

Guest Blogger Jenny: How Does A Private Elementary School Handle Bullies?

Description

Bullying is getting a ton of press these days, mostly due to the use of the internet (whether on social networking sites or live streaming video) to harass victims, sometimes, it seems, to death. In those cases, "bullying" seems a bit too mild a term for what occurred; complete invasion of privacy, harassment, and true criminal intent fits the bill a bit better.

The type of behavior our kids experience on the playground is usually of a lesser grade, more in line with what we once experienced at school ourselves. Kids get shoved off of playground equipment, excluded from games, called names, are ostracized for unique physical traits, and have their names mocked. Though highly unpleasant, this seems to be a childhood rite of passage, and I'm not sure anyone escapes unscathed.

My daughter got her first true taste of bullying in first grade, and she got it right between the eyes. Some fourth grader terrorized her on the playground, demanding her immediate removal from the monkey bars (she did not back down). This went on for weeks until she finally asked for help. Although the threat of physical violence seems bad, the worst was coming. The girl terror in her classroom, run almost solely by a very manipulative and obviously miserable little girl, was highly exclusionary and very sophisticated. My child could easily defend herself against a physical bully and win out (a decent life lesson), but she had little to no defense against the whispering rumor mongering wretch who made her whole year miserable.

This happened at a public school, and when I approached the teacher to complain, she just looked tired and replied she was late for a meeting. Some conference with the girl's mother and the teacher happened eventually, but the girl terror pretty much lasted the entire year. I had to promise my daughter she would never, ever again share a classroom with that girl. A girl who, much like the girl bullies portrayed in the NYT article Christina previously posted, seemed old for her age, wielded a cell phone at six, and emulated teenage behavior.

Keep in mind: bullying behavior creates more bullying behavior. Kids learn it from somewhere, and most bullies were victims themselves. I watched this in action during her third grade year, as most of the class (my kid included) teamed up against an overweight girl who had often bullied others herself. It might have been payback, but it was still unacceptable. Thankfully, the teacher called the entire class to task, and everyone learned something, except the victim herself, who kept calling herself the victim even as she continued to shove my daughter off the ends of benches. Whatever.

So, that's my experience with bullying at a public school. What would private school be like? I had no illusions that it would be a bully free environment; I went to Crossroads starting in 8th grade, and the social bullying was tremendous. And Anna* had been left with the impression that all kids were mean, so the idea of being the new kid, and thus an easy mark, weighed heavily upon her.

I'm happy to report that, at least at Mirman, bullying appears to be non-existent. Anna's transition into the social scene has been pretty easy. There are some kids there who do appear to have poor social skills, and are less than diplomatic about wanting a turn on the monkey bars, but there seems to be none of the Lord of the Flies atmosphere of 3rd St. Anna has been included in impromptu recess theater performances and older girls teach her new gymnastic bar tricks every day. If someone gets a wrong answer in class, it isn't an opportunity for humiliation.

Anna informed me (and this just might be Mirman student rumor mill) that some upper school students were busted for bullying, and were actually suspended. Iâ€™m not sure if this is entirely accurate, but the information certainly reassured her that she was safe from harassment at her new school. The kids at Mirman might be precocious, but theyâ€™re not particularly sophisticated in a pop culture way. The nastiness, disrespect and sarcasm of â€œHannah Montanaâ€• and â€œThe Suite Lifeâ€• (shows my daughter is forbidden to watch) just doesnâ€™t gain any points in the Mirman environment.

Mirman has a Character Counts education program, with six pillars: caring, citizenship, fairness, respect, responsibility, and trustworthiness; students voted to add cooperation, perseverance and friendship as well. If a school truly pushes this agenda, it doesnâ€™t make for an easy bullying environment.

Plus, The Mirman Parent/Student Information Manual states very clearly: â€œThe school does not condone physical/verbal/cyber harassment of bullying of any kind. Such actions are considered suspendable offenses, Extreme offenses may result in expulsion.

So, since I can only speak for our limited time at the Mirman School, Iâ€™m curious: what do other private school parents deal with in terms of bullying (The Willows has a similar policy on its campus). Do the other schools have a definitive policy with genuine follow through? Have there been cases of outrageous bullying at your school? And, if so, how did the school deal with it?

In some ways, I worry that the extreme zero tolerance for bullying of any kind might just infantilize our kids. Learning to defend oneself from nonsense is a good skill to have; learning to ignore the malicious whispers and persevere builds great character. But, when bullying becomes almost organized on the playground and entrenched in the social scene, it leads to a break down in the natural order of things, and fosters an entire bullying environment where nothing is off limits. In the end, it's another one of life's delicate balancing acts: allowing enough adversity to build valuable life skills, while squelching the truly evil stuff before it poisons everything. And that's the challenge all schools face when it comes to bullying.

Jenny Heitz has worked as a staff writer for Coast Weekly in Carmel, freelanced in the South Bay, and then switched to advertising copywriting. She has been published in the Daily News. She now writes about gift ideas and products on her blog, [Find A Toad](#).

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