# Bullying: How Faith Communities Can Respond

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*A 12 year-old girl I know is being humiliated on Twitter by a girl from her school. The girl tweeted an embarrassing comment about my friend and a boy from their school. It's a common experience for youth to be embarrassed about early experiences in relationships and dating. What raised this to a different level is that the embarrassing comment was re-tweeted by other classmates until it spiraled into tears of hurt and humiliation for my young friend in a matter of a couple hours. And it happened entirely beyond the realm of adult supervision.*

As a parent or youth leader, you probably have similar stories to tell. YouTube is filled with videos that depict countless situations of bullying. Tragically, some of these stories are about young people who decided that taking their own lives would be a better option than enduring the pain and humiliation of being bullied.

Bullying amongst teenagers is not a new problem. What is different today is that teens can no longer escape the pressure of bullies. In our online, socially-networked, 24/7 world, kids are not free of the bully when they leave school or get off the bus. Text messages, tweets, and Facebook taunts can follow them into the once-safe confines of their homes and bedrooms. Kids today cannot escape the aggression of their peers, even in the places that are supposed to provide them with comfort and security.

Today's social networking mediums are particularly troubling in relation to bullying because they have the effect of putting aggressive statements out to a wide number of people instantaneously and often anonymously. It goes beyond simply having one's feelings hurt by a mean comment, to having that exchange occur in a public forum where others can retweet, comment, "like," forward, and link. It's a forum from which you *can* walk away—you can block someone on Facebook, you can ignore the Twitter-feed, you can turn off the computer—but the hurtful or embarrassing message is still out there for others to see. Cyberbullying does not end when the victim walks away.

## Definition and Causes of Bullying

The first step in responding to bullying is understanding it's definition. Bullying is unwanted, aggressive behavior among school aged children that involves a real or perceived power imbalance. The behavior is repeated, or has the potential to be repeated, over time. Both kids who are bullied and who bully others may have serious, lasting problems. Bullying includes actions such as making threats, spreading rumors, attacking someone physically or verbally, and excluding someone from a group on purpose.[1]

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1. Adapted from stopbullying.gov. Accessed May 11, 2012.

Kids bully other kids for a variety of reasons. According to the US Department of Health and Human Services, in many situations, children and teens bully others in order to fit in. Other times something serious is going on in their lives—stress, abuse, or problems at home. They may have been bullied themselves and now find they are in a position to wield the kind of power that was (or is) used against them. Children who bully can be well-connected and show leadership. This type tends to be concerned about their popularity. Other children who bully are isolated and may have low self-esteem. They may not be skilled in empathizing with others. Children are more likely to be bullies themselves if they:

- are aggressive or easily frustrated,
- have less parental involvement,
- think badly of others,
- have difficulty following rules,
- view violence in a positive way, or
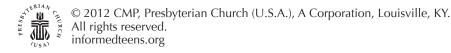- have friends who bully others.[2]

## The Importance of Community

Many resources are available to help schools, churches, parents, and communities respond to bullying behavior. There are protocols for adults to intervene in situations where bullying occurs. There are recommendations for kids that range from befriending a child who is being bullied, to talking to a trusted adult, to helping the bullied person get away from the situation. At the root of all the recommendations is the need for connectedness. The need for community.

Because community is key to preventing bullying, the church can and should lead the anti-bullying campaign. True community is essential to the life of faith and central to how we come to know Jesus. The earliest disciples were called into community with Jesus and one another. The earliest church was founded by sharing things in common, breaking bread and praising God—in short, by being in community. Paul's letters shape the Christian communities of his day so that they might come to know the salvation of Jesus. Because community is central to our identity as followers of Jesus, central even to the way we come to know Jesus, communities of faith can be a powerful force to end bullying.

I am reminded of the story of the disciples on the road to Emmaus in the twenty-fourth chapter of Luke's gospel. The two disciples walking to Emmaus talk about Jesus' death and the rumor they have heard that he is alive. Jesus appears and walks with them, but the disciples do not recognize him. When the three approach the village, Jesus goes on ahead, but the disciples urge him to stay. During dinner, Jesus takes bread, blesses it, breaks it, and gives it to them. Suddenly the disciples' eyes are opened and they recognize him!

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2. stopbullying.gov/at-risk/factors/index.html. Accessed May 11, 2012.

It's amazing how long it takes the disciples to see Jesus. They walk with him, are taught by him, share their grief with him, touch his wounds, break bread with him. Only then do they recognize him. It's no accident that it takes that long. They *needed* all that interaction to truly be with him. So do we. We need to see, share, hear, touch, welcome, and break bread to truly be with Jesus, to truly be in community with him.

Teens have many communities in their lives: school friends, neighbors, teammates, the church family, co-workers, family members, and the list goes on. Teenagers are social creatures. It shouldn't be a surprise to anyone that, with the advent of social media, teens have claimed another significant layer of community in their lives. Though most teens still need permission to leave the house and most responsible parents and caregivers know the whereabouts of their teenage children, young people have a freedom not available to any generation before them: constant contact with their peers, even when they are not together in person. So add the blog roll, the twitter feed, and the many, many Facebook groups to the list of communities in their lives.

Of course, there are positive aspects to all of the technology that's available to the current youth culture. However, if not kept in check, social networking can work against the creation and nurture of strong communities. The online versions teens create of themselves tend only to be partial identities. Online identities allow people to control what goes out for public consumption. One can project an image of who they *want to be* rather than the complicated, multi-faceted people that they actually are. It becomes very easy for teens (and all of us) to forget that the cool, funny, edgy versions of our online friends are not the whole story. With that forgetfulness comes feelings of inadequacy, judgment, and even humiliation. Feelings of depression and resentment, and a sense of not being good enough can easily take over.

Dr. Sherry Turkle, a professor from MIT, studies how people interact with one another. One of the events she observes is the 15 year-old birthday party.[3] According to Dr. Turkle, there has been a change in human behavior over the past ten years.

Ten years ago, in any gathering of 15 year-olds at a birthday party, Turkle says, there was a moment, usually toward the beginning of the party, when things were awkward and almost everyone there wanted to leave. The party hadn't found it's rhythm and no one knew what to do about it. But no one could leave; the guests awkwardly started to figure out how to interact with one another. After another ten minutes, everyone got past the awkwardness and the party was a hit. Now, she says, when that awkward moment arrives, everyone pulls out their cell phone and checks Facebook or plays games. The group never learns how to deal with the initial awkwardness. They don't learn the skills they need to interact with each other.

When teens escape into their smartphones and iPods, they lose the opportunity to learn valuable social skills that they need in the world. These skills help them develop compassion, solve problems, work for compromise, and speak hard truths in love. They

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3. tedxuiuc.com/TEDxUIUC/Talks_Sherry_Turkle.html. Accessed May 11, 2012.

need these skills to create real community and genuine connections. Without these skills they can fail to do the very basic things needed to create community like sharing meals and exchanging stories of what really matters in their lives. They don't connect to one another in deep and meaningful ways. They don't see and share and hear and touch and welcome. All those things that led the disciples to be able to recognize Jesus was among them. All things that we might do to see God's love made flesh in one another. All things that we do to be in true community.

The failure to create and sustain community and connectedness creates fertile ground for bullying.

## Helping Teens Connect in Meaningful Ways

As parents and youth leaders, God calls us to be connected with teens in healthy, meaningful ways as we facilitate Christian community. As Christ's body, we are called to communicate the grace and welcome of God. We are called to create bonds that communicate hope to youth who despair, who are lonely, who have not found their place, who are bullied by their peers, or who bully others. We are called to go out of our way to show teens they are loved by God and others.

There are kids in our congregations who are hurting, who are feeling isolated and lonely and fearful and rejected. Kids who won't be themselves among their peers because they're afraid. They are looking around for someone that they can trust, someone that will welcome them just as they are.

There are kids in our congregations who bully others because they feel isolated, because they are hurting, because they have not been taught empathy.

Our call is to show all youth that Jesus is present in our communities and that Jesus wants to connect with them. Jesus may be hard to see at first—the disciples were actually with him on the road and didn't see him. Jesus is in the flesh in our church communities and he is just waiting to connect with us.

How does Jesus take on flesh here and now? What does that look like?
- Jesus looks like youth leaders who take time each week to provide opportunities for fellowship, mission, prayer and study.
- Jesus looks like youth leaders who create safe and welcoming environments by declaring church activities to be bully-free zones—and coach youth on the language they use and the ways they can welcome each other.
- Jesus looks like the pastors who talk with young people about the causes and consequences of bullying and the congregations who create initiatives against bullying.
- Jesus looks like youth leaders who show up week after week to listen to young people and who are trained in ways to detect bullying and support efforts to end the bullying behavior.
- Jesus looks like the congregations who want young people to know that the good news of God's grace and love are for them.

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- Jesus looks like parents, caregivers, Sunday school teachers, mentors, basketball coaches, choir directors, and any adult who will listen without judgment, provide comfort and counsel, and help youth feel connected to the community of faith.
- Jesus looks like the youth in our congregations when they are encouraged to welcome, to share meals, to listen, to be honest, to care for one another. When they are called to be Jesus for the people sitting next to them in the pews.
- Jesus looks like congregation members who reach out into their communities to share the good news of Jesus Christ and care for all of the young people in their area regardless of racial/ethnic background, socio-economic status, or sexual orientation.

## The Promise of Our Easter Faith

The promise of our Easter faith is that Jesus is here.
He's here with arms open wide in welcome.
He's here to comfort.
He's here to connect us.
He's here to save.
He is here in each one of us as we see, welcome, share, listen, teach, and create community with the youth who grace our lives.

As a community of Jesus Christ, let's join together in taking the lead to respond to the problem of bullying in our communities. Let's not stand by as young people like my 12-year-old friend struggle to navigate the pain and humiliation that comes with bullying. Instead, let's spread the love of Jesus Christ in our broken world as we teach our young people how to live in Christian community.

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## For More Information

Visit these websites to learn more about the issue of bullying and ways that you and your congregation can respond:
stopbullying.gov
pacer.org/bullying
stompoutbullying.org
thetrevorproject.org
educationworld.com/a_special/bully.shtml

## Available Lesson Plans at Informedteens.org

"Bullying: Thou Shalt Not Bully"
"Bullying: Speak Up"
"Bullying: Church as Safe Place"