

When Your Child Is the Bully

Is your kid a Scott-Farkus-in-the-making? Credit: (c)MGM, Courtesy of Everett Collection

Heidi's oldest child was just 15 months old when she started exhibiting aggressive behavior. She hit, she bit, she pulled other kids' hair — and Heidi was at a loss as to how to cope.

"My daughter was mean," recalls the New Jersey mom of three.

And with that realization came with a flood of emotions — confusion, embarrassment, and even shame.

"I was a teacher and a nanny before I had kids, so I thought I had it all figured out. I was ... embarrassed of my daughter, and I definitely felt shame. Here I was this teacher, this nanny with years of experience, and I couldn't even control my 15-month-old."

We hear so often about the victims of bullies, the kids who suffer at the hands of tiny tyrants or teen queens. The media covers the sensational cases, like that of Phoebe Prince, the 15-year-old South Hadley, Mass. student who took her own life after she was taunted mercilessly on Facebook.

But what about your average, garden-variety bully? And what about their parents? For Heidi, living with the knowledge that her child took pleasure in victimizing others was incredibly stressful.

"I felt judged, especially by people who didn't know me or my child," she says. "I left many places crying, for many months."

Those feelings were wholly appropriate, says speaker, author and filmmaker Stacey DeWitt. She is also the founder and chief executive officer of Connect With Kids, an organization that seeks to educate parents on issues like obesity, anorexia, body image, drug use — and yes, bullying.



DeWitt says that, unlike Heidi, many parents of bullies are reluctant to admit that their child has a problem.

"Initially, they don't want to hear it," DeWitt says. "They say, 'That can't possibly be my child!' or 'People are overreacting.' But once you point out the pattern of behavior, they do eventually acknowledge that fact."

DeWitt says child-development research shows that bullying by very young children is, in fact, Darwinian.

"This is actually nothing new," she says. "In some ways, it is evolutionary to have this kind of aggressive behavior and it is not uncommon to see it in young children."

What *has* changed, she says, is that our current "culture of cruelty" rewards those whose bullying ways put them on top. No one remembers who came in fourth place at the Olympics — everything in modern society is geared toward a cutthroat, competitive lifestyle. This obsession with winning can actually blind parents to the signs that their kid is bullying others.

"I think some parents are proud (of their bullies) and they don't even realize it," DeWitt says. "I don't think in most cases it is ill-intentioned, but I do believe that parents are so consumed with survival in the current, highly competitive socioeconomic market and with their kids being the best and coming out on top. The thing is, when you need to be the best, that means someone else needs to be on the bottom."

The blindness DeWitt points to does seem to exist. We posed the statement, "I feel some pride in my kid when they bully others" on an electronic message board, along with two possible responses: "Sure I do, it's a big bad world out there and someone has to be the winner!" and "Are you crazy? No way!"

While only six percent of parents agreed with the statement, the tone of the debate that ensued is a grownup version of playground fisticuffs.

"Any parent that is proud of this type of behavior needs to be pulled outside and have the [expletive] kicked out of him/her.

Eventually their kid will be on the news because one of the kids that he/she bullies will bring a gun to school and blow their [expletive] head off," writes one mother.

While other posters adamantly deny that they would be proud of a bully, some of them are keen on meeting fist with fist.

One woman details an incident in which her child punches another child in the face, and she praises the girl for her actions: "We were at [a playground] several months back and some older boy was climbing all over her, not wanting to wait his turn to go down the slide (He was too big/old to be in the toddler area in the first place). She asked him twice to back off. He did not, she she reared back and punched him hard in the face. THAT, I was proud of."

DeWitt is unfazed by these kinds of reactions, and reminds us that parents are themselves subjected to this kind of "it's either me or you" mentality every day in the workplace. In fact, more and more mothers are finding themselves the victims of bullying — from other moms.

"You have to remember how competitive the world is right now, and this is something that parents themselves are forced to maneuver through," she says. "We teach our kids that they need to be tough and competitive to look out for themselves. It's cultural."

She points to all aspects of modern life, including, of course, the media. Shows like "American Idol" thrive on the nasty remarks of the judges, and we consume them happily. However, DeWitt is one of the few to point the finger not at the producers of such entertainment, but at us, the consumers.

"It isn't that this kind of show would never have been made in the 1950s, it's that society would not have tolerated this kind of show in the 1950s," she says. "The media is just a mirror of who we are now."

What can parents do? Teach your kids empathy (which is not an innate skill) and role-play often when they appear to be developing the traits of a bully.

That's what Heidi tried to do with her daughter, who is now 8 years old and recently ran her very own fundraiser for the victims of the Haiti earthquake disaster. But the road to empathy and kindness was neither short nor smooth, she says.

"I knew in my mind that it was nothing we were doing to cause her to be a physical kid, who hit, and bit, and pulled hair," Heidi says. "We didn't teach her those things, so in my mind I knew it was just something to work through. But knowing that didn't make it any easier."

"I am proud to say, that now, at almost 9, she is a super great kid," she adds.

*Related: Workplace Bullies, Women and Leadership
- Nut Up, Ladies*