

HANDLING BULLYING

My eleven year old son has become a victim on 'mild' bullying in school. I have made the *hanhala* aware of the problem, but nothing has really changed. My kid can be annoying, as can all kids, but there is no reason that he should have to allow himself to be pushed around physically. I have advised him to hit back and hit back hard the next time the bullies come over and shove him, but my wife is horrified at this advice. Is there any justification for it?

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In answer to the question – should the child hit back, we must be cognizant of the fact that ‘giving back’ is not a *Torah* way of life. It puts the victim in almost the same category as the bully.

Let me tell you a small story of a frum soldier in the Israeli army who was given orders to go to the front where shooting would certainly take place. He somehow had the *protectzia* to remain behind and do office work. He asked one of our *Gedolim* if he should use this *protectzia* and was told that he should – not because of the danger involved, but because if one takes a life, even one of an enemy, life in and of itself, becomes cheapened.

Chazal tell us “*Odom nifal achar peuloso*” – one’s character becomes the result of his actions.

I once read that Reb Moshe was asked if one is allowed to go fishing. His response was “*vee ken a Yid shtechen a verm mit a hook*”. “How is it possible for a Jew to stick a hook into a worm?” We are *rachmonim b’nei rachmonim*. We therefore cannot condone in any fashion, physical or verbal abuse whatsoever. Our *machane* must be *kadosh*.

It is therefore incumbent upon us all to instill into our youngsters the idea of not raising one’s hand or one’s mouth to another even when one thinks it is deserved. As *Moshe Rabeinu* said “*Vayomer lo- Rosho- lomoh sake reyecho*”. Even though he only picked his hand up, he is called a *Rosho*. We certainly do not want our children to even be assumed to belong to this group.

Parents, school staff, and all responsible adults, must have zero tolerance for bullying, not only in *hashkofa*, but in reality. It is, therefore, the responsibility of the parents, school staff and every responsible *Yid*, to prevent bullying in every possible way. Dr. Avrohom Worenklein, Clinical Psychologist in Montreal, was called upon by Mrs. C. Polter, Director of Ahavas Chesed, a professional organization which helps all those in need in the *Chareidi* community, to formulate a bullying prevention program for the *Chareidi* schools..(This program is available from Dr. Worenklein.)

The program includes advice to victims, such as ignoring the bullying by walking away and making them think you just don’t care, acting confident by holding your head up, making eye contact, and walking confidently; making the time to do things that help you feel good about yourself; staying away from areas where bullying tends to happen (e.g. bathroom, isolated areas, etc); talking to someone you trust, like your parents, a friend, a teacher, principal - they can offer support and help develop a plan to end the harassment; thinking about how your behavior may be making the problem bigger or smaller.

It is recommended that the victim be told he is not alone, lots of kids struggle with bullying and harassment; keep his cool and walk away, even though he might be upset; share his feelings with people he trusts, so that he doesn't have to struggle alone; it's not his fault, no one deserves to be bullied; be assertive, not aggressive, fighting back can make things worse; it's okay to ask for help, he doesn't have to solve this problem on his own.

This advice is only the tip of the iceberg and should be expanded to be effective.

I spent a period discussing the above question in one of our Seminary classes, a group consisting of forty-five 18-19 year old students. I asked each one if she had ever been bullied during her school years. Only three, *B"H*, fell into that category, three too many. **I wonder why the others were not able to speak up when we know the numbers are ten-fold.** Of the three, two responded to the bullying in kind, while the third changed schools. Of the remaining forty-two students, all but two felt they would tell their students or children to walk away and report the situation to someone in authority to help with the problem. The other two agreed with the father in our question, that the boy should respond in kind.

I know that this is just a small sampling of girls and I am sure that the problem is more prevalent in a boys' environment. One needs to recognize that relational bullying by isolation, rejection, etc. unfortunately, is not uncommon among girls. The above sample may not be fully representative. In fact, in one of the boys' yeshivas recently, 40% of the children in Grade 6 reported that they had, at one point in the past, been afraid to go to school because of bullying!

It goes, without saying that teachers and administration, in conjunction with the parents, must put much time and effort into instilling into the bully *ahavas Yisroel* and a program must be set up to save the bully's future in *Klal Yisroel*.