

Miss Katie's Kids Korner

Confessions of a Grade School Bully

by Katie Taylor

The following story is true. Edna Murphy is a real person, but Edna is not her real name. The source for all other information (in italics) was taken from "Taking the Bully by the Horns" by Kathy Noll and Jay Carter.

I was a grade school bully. My victim was Edna Murphy. She wasn't just my victim, but the target of the entire class. Every day in school, a chorus of "Eeehhddnaaaahh!" would ring through the halls. It was fun and easy to make her cry.

"Bully abuse can vary from physical and criminal abuse – pushing, tripping, slapping, hitting, wrestling, choking, kicking, biting, stealing, breaking things – to verbal abuse – judging unfairly, missing the point, passing the blame, bossing, making the victim self-conscious, embarrassing, making the victim cry, confusing and making her feel small."

Edna had all the qualities of a child with high bullying potential. She was an only child with few friends in the class. Both of her parents worked as college professors in a time when most moms stayed home. Edna had a Native American ancestor and was very proud of her heritage. In her back yard, she played in a pueblo. When we were in third grade, Edna did an authentic Indian dance in the school play and almost made it onstage bare-chested before the teacher stopped her.

She was allergic to milk. This singled her out in the cafeteria, and caused her mother to bake 7-Up birthday cakes. It was a wonder she had the courage to come to school at all. "Victims are usually loners. Children who appear to be friendless can be magnets for bullies. Many times it's how kids carry themselves. The bullies pick up on that. They also might pick on children who are different – those with mental or physical handicaps." I had nothing against Edna. She was (and still is) incredibly smart, which is why I stole her pencils. They had all the answers. "Bullies really do have low self-esteem. If there is something about themselves they don't like, they feel that by putting their victim down (or in my case, stealing their pencils), they are distracting from their own problems." Most of the girls in my class had the required 3-ring binders with plastic dividers for each subject. Edna had a notebook with dividers as well, but instead of punching holes, she stacked her papers on top of her notebook

cover. I truly admired the way she could find her homework in that pile of seemingly disordered paper. But that didn't stop me from routinely knocking her desk so that her papers would scatter all over the floor. The whole class would laugh at Edna's expense and I would be the hero. Bullies love to have an audience.

While low self-esteem is a major component of being a bully, other factors are also important. Usually bullies come from middle-income families who do not monitor their activities. Parents are either extremely tolerant and permissive or physically aggressive and abusive. Kids learn by example and if they see their parents "winning" through verbal or physical abuse, they'll copy that winning style. Sometimes it isn't the parent's fault. The increase of violence on TV, movies, and video games also influences the action of bullies.

I went to an all-girl school. Clothes, hair, and popularity competitions were fiercer than anything found on the hockey field. Edna's wardrobe consisted of plain skirts and blouses. She wore undershirts long after the rest of us had bras, and anklets with saddle shoes. She never shaved her legs. While I washed my hair every night, Edna's long dark hair always looked a bit greasy. "Girls in cliques will pick on you simply because you don't wear your hair or clothes they way they see fit to be cool (Insults, Gossip, Rejection, Spreading Rumors)." Middle school marked the end of my bullying days. I was too afraid of being accused of having "kooties" myself to ridicule someone else. Edna and I were in the same class for 12 years, but I'm sad to say that we never became great friends. I hadn't seen her since high school graduation, but I called her recently to ask permission to use her story for this article. Thinking the call was rather bullying of me, I was shocked when she said she didn't remember my being a bully to her. She remembered having been bullied by other girls, but not by me. I apologized anyway and told her about the pencils.

The bullying that Edna endured didn't include physical violence. My frame of reference has a hard time comprehending what goes on today. Here are some alarming statistics compiled by the Bureau of Justice School Crime and Safety Division: 1 out of 4 kids is bullied. 1 out of 5 kids admits to be a bully. Almost half of all students say they know another student who is capable of murder. Playground statistic: Every 7 minutes a child is bullied: Adult intervention - 4%, Peer interven-

tion - 11%, No intervention - 85%.

If your children are victims of bullying they may be too embarrassed to tell you. Physical signs to look for include: cuts, bruises, torn clothing, headaches and/or stomach pains before school, always losing money, and expressing fear or anger. If the abuse is verbal, as a parent you can confront the parent of the bully directly. However, if the abuse turns violent, it is best to notify the school anonymously. Chances are the school is aware of the situation and the bully has other victims. Knowing that your child was the one who "told" will only bring him more potential harm.

Edna and I talked a long time about our lives, school memories, and how being bullied had affected her. I was relieved to hear that she had not been scarred for life because of the way she had been treated at school. When she got to college, Edna had met others who had also been bullied, but unlike Edna they never got over the humiliation. Edna reminded me that she had attacked her main protagonist head-on in front of the entire class. She had faced her worst enemy and came out the victor. And she still doesn't shave her legs. Good for you, Edna. ☆

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