

Laws Won't Deck Bullies

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The other day as the Florida Legislature debated what groups to include in a bill designed to prevent bullying in schools, my thoughts turned back to fifth grade and a guy named James Jackson.

He wasn't bigger than me, but he had a swagger that made everyone in our class afraid of him. One day he snatched my notebook and took some paper out of it. I didn't say or do anything, and from then on he had me.

Soon he was calling me names, throwing spitballs at me and daring me to do anything about it. I didn't do anything other than go home and worry what would happen the next day.

But after he chased me home one day, I knew I had to fight back because if my father ever saw me running from anyone, he would have given a beating worse than any from a classmate. He was a bully himself who relished terrorizing his wife and children.

"Don't ever come home crying," he told me many times, and I knew he meant it.

So the next day Jackson and I got it on, and it turned out he wasn't as tough as everyone thought (think of Ralphie turning the tables on bully Scut Farkas in the film "A Christmas Story"). He threatened revenge, but he never bothered me again.

More Than A Law Needed

I bring all this up so many years later because I want to believe that a law similar to the one working its way through the Legislature would have made a difference at my school - or any school.

Unfortunately, victims of bullying are often isolated and completely on their own. Many times they're afraid to speak out because of fear and/or embarrassment. And laws and school policies won't stop the new frontier: cyberbullying, in which kids use e-mail and Web sites to harass and humiliate others.

Not that bullying isn't something school administrators shouldn't be concerned about. According to the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, about three in 10 American students are affected as a bully, a victim or both. It can increase absenteeism, hamper learning and leave permanent psychological scars.

Bullying had long been shrugged off as a "boys will be boys" activity. After the 1999 Columbine High School massacre, in which two frequently bullied students killed 13 people and wounded 23 others before killing themselves, the nation woke up to the reality that it was no longer a harmless children's activity.

Bullying Behavior In The Workplace

After being in the workplace for nearly 40 years, I've also learned bullying behavior is not something that stops after high school. I've observed bosses who belittle employees

under the guise of motivation, and co-workers who felt the need to exalt themselves by putting down their peers, especially those of another race or sex.

One of my former co-workers even went to counseling, trying to figure out why some people treated her so badly when she performed so well. I told her the problem was her, not them, and that she had to stand up for herself, which she did.

While I don't think we can ever really end bullying in schools, we can raise awareness and try to create a culture change where bullies are ostracized, parents recognize warning signs, teachers know how and when to intervene, and kids stand up for each other, which is probably the most important.

To paraphrase the title of Robert Fulghum's bestseller, all I really need to know about bullies I learned in the fifth grade.

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