

LIKE COLD STEEL ...

Speak out for those who cannot speak,
for the rights of all of the destitute.
Speak out, judge righteously,
defend the rights of the poor and needy.
Proverbs 31:8-9

Alison was a first grader, tall, strong, smart, and kind. On the playground at her school, there lurked a second grade bully, whose favorite recess pastime was to terrorize kindergartners, bending their fingers back until the children cried out in pain. At dinner, Alison told us about this older, bigger boy, who terrified the youngest children. The children huddled behind Alison for protection. That day, the bully made a serious miscalculation - he grabbed Alison's fingers, intending to bend them back. We asked, "Then, what happened?" Extending both her hands as upturned open claws, she replied, "Like cold steel!" Instead of being victimized, she curled the boy's fingers in her closed fist. He cried for mercy and Alison released him, extracting a promise that he would never again terrorize the kindergartners. And, he didn't! Alison had an early experience with standing up for those most vulnerable.

In *The Bully, the Bullied, and the Bystander*, Barbara Coloroso asserts that it takes those three roles to perpetuate bullying. The bully is the one who uses superior physical strength, age, or power to terrorize another. The bullied is the one who is threatened and intimidated. The bystander is one who sees what is going on, but watches, turns away, or actually participates. Coloroso contends that the roles are fluid: the bullied can become the bully or vice versa, the bystander can become either of the other two roles. Bullying is not "normal childhood behavior." Individuals do not outgrow bullying or being bullied. Bullies grow up to bully others, with higher stakes. They leave lifelong scars on all who are directly impacted or who live in fear that it will happen to them.

Remember your childhood. Who were the bullies? Who were the bullied? Who were those who simply stood by and watched. Who were the defenders, the ones who spoke out, the ones who were the witnesses? Witnesses - this is where the resolution of bullying lies, when bystanders are transformed by their courage, their values, their belief that adults will help, their awareness that they can make a difference. These are the kids who stand up and invite the one who is being bullied to come and sit at their table for lunch, who tell the bus driver that someone is being bullied, who get the playground monitor to come and help, who tell their parents, trusting that they will do something. In loud, clear voices, they announce, "Stop that!", "That is not cool", "That is not okay." They "speak out" and "defend the rights of the poor and needy."

So how can we, as the adults who love kids, make a difference?

- Be the tellable parent. Make time to listen. Take your child's stories seriously.
- Act. Don't just say, "That is too bad." Get other adults involved in resolving conflict.
- Let your home be a safe haven, a sanctuary, where all are treated with love and respect, where bullying isn't allowed. Many kids who are bullies learn it at home by observing how adults treat one another or how adults treat the kids or how adults allow bigger kids to treat the younger ones.
- Mention stories you hear about bullying and ask your child if that goes on at their school.
- Explore ways to stop the cycle of bullying. Ask, "Who could you turn to for help, if you are at school, on the bus, at the park, or at a friend's house?" Role play effective ways to enlist help.
- Catch your kids being kind to others, especially to those who are new, different, or vulnerable. Tell your child how proud you are of the way they live out their faith.
- Remind your family that Jesus calls us to love our neighbors, all of God's family, including the ones who are hard to love, just as we ourselves want to be treated. Then, catch your kids doing just that!
- Read a book or watch a movie in which a person has the courage of their convictions to stand up to bullying, to be a witness.

Jesus announces to his followers that they will be given the power of the Holy Spirit ... "and then you will be my witnesses." Acts 1:8 May each of you raise up children of God, who protect the most vulnerable ... like cold steel!

FAMILY ACTIVITIES

1. Tell your child a story about your childhood experience with bullying. What did you see? What did you do? What do you wish you had done? Who were those you could turn to for help? To whom do you wish you could have turned?
2. Share the concept of "the bully," "the bullied," and "the bystander." Encourage your child to end this cycle by becoming a "witness," one who speaks bravely, gets help, and never turns away or participates.
3. Be the parent to whom your child can tell what is really going on in their lives. Listen to your child and their friends. When your child comes to you with an incident of bullying from school or a sports team, the bus or a park, classroom or a social media post, listen carefully, take it seriously, act on it.
4. Point out incidents of those who are witnesses - in your life, in the news, in history. If your children become witnesses, let them know how proud you are of them.
5. Get your school, community, and faith community involved in "speak(ing) out for those who cannot speak." Let your kids know that we do this because God calls us to care for all in our world.