROM THE PARENTS WONDERING WHY. SIMPLY PUT, SCHOOLS CANNOT REALISTICALLY WATCH OVER THE TENS OF THOUSANDS OF INTERACTIONS THAT HAPPEN IN THEIR HALLS EVERY DAY. NOR SHOULD THEY HAVE TO.

THIS ISN'T AN ARTICLE TO DISSECT LEGISLATION OR OUR SCHOOLS' SPECIFIC ANTI-BULLYING POLICIES. INSTEAD, I PASSIONATELY ASK PROFESSIONALS AND PARENTS TO THINK THROUGH THE IMPACT THIS IDEOLOGY OF CONFLICT-FREE COMMUNITY HAS ON THE STUDENTS AND FAMILIES THAT WE SERVE. IF YOU ARE WORKING WITH A CHILD WHO HAS A LOW SELF-IMAGE AND IS BEING PICKED ON, ARE YOU GOING TO SIMPLY INSTRUCT THEM TO TELL AN ADULT WHEN SOMEONE IS PICKING ON THEM? NO. ARE YOU GOING TO FEED INTO THEIR BELIEF THAT THEY ARE POWERLESS AGAINST MEAN PEOPLE? NO. ARE YOU GOING TO PROVIDE STUDENTS TOOLS TO BUILD THEM UP EMOTIONALLY AND SOCIALLY? ARE YOU GOING TO EQUIP THEM TO SOLVE THIS PROBLEM ON THEIR OWN? DO YOU WANT STUDENTS TO UNDERSTAND THEIR ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES IN THIS HARSH WORLD? DO YOU WANT THEM TO UNDERSTAND THAT THEY ACTUALLY HAVE A VOICE AND A STRENGTH THAT ISN'T DEPENDENT ON OTHERS? YES, YES, YES, AND YES. THESE LATTER MESSAGES ARE CONTRARY TO WHAT LEGISLATION IS MANDATING AT OUR SCHOOLS.

AS MY WIFE AND I WENT BACK TO MY DAUGHTER TO DISCUSS HER COLLAGE, WE WERE ABLE TO HELP HER SEE THAT SHE IS NOT A VICTIM, BUT A VICTOR. I WANT MY DAUGHTER AND EVERY STUDENT IN THE SCHOOL I SERVE TO KNOW AND UNDERSTAND THAT THEY ARE CAPABLE OF STRENGTH AND TO NOT ALLOW THE WORDS, ACTIONS AND BEHAVIORS OF OTHERS DEFINE WHO THEY ARE. THAT SOUNDS LIKE "VICTIM PROOFING" TO ME, NOT "BULLY PROOFING."

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THIS LINE OF THINKING MAKES MORE SENSE TO ME AS WE ADDRESS BULLYING WITH STUDENTS. WHO ARE THE BETTER, MORE FOCUSED AND INVESTED LEARNERS? THE TARGETS, THE BYSTANDERS, OR THE BULLIES? THE TARGETS AND BYSTANDERS, OF COURSE. THE TARGETS AND BYSTANDERS ARE THE ONES WHO FEEL HURT, ANXIOUS, AND FEARFUL, BUT WANT THE BULLYING TO STOP. INITIALLY, BULLIES TYPICALLY ARE INTERESTED ONLY IN LESSENING CONSEQUENCES THEY MAY EXPERIENCE AS A RESULT OF IMMEDIATE ADULT INTERVENTION. THAT IS NOT THE BEST LEARNING SCENARIO FOR TARGETS OR BULLIES. IF WE PUT FORTH EFFORT TO BUILD UP AND EQUIP VICTIMS TO EXPECT TO BE VICTORS, WE CHANGE THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCT.

NEGATIVE BULLYING BEHAVIOR DOES NOT MODIFY AS EFFECTIVELY WHEN AN INDIVIDUAL IS TOLD ON AND THEN SCOLDED. ALL BEHAVIOR IS DICTATED BY INDIVIDUAL BELIEFS, ATTITUDES, AND VALUES. WE CAN'T MAKE PEOPLE BE NICE AND LIKE EVERYBODY. WHEN VICTIMS LEARN HOW TO NOT GIVE POWER TO THE BULLIES, THE BULLYING IS LIKELY TO STOP. IF BULLYING DOESN'T STOP AFTER REPEATED ATTEMPTS TO RESOLVE ON THEIR OWN, THEN MORE SIGNIFICANT INTERVENTION IS NECESSARY BY ADULTS.

I WRITE THIS BECAUSE WELL-INTENTIONED PEOPLE ARE CREATING LAWS AND SOCIAL CURRICULA THAT COULD IMPROVE. WE ARE EXPENDING TOO MUCH ENERGY TRYING TO CREATE AN UNREALISTIC UTOPIA RATHER THAN EQUIPPING KIDS TO DEAL WITH REAL LIFE...WHICH IS HARD. MY DAUGHTER IS NOT REMOTELY CLOSE TO BEING A VICTIM OF BULLYING, YET THIS BRIGHT, CONFIDENT AND ARTICULATE CHILD BELIEVED SHE WAS A VICTIM. SOMETHING IS WRONG WITH THAT. THE WORDS WE USE AND THE POSTERS WE DISPLAY HAVE TO CHANGE TO REFLECT POSITIVE PSYCHOLOGY. POSITIVE PSYCHOLOGY WILL HELP HER EMBRACE THE FACT SHE IS NOT A VICTIM, SHE IS LIKABLE, BUT NOT EVERYBODY WILL LIKE HER; SHE IS BEAUTIFUL, BUT NOT EVERYBODY WILL THINK SHE'S PRETTY; SHE'S KIND-HEARTED, BUT SOME PEOPLE MIGHT RESENT HER FOR NOT SEEING LIFE IN THE SAME WAY THEY DO.

SHE IS OK AND CAPABLE OF LIVING WELL AND BEING HAPPY.

SO PLEASE, PROFESSIONALS AND PARENTS, START TO SPEAK UP AND HELP CHANGE THE FOCUS. HELP US MOVE FROM UTOPIA TO REALITY, FROM REACTION TO RESILIENCY, AND FROM VICTIM TO VICTOR. THEN, THIS FUTURE GENERATION WILL REALLY BE ABLE TO STAND UP AGAINST BULLYING. TALK WITH YOUR SCHOOL AND COMMUNITY MORE ABOUT AVAILABLE RESOURCES ON BULLYING PREVENTION.

ABOUT TREVOR SIMPSON

TREVOR SIMPSON RECEIVED HIS BACHELOR DEGREE FROM TRINITY INTERNATIONAL UNIVERSITY WITH A DEGREE IN PSYCHOLOGY AND BOTH HIS MASTER'S DEGREES IN COUNSELING AND YOUTH AND FAMILY MINISTRY FROM DENVER SEMINARY. HE HAS ALSO RECEIVED HIS TYPE 73 SCHOOL COUNSELOR



CREDENTIAL THROUGH NORTHERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY. AS A LICENSED CLINICAL PROFESSIONAL COUNSELOR AND NATIONALLY CERTIFIED COUNSELOR, HE HAS WORKED WITH CHILDREN, PRETEENS, ADOLESCENTS, PARENTS, AND FAMILIES SINCE 1992. HE HAS WORKED IN RESIDENTIAL AND IN OUTPATIENT SETTINGS AS WELL AS IN PRIVATE PRACTICE. HE ALSO SPENT SEVEN YEARS AS A YOUTH PASTOR. TREVOR IS ENTERING HIS FOURTH YEAR WITH ALEXIAN BROTHERS PARISH SERVICE WHERE HE IS CURRENTLY SERVING AS A SCHOOL COUNSELOR AT ST. ISIDORE SCHOOL, IN BLOOMINGDALE. HE ALSO ACTS AS THE MANAGER OF SCHOOL BASED SERVICES WITHIN APBS.

TREVOR HAS BEEN MARRIED FOR 17 YEARS AND HAS TWO DAUGHTERS. HIS FAVORITE THINGS INCLUDE: CAMPING, BIKING, GEOCACHEING AND HANGING OUT WITH HIS FAMILY. HE VOLUNTEERS AS A YOUTH LEADER WITH HIS LOCAL CHURCH MIDDLE SCHOOL YOUTH GROUP. TREVOR REPORTS THAT HIS FAVORITE PART OF HIS JOB IS COLLABORATING WITH TEACHERS AND PARENTS TO BENEFIT THE NEEDS OF THE STUDENT.