

## **Bullying**

Bullying is a very hot topic in the Australian press at the moment – and I know it is a very real issue around the Western world from my travels last year. I am often asked my views about how to overcome it and what to do to prevent it and so I will share my thoughts and ideas in this newsletter.

I can write with some authority about this as I was a victim in my home environment and a completely awful bitch and a bully at school!

Bullies I believe are created in the early years of life. The essential brain developments that sculpt the frontal lobe development which will ensure emotional maturity need very particular care and nurturing in the first two years. During this time the nerve pathways that underpin learning and language development, and also for establishing anti-anxiety chemical systems in the brain grow. This young brain is very susceptible to stress and distress. Warm attentive parenting will help a baby or toddler repeatedly activate the release of the positive soothing chemicals oxytocin and opioids that will counteract the cortisol of the distress response. The young brain is largely run by the primitive responses from the lower or reptilian brain and those feelings overwhelm easily our wee ones.

**“ When a child is not given enough help with his intense lower brain feelings and primitive impulses, his brain may not develop the pathways to enable him to manage stressful situations effectively. The legacy later in life is that he will not develop the higher human capacity for concern, or the ability to reflect on his feelings in a self aware way. Brain scans show that many violent adults are still driven, just like infants, by their ancient rage/fear and defense/attack responses deep in their brain.”**

P24-5 Margot Sunderland “The Science of Parenting”

So what are the best ways for parents and the carers of children best support this essential brain development that will help them grow into caring children without a need to bully others?

### **My top tips are:**

1. Creating a caring bond as soon as possible with lots of skin to skin contact, soothing when obviously distressed ( not when the bottom lip quivers!), enormous amounts of comfort touch.....yes that means rocking to sleep when they are distressed, singing soothing lullabies, tender stroking, pushing the pram' backwards and forwards.....simply genuine loving attention.
2. Creating pathways of comfort with sheepskins, cuddly blankets, soft toys, their hands or thumbs and maybe a comforter 'dummy'.
3. Involve others to help in the first two years ONLY if they are loving, caring and comfortable with safe nurturing touch.

4. Avoid forcing young ones when they are experiencing separation distress – this hurts a young child much like a physical pain. There are some key studies that link separation in early life to depression.
5. Large based day cares are unable to meet the emotional and nurturing needs of babies and very young children and there is much evidence that shows extensive, long day care early on is contributing to more aggression and non-compliance in children.
6. Healthy management of parent emotions and the use of the right voice and energy...being enthusiastic and optimistic is really helpful
7. Ensure opportunity for respite for parents – everyone benefits with a little break from parenting young children.....only with people they love, or who are able to offer a gentle loving care
8. Avoid shouting and criticism as it strengthens the lower brain patterns of distress and fear and rage
9. Routines bring children comfort and lower the risk of an emotional overload of fear or rage
10. Lower other potential stressors from babies and toddlers – shopping centres, large social gatherings, too much activity or over stimulation from TV's, very large toys with bells and whistles!
11. Create healthy sleep cycles and patterns as soon as possible.
12. Protect children from early bullies whether that be older siblings or at childcare. Then teach them how to manage such children.

Bullies are simply immature in the brain development and then that creates a pattern of behaviour that becomes a habit. Building significant caring adults in a bully's life who show they care, is vital in helping to heal these patterns. The brain has plasticity and can change over time however it cannot without lots of TLC. Punishment and punitive critical behaviour management will fail as it is not supporting the growth of neurons in the upper brain.

If we remember all children simply want to be loved, and accepted then this is what bullies are secretly wanting. The young brain before school has a much better potential for change to overcome early delays. Unfortunately our systems especially education have created such a serious phobia about safe touch that those vital warm, loving child care workers and teachers are unable to soothe and nurture children who DESPARATELY need it to help them manage their stressful and overwhelming negative feelings. In the UK they have "Nurture Groups" in some schools who are trained in safe touch and reassuring nurturing and they work closely with children with serious behavioural patterns so that they are able to gain essential emotional and social skills so they can re-join normal classrooms. I agree with Margot Sunderland that large day cares should have "emotional nurses" and I believe

all primary and secondary schools need the same. Safe touch and the benefits from reassuring contact benefit all students experiencing distress. Many students today process grief and loss in school toilets because there is not anyone who can hold them while they simply cry. We are denying a natural response of an emotionally mature adult to give comfort. I would like to see a formal accreditation for child care workers and teachers that they have completed training in all the legalities of safe touch and various techniques that help children and teenagers diffuse negative emotions safely. If anyone out there would like me on this mission with ideas, research, or a model that is already being used please contact me.

Bullies and victims both need support and rarely will they receive what they need with our current systems. Emotional growth needs trust, respect and appropriate support, and only specially trained people with a kind, caring disposition will achieve that. If our modern world continues to put work and wealth ahead of the vital early years of children's lives, we will continue to despair at the increasing violence and aggression in our communities. Schools will simply continue to be left to manage the results of unhealthy parenting, and the disruption that occurs both inside and outside the classroom. Sadly, the children from loving caring homes get penalized because their learning environment is disrupted by these emotionally and socially incompetent children. Teachers are struggling with unreachable and unteachable children, who tomorrow become adults with the same low competencies who then struggle with finding a place to be. Healing our world begins from the cradle to pre-school.

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