parenting ideas

insights



Preventing childhood bullying

by Michael Grose

Childhood bullying is an insidious behaviour that thrives on secrecy and adult acquiescence.

The recent efforts by a father in Ohio, USA to hold his child accountable for bullying is commendable, even if the technique he used is questionable.

Matt Cox insisted that his ten year daughter walk eight kilometres each way to school for three days after she was banned from the school bus for bullying.

He posted a film of her walking to school on social media, which has drawn over 15 million viewers. Cox's actions have drawn mixed responses from parents and professionals alike.

Let's look at the filming and posting of a disciplinary measure to social media first. It's a firm belief of the Parenting Ideas team that discipline works best when it's a private matter between parents and their children, and not something shared with others.

Keep discipline private

Many kids feel uncomfortable when even their close family are aware of the discipline they are experiencing. The posting of the film on social media borders on the realms of humiliation, which probably wasn't this father's intention. Imagine thirty years ago if Cox's parents had filmed an act of discipline involving their son and screening it as a short in movie theatres across the country. There would have been a public outcry about this invasion of privacy. Now thanks to social media posting of private matters is the new normal, which often goes unquestioned.

Parents should be encouraging their children to think very carefully before they post anything on social media as once the genie is out of the bottle it can't be put back. This video could well come back to haunt his daughter in the years to come.

Being accountable

It's laudable that this father wants to hold his daughter accountable for her actions rather than dismiss the behaviour as minor, or 'just one of those things that happen.' Too often parents excuse their children's poor behaviour, or simply don't take it seriously enough.

This father backed the actions of the bus driver, which were presumably endorsed by the school. Parent inaction over children's inappropriate behaviour is a common frustration for many teachers and principals so I suspect knowledge of this dad's actions would have been greeted by high fives by most of the staff at the girl's school.

Reflection is a pre cursor to behaviour change so the fact that she walked to school gave her plenty of time to ponder on her actions. However this type of punishment doesn't generally lead to a reduction in bullying in the long-term.

Restore relationships

Relationship restoration is a key strategy used by many Australian schools that's proving successful in changing bullying behaviour. Increasingly, kids who bully are expected to face up to their victims in safe, teacher-lead meetings. They are required to recall their actions and account for their behaviour. They also hear first hand the impact that their behaviour has had on the person they bullied, which is usually very confronting. This restorative justice method promotes real accountability as kids are expected to make amends in some way for the hurt that they have brought to the other person.

Research shows that many children who bully generally don't identify with the impact of bullying, so hearing first hand how their behaviour impacts on others is more likely to create some empathy, and hopefully, a decrease in bullying.

Like any behaviour change method, restorative justice doesn't work all the time. It needs to be applied in a calm, respectful way and it requires the support of the families of all children involved. This restorative justice method is less about seeking vengeance ('you'll get your come uppance') and more about seeking justice for the person who is bullied ("do you feel safe and also that you've been heard?") and achieving behavioural change from the child who bullies.

Use the restorative approach at home

Parents can practise this restorative approach in their families by encouraging a child to make amends if they've upset or been nasty to a brother or sister. 'You mess up relationships, you make up relationships' is a fabulous way for kids to take ownership of their anti-social behaviours. Again to be effective this method needs to be carried out in a safe, calm manner at a time when children and teenagers are likely to listen.

Childhood bullying requires a zero tolerance approach from parents, teachers and coaches if it is to be stamped out. The approach taken needs to be respectful to everyone involved; aimed at achieving justice and maintaining personal safety rather than seeking vengeance and gaining pay back; and stay firmly in the private rather public domain.



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