BULLYING

Because bullying is such an emotive word, it's good to look at its derivation. The OED gives three meanings for 'bully':

1. A term of endearment originally applied to either sex. Good friend. Fine fellow...   (as in Shakespeare's 'bully Bottom')
2. A bulstering gallant, a swashbuckler.
3. A tyrannical coward who makes himself a terror to the weak.

This shows a polarity in 'bullying' which takes us to the heart of the matter when we come to consider how children relate to one another.

1. In the rough and tumble of their interactions, children are getting to know each other and themselves: testing each other out, getting back reflections, helping to round off some sharp corners....It's an important part of their healthy socialisation: 'bullying' in the healthy sense of being 'fine fellows' together in the rough and tumble of life. As parents and teachers, it's important that we recognise the validity of this kind of 'bullying' and guard against having too precious attitudes about children not engaging with each other both physically and verbally in robust ways.

2. The question, of course, is where you draw the line between healthy rough and tumble and the negative variety which is all we understand by 'bullying' today: the dictionary gives us the transitional stage: the 'blustering gallant' when things can go either way. It's this intermediate stage which gives rise to most of the concerns at school. Bullying in the negative sense is something that has been allowed to develop from the 'blustering gallant' into something systematic and entrenched.

In the fraught atmosphere the word 'bullying' often conjures up, it is all too easy for misconceptions and exaggerations to enter in and it can then be very difficult to come to a clear view of a situation, particularly when the 'bullying' stems from the more healthy or transitional forms. It's all too easy for the school environment to be blamed and all forms of rough and tumble and noisy excitement to be seen as suspect and in need of intervention.

The school has an Anti-Bullying Policy which defines clearly what it understands to be bullying, a list of signs and symptoms for parents and teachers to recognise, a list of procedures to be followed within the school and a variety of measures the school can take to heal the situation including a 'no-blame' procedure so that the problem is tackled at source- not superficially by punitive measures which can make a 'martyr' of the bully and perpetuate the negative cycle. On the other hand, depending on the situation, the disciplinary procedure can be invoked leading ultimately to a fixed-term exclusion. The Policy also contains measures for anticipating and preventing bullying and guidelines for teachers regarding the environment we need to create and maintain to ensure positive behaviours.

But we have to be careful what we mean when talking, for instance, of an attitude of 'zero tolerance' towards bullying because this may fail to take into account the spectrum of behaviours this word can encompass- positive as well as negative as shown above- and,

worse still, imply that 'short, sharp' punitive measures will sort out the problem once and for all! 'Zero tolerance' to negative bullying means zero tolerance of the behaviour, not of the child concerned. The measures to be taken to correct that behaviour need careful thinking through not knee-jerk reactions.

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There is also a parental responsibility in all this that needs to be recognised and worked with because it is our experience that some of the more difficult and extreme conflicts we have to deal with have their roots at home: school provides the 'greenhouse' that brings not only flowers to the light of day but also the weeds! What follows is a parental checklist which bears directly on the sorts of behaviours that can lead to bullying in the negative sense- either bullying or being bullied:

* do I, as a parent, hold attitudes about my child never (or very rarely) being in the wrong?

* do I check out a story from different points of view or just take it as given and react accordingly?

* does my child ever play up to my sympathies or antipathies or even try to manipulate them with exaggerations (or plain untruths) which I don't bother to check out because they reinforce my views about another child or that child's parents?

* do I try to manipulate my child's friendships and discourage them from playing with certain children?

* do I hold attitudes about my child always (or usually) being in the wrong in such a way as to make them feel guilty and hopeless?

* how do I talk about other adults (including teachers!) and children in the presence of my child? Do I talk in a generally balanced and respectful way or does my child pick up the flavour of gossip, rumour-mongering, praise and blame, some people being OK while others are dismissed or put down (ie the ingredients of bullying)

* what role models are my children exposed to in elder siblings or in exposure to television, computer games etc? Do I take notice of and put into practice the school's guidelines with regard to the latter?

* do I have problems with other school parents and/or their children? If so, how do I go about dealing with this? Who do I look to for help? Do I contact the school or get involved in creating cliques?

* do I swear in front of my children and then expect they won't do the same?

* do I verbally abuse my child in moments of stress in such a way as to lower their self-esteem or make them feel worthless?

* do I talk to my child in too adult a way as though they were my friend or equal? Do I load them with confidences, tell them everything?

*do I give away my authority by trying to reason with my child when they're still of an age (ie below 11/12- class 6) when they need to be going along with what I'm saying simply 'because I said so'?

* do I spoil my child? Give in too easily to their demands so they're too used to having their own way and expect to continue to do so at school?

* have I the necessary time at my disposal to give my child the attention they need? (sometimes children have to develop coping strategies by putting on false fronts that hide their inner insecurity and need: these 'fronts' may be picked on and worried at by children trying to 'get through' to the real person. The parent will then claim their child is being bullied.)

* do I make sure that my child helps with household chores as a matter of routine (from class 2) and does not grow up with habits of always expecting to be 'served' or tidied up after?

* do I make sure my child enjoys the security of regular family meals, bedtimes, storytimes, prayer times (times for quiet and reverence) so they feel nourished and secure in themselves and so less likely to seek out and exploit the weaknesses of others. (ie feeling the need to project their own insecurity..)

Having said all this, we're all more than simply products of heredity and environment. Some children may manifest difficult behaviour with no apparent relation to anything they have picked up at school or home, they just seem to have 'brought it with them'. This is another important piece of the puzzle in trying to build up a true and balanced picture of what is going on in a situation of bullying- both for the bully and their victim.

To sum up, then there's four main areas for consideration:

1. discriminating between healthy and unhealthy forms of interaction between children and knowing when to intervene.

2. the nature of the school's practice in being vigilant and taking appropriate action

3. parental awareness of their responsibilities: good parenting practices

4. the individualities of the children in question (both bully and bullied): what is being expressed here and how can the situation be managed creatively to the benefit of both parties?

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