

Bullies

What do John Travolta, Tom Cruise and Harrison Ford have in common?

All three men were victims of bullies and their cruel, intentional and aggressive behavior, when they were boys.

Bullies bully for a variety of reasons:

- Jealousy
- The need to be in control
- The desire to be at the center of the attention
- Enjoyment of picking on the weak
- The desire to look tough
- The need to feel better about themselves by hurting others

Many bullies have problems in their own home life. Their primary role-model may be a violent person, which then predisposes the bully to acts of intentional, aggressive behavior.

The consequences of this violent behavior, more often than not, are that victims of bullies wind up seeing pediatricians and family doctors, complaining of abdominal pain, depression, mood changes, lack of concentration and even self-mutilation, to the point of suicide.

When a child becomes withdrawn, misses some of his or her belongings, or sleeps poorly, there's a good chance that he/she is being bullied at school. Children may be too afraid to tell adults about being victimized, adolescents, in particular, may be too embarrassed to discuss this sensitive issue, and younger children may not have the necessary communication skills to express their feelings and fears (tools such as crayons, drawings, puppets and clay come in handy at a time like this).

Obese children are more likely to be bullied and, at the same time, they are more likely to be bullies (to compensate for their own sense of inadequacy and pain). One of my pediatric obesity clinic patients told me that bullies taunted her and yelled, "You are as big as two yellow taxis," in front of a few of her friends.

Should a child ever be caught by a bully it's a great idea to yell loudly and use body language that indicates strength (i.e. stand tall, look people in the eye, etc.), especially if there's an "innocent" bystander nearby who might be able to help.

It's important to teach victims of bullies that it is not their fault. They did nothing to deserve that kind of treatment.

An Alaskan judge recently ruled in favor of a victim of bullying. Both the bully's family and the school, where the incident occurred, were asked to pay a few million dollars each, in damages, to the victim. Perhaps that will get the attention of those who would like to turn a blind eye to this form of abuse.

In the city of Calgary and the province of Alberta more and more schools are working hard to address this issue, rather than avoid it. It seems that they are no longer willing to play down the seriousness of even minor forms of intimidation.

I recently had the privilege of interviewing the founders of a national organization called, Champions Against Bullying. This dynamic organization provides a wide range of age-appropriate

resources that have been helping bullies, victims, families and schools across North America. My interview with the founders, Alex Penn and Delfina Moore, can be found on my web site, www.healthykids.ca. (Use "Herald" as the coupon code to register for the PowerPoint presentation on bullies).

I was shocked to discover that 60% of the elementary school boys who bully other kids end up having a criminal record by the time they are 24 years old; they have a tendency toward abusing elders and spouses in later life; and, unfortunately, they are also more likely to engage in sexual abuse.

If we want to reduce the frequency of these events later in life, it's probably a good idea to nip bullying in the bud early.

Champions Against Bullying has recently launched a CD that is a great resource for encouraging children to speak out. It features children interacting, at home and school, in such a way that they heal themselves of guilt and other mental scars. The pilot project (which is being done with this CD in the Toronto area) is causing a lot of excitement in families, children and school boards.

Champions Against Bullying also provides monthly newsletters and an advice column on their web site (www.championsagainstabullying.com).

My advice to families, whose children have been victimized, is to do whatever it takes to restore their children's dignity as soon as possible. Few things are as important as a healthy self-esteem; and, unfortunately not all bullied children will get the fairytale/Hollywood ending that Cruise, Travolta and Ford did. So, please bookmark www.championsgainstabullying.com and share it with everyone, but most importantly, with the key people at your children's schools.

Access www.healthykids.ca for a terrific new resource in helping families raise healthy children - Healthy kids with Dr Nieman will optimize your child's complete health.

An informed parent is...an empowered parent.