

Be Nice! October is Bully Prevention Month

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Did you know that October is Bully Prevention month and Disability Awareness month? Sadly, children with an exceptionality are 2 to 3 times more likely to be bullied than their typical peers.

Empathy

So, what can you do to help ensure that your child is not a victim of bullying or does not become a bully themselves? To put it simply---EMPATHY! Parents who show empathy for their child when upset, without ignoring their child's feelings or trying to change their child's emotional state, help them to develop empathy.

How to Spot Empathy in a Child

Let's look at a couple of examples of how to develop empathy in your child.

- Your young child wants to go outside, but it is raining and your child is crying and frustrated. Empathy is reflecting how your child feels. Describe to your child what you see, "Your face is going like this" (get on your child's level and mirror your child's face). "You look like you feel sad because you can't go outside right now. I know this is hard for you but you can handle this." Dr. Becky Bailey, creator of Conscious Discipline, wrote the Schubert and Sophie series. These books help teach children crucial social skills, such as regulating their own emotional states and how to be assertive with others who do not respect their boundaries, such as bullies. This series walks the child and parent through the steps on how to handle upsets, as in the scenario described above.
- Another example of teaching your child empathy is by expressing respect, care, and concern for everyone your child sees and hears you interact with. Yes, even the driver who cuts you off in traffic! Showing empathy in this situation could be by saying out loud, "Boy, that really scared me and I need to take a deep breath to help me feel calm! That driver must have an emergency to be driving so fast! I hope that everything works out well for her!" Not only will you be modeling empathy, but you will be modeling self-regulation for your child.
- A further effective way to teach empathy is to teach children to value one another's differences. I authored the book [Exceptionally Good Friends: Building Relationships with Autism \(EGF\)](http://www.exceptionallygoodfriends.com/), winner of the Autism Society's, "2015 Dr. Temple Grandin Outstanding Literary Work of the Year." One of the reasons I wrote the book is specifically to help children develop empathy, tolerance, and understanding of one another's differences. The story is told from the point of view of a neuro-typical child about her friend with autism. The book can then be flipped over for another story told from the point-of-view of the child with autism, experiencing the same events. The two stories lend themselves very well to the discussion of these differences. One of my favorite quotes from the book is, "Next time I see someone who looks or acts differently, I will remember to be kind to them." To learn more about this insightful resource, visit <http://www.exceptionallygoodfriends.com/>.

Compassion, Empathy and Character Development

The Creating Compassionate Children™ (CCC) campaign is a curriculum for schools that is centered around EGF. “Get caught Being Kind™” is the campaign’s slogan. The curriculum provides teachers and schools with discussion questions to be used along with my book and extension activities and materials to help students develop compassion and empathy for peers who look or act differently. The CCC campaign meets federal guidelines for the requirement for Character Development. To donate a kit to a classroom or to find out about implementing the program in your county, visit <http://getcaughtbeingkind.org/>.

Avoid Bullying

Equipping your child with strong self-advocacy skills can help your child to avoid becoming a victim of bullying. A common home situation that is ideal to teach self-advocacy skills is when your child takes their sibling’s toy. Attend to the “victim” first, offering empathy and empowerment. Ask the victim, “Did you like it when your brother/sister took your toy?” The child will likely say, “No!” emphatically. Help the “victim” use this energy to approach the “aggressor” to say, “I don’t like it when you take my toy, give it back, please!” Next, attend to the “aggressor” saying, “Look at your brother/sister’s face. His/her face shows that he/she feels mad and doesn’t like it when you take his/her toy. You wanted your sibling’s toy but did not have the words to tell him/her. Instead of grabbing, next time say, ‘May I have a turn please.’ Try it with me now.” You have now taught your child a new skill to use in a similar situation in addition to reinforcing empathy.

Children are much less likely to become bullies themselves when their caregivers are responsive to their emotional and physical needs, connected to their child, treat others with respect, and utilize positive discipline.