

Peer Aggression, A Paradigm Shift

“Why the Word Bullying Trivializes Aggressive/Criminal Behaviour”

Through my teachings of children, I have been asked by several concerned parents, and even school educators, if I could speak on the issue of “bullying” and the challenges needed to deal with it in a desirable manner. Based upon these enquiries, my research began, and what I found was that in dealing with this important issue, we need to create a paradigm shift on the semantics of this issue, starting with the word “bully”.

To me the word “bully” trivializes aggressive, and at times, criminal behaviour, especially once the “aggressor” turns the age of 12 in Canada. Often what has been called “bullying” behaviour is seen to be nothing more than normal childhood behaviour involving children with competing claims. To me however, bullying behaviour is a conscious, wilful, and deliberate aggressive activity that is intended to harm, be it emotionally, psychologically, or physically, and induce fear through the threats of further aggression, thus creating fear and terror in the identified target. These types of behaviours in the criminal justice world are known as criminal harassment, utter threats, and assault; but yet in our schools it is treated more like undesirable, and sometimes “trivial” or “insignificant” like behaviour. In her book, “The Bully, The Bullied, and The Bystander”, Barbara Coloroso stated:

“ Individual incidents of verbal, physical, or relational bullying can appear trivial or insignificant, nothing to overly concerned about, part of the school culture, But it is the imbalance of power, the intent to harm, the threat of further aggression, and the creation of an atmosphere of terror that should raise red flags and signal a need for intervention. Sadly, even when the four markers of bullying are clearly in evidence, adults have been known to minimize or dismiss the bullying, underestimate its seriousness, blame the bullied child, and/or heap on additional insult to injury.”

Often I hear those who trivialize what I like to call “Peer Aggression”, say that this is “normal” childhood behaviour, commonly exhibited by youth, and nothing more than children teasing one another. To me “teasing” behaviour is a fun thing to do with friends that is not intended to hurt others, is innocent in motive, maintains one’s dignity, and pokes fun in a benign light-hearted way. When children tease one another, there is playfulness that is not intended to harm. Peer aggression however, is a direct, or even clandestine, attack that is intended to harm the intended target either emotionally, psychologically, and

or physically. Peer Aggression is NOT NORMAL teasing, it is anti-social aggression, and needs to be treated as such by parents, students, teachers, and administrators !!!!!

Here are two semantic changes that I believe can start to create a paradigm shift in dealing with this important issue:

- Rather than calling this behaviour “bullying”, a word that I believe trivializes aggressive/criminal behaviour, I prefer to call it “Peer Aggression”, as it identifies the problem for what it is, “aggression”, which is a more encompassing term that can be expressed by the aggressor via an emotional, psychological, and or physical attack or combination thereof. I also believe that the term “Peer Aggression” identifies to students, parents, teachers and administrators that this anti-social behaviour is serious and will be treated as such
- The bully should be called the “aggressor” thus identifying what they are actually doing; using aggression to hurt their intended “target” rather than “victim”. Peer aggression creates a climate of fear that makes children feel unsafe.

Peer Aggression can no longer be minimized or trivialized by students, parents, teachers and administrators. We can no longer trivialize this aggressive behaviour without substantial objections, indignation, direct intervention, or outrage; and I believe that one way to accomplish this is to create a paradigm shift via semantics on this important issue.

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PS: Changing semantics is but one piece of the overall puzzle in dealing with Peer Aggression, a subject that I have become very passionate about, and I am in the process of designing an entire educational program around.