



Part 3 **ADULT BULLIES**

ARE SCHOOLYARD BULLIES IMITATING THEIR PARENTS?

The age-old saying, "The apple doesn't fall far from the tree," is often used when children mimic their parents' actions. It's a compliment when used in reference to a child's intellect, athletic ability, or good deeds. But the saying takes on a much darker meaning when a child becomes a bully as the result of intimidating and aggressive parents—who are indeed bullies themselves.

Of course, the term "bully" may seem more apropos for the schoolyard than for the supposedly adult universe, especially when the parental aggression is directed towards their children. "Parents don't 'bully' a child—it's abuse," says Dr. Richard Horowitz, a parenting coach and author of *Family-Centered Parenting*. Still, even if it isn't pointed at their children, any type of aggression shown by the parents is enough. "Kids learn nothing more than modeling their parents," Dr. Horowitz says. "The message is very loud and clear that when you feel diminished, you act out in an over-the-top way...You get empowered by overpowering another."

But is it also possible that bullying is genetic? Can parents pass along aggressive tendencies just as they can eye and hair color? "How could they *not* pass it on?" asks Dr. Laura Martocci, Associate Dean of Experiential Learning and a member of the sociology faculty at Wagner College. Like Dr. Horowitz, Dr. Martocci believes that children model the behavior of the adults for both better and worse, with one of the worst behaviors being women's gossip. "Mom gossips. Mom spreads rumors. And she does it while driving, or while making dinner," Dr. Martocci says. These "public family places," as she calls them, encourage their daughters to recognize it as appropriate behavior.

"Unfortunately, as adults, women have honed this type of behavior—it comprises their primary social skill set," says Dr. Martocci. "Worse, from what I have seen many women—especially those who have been victims—don't have the slightest qualms about it."

Dr. Martocci recalls the case of Missouri mother Lori Drew, who allegedly created a false Facebook profile to cyberbully

13-year-old Megan Meier, a classmate of one of her children. Drew took on the persona of "Josh Evans," who engaged with Meier online, then spurned her. Prosecutors believed it was this rejection that directly lead to Meier committing suicide.

Men, on the other hand, are known for their physical aggression, which is what often constitutes the typical schoolyard bully. Dr. Cheryl Dellasega, an expert on bullying and author of *Mean Girls Grown Up*, believes that while women use gossip as a way to relieve everyday tension in their lives, "Men compete more. They are more likely to go golfing." But if only they could leave the tension behind on the golf course. Instead, some men continue to manifest this aggression publicly—road rage, yelling at the television or game officials during sporting events, physical fights, etc. The solution? "Teaching early on how you get your message across without hurting another is very important," Dr. Dellasega says. She also echoes others' sentiments on gossip: "Gossip is still bullying—it's still hurtful."

Men and women flip over tables and punch each other on reality TV and we tune in or set our DVRs. We call it our "guilty pleasure," but what happens when we turn into bad boys and girls in our own lives, and in front of our children? It seems that it's only a matter of time before researchers discover that there truly is a "bullying gene."

We tell our children what to do and how to do it all the time—what if we started taking some of our own advice? Even better, what if we started behaving the way in which we want our children to behave? That way, when the apples do fall from the tree, they won't be rotten.

By Barbara Bellesi, a writer on Staten Island.

Wagner College Program Takes a Stand Against Bullying

The Students Against Relational Aggression (SARA) program is an anti-bullying initiative at Wagner College. College students enroll in Dr. Laura Martocci's course on violence and aggression and deliver a 12-week curriculum in local 4th grade classrooms. The program is in 12 schools across Staten Island and growing.

The intervention program allows young children to develop the skills they need to move on confidently to middle school. The program helps them to define behavior that is acceptable inside and out of the classroom, therefore taking ownership of the environment that is a part of their growing years.

"The insight that humiliation is central to most forms of emotional violence anchors the SARA program," says 'Dr. Martocci. "The intervention takes this fact, as well as the knowledge that children judge, label, and recognize as 'other' what is different from them, as its point of departure."

SARA has been a great success for both sets of students, Dr. Martocci says. "Face-to-face regular contact between an older, 'cooler' college student and a 4th grader is much more powerful than any anti-bullying curriculum workbook a school could purchase. It actually allows young people to see someone model alternate behaviors."

While the SARA program is not yet available to all schools, Dr. Martocci welcomes questions about the initiative. She can be reached at martocci@wagner.edu.

Learn more about the experts featured in this article:

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