

Five Tips for Parents When Your Child Is Being Bullied

by: Edward F. Dragan

All 15-year-old Phoebe Prince wanted was to be liked. But after moving from Ireland to Massachusetts, it wasn't long before Phoebe endured bullying from the "mean girls" at school. They stalked Phoebe, called her an "Irish whore," and intimidated her relentlessly. In January, the mean girls followed Phoebe home and threw a Monster energy drink can at her. Phoebe kept walking — past the harassment, past the can, past the white picket fence, into her house. Then she walked into a closet and hanged herself.

When her mother enrolled Phoebe the previous fall, she told the principal her daughter had been bullied in Ireland. The principal assured her he would watch out for Phoebe. But Phoebe's mother didn't document that discussion with a follow-up letter. She didn't ask for a copy of the school's anti-harassment policy. She didn't ask for a plan of intervention if Phoebe was bullied.

She didn't fail to do these things because she was indifferent. She didn't do these things because she didn't know she had the ability to intervene and to foment decisive action.

It's one thing for school administrators to give parents lip service. It's quite another for them to be accountable for their promises. If your child is being bullied, here are five tips for ensuring that her school will do right by you and your child.

1. Develop a climate in your home that encourages discussion.

It's difficult to get your kids to talk about their hurts when they are bullied. By setting the right climate — one of listening, not lecturing — you can create an atmosphere of trust to find out what's going on. Start by asking simple questions — who, what, where — to thread together a story: "Did anyone call you a name today?" "Who was the person?" "What teacher did you tell?" What happened next?" Be careful not to judge.

Be sensitive to your child's moods. If your child seems hesitant to discuss it, don't force it. Spend some time in a favorite activity with your child to reinvigorate the bonds of affection that can promote dialogue.

2. Create a narrative outlining the details of your child's bullying.

Phrase the information the way you would tell a good friend what's happening to your child. And practice telling your story to a friend.

It's crucial to obtain a copy of the school's anti-bullying policy to determine whether, in your opinion, anything that happened violated it. Work that into your narrative — starting with what should happen and why you know a violation took place.

3. Call the principal to tell your child's story and ask for help.

Better yet, try to meet face to face with the principal. Tell your story factually, not emotionally, and ask what you and he can do together to stop the bullying. Write down everything he said and agreed to do, because you are going to hold him accountable for it.

4. Send a thank-you letter to the principal, recapping what he or she said and agreed to do.

By doing this, you have put the principal on notice that you are familiar with school policy and that you are watching for change.

5. Check with your child to see if the bullying stops, and follow up with the principal.

If the harassment continues, document it. You may need to move up the chain of command, contacting the superintendent of schools, board of education, or possibly even state and federal authorities.

In 40-plus years as an educator, I have never seen a more difficult environment for children than that which exists today. If parents learn how to work with schools to put an end to bullying, we might prevent more tragedies like that of Phoebe Prince.

Edward F. Dragan, EdD, owns Education Management Consulting, LLC (www.edmgt.com), providing litigation consultation to attorneys and consultation to parents who want to protect their children from bullying in school. His book, The Bully Action Guide: How to Get Your School to Listen When Your Child Is Bullied, is forthcoming this spring.