

# A Sane, Effective, Torah Approach to Bullying

Izzy Kalman, MS

## **Are schools to blame for bullying?**

As Jews, we like to think that our kids are nicer and better behaved than those of our Gentile neighbors, and that our schools do not have the kinds of problems that plague public schools. While this may be true regarding serious physical violence, when it comes to bullying we seem to be no better off. Bullying is a problem that Jewish schools, including Chabad yeshivos,

are struggling to solve. One only need read the comments to articles in online Chabad publications to see how rampant it is. Yeshivos, which depend upon tuition for survival and hate losing a single student from the path of Yiddishkeit, sometimes find themselves facing angry parents threatening to send their kids to a public school because they continue to be bullied.

If you find yourself

blaming your kids' schools for failing to make them stop being bullied, I would like to come to the schools' defense. The frequently heard complaint, "*My child is being bullied and the school is doing nothing to make it stop,*" is almost always wrong. In fact, the harder schools try to make bullying stop, the worse it is likely to become.

Yeshivos strive to base their policies on Torah, on eternal Jewish values, but

also seek to incorporate the best trends from the world of secular education.

Unfortunately, not everything that comes out of the secular universities turns out to be in children's best interests.

One thing yeshivos have almost universally embraced is the modern field of bullying psychology. This field has spawned the anti-bullying movement, which very well may be the most popular



Izzy Kalman shows children (and adults) how not to respond to people who are mean to them.

social movement in history. It promotes the premises that kids have a right to go to school without being bullied and that it is the school's responsibility to guarantee them a bully-free environment. These ideas sound so obvious, so true, that few people, including the school administrators who are responsible for turning this Utopian ideal into reality, question their validity. Then they find themselves in the dilemma of facing parents who feel totally justified in blaming the school when their kids are bullied.

### **LAWS THAT SET SCHOOLS UP FOR FAILURE**

The Talmud teaches that we should not pass a law that most people cannot comply with because it sets them up for failure, turning the

majority of the population into lawbreakers.

Research studies have been finding repeatedly and unequivocally that the most highly revered anti-bullying programs, created by the world's most respected academic bullying experts, have dismal success rates. They rarely result in more than a minor reduction in bullying and often lead to an increase. In 2014, a major study conducted by the University of Texas at Arlington discovered that students who attend schools with anti-bullying programs are more likely to be bullied than students who attend schools without such programs!

Despite the fact that bullying experts discover their programs are essentially worthless, they engage in lobbying to get governments to pass anti-bullying

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laws that require schools to implement their ineffective prescriptions. These laws set schools up for failure, as the harder they try to comply with them the worse the problem is likely to become. Never in history has there been so much tension between parents and schools due to anti-bullying laws. How are schools supposed to be responsible for getting rid of bullying if the leading experts don't know

how to do it?

Certainly, you may expect, the academic bullying experts have interventions up their sleeves that are better than what we do with our own children or with our fellow adults. The truth is that they don't. They instruct the schools to implement more-or-less the same ineffective interventions we take at home: to tell kids they should be nice to each other all the time; to teach them that

This sidebar is not meant to provide a comprehensive solution to bullying. It is a simple version of the procedure I use to teach kids how to solve the most common form of bullying: insults. Many parents have succeeded in helping their kids by doing this exercise with them. You can do it with your kids, too, even if it's just to help them deal with their siblings at home.

First of all, it is helpful to stop thinking in terms of bullies and victims. It is more helpful to think in terms of winners and losers. The so-called bullies are winning, which is why they feel great, and the victims are losing, which is why they feel miserable. It also helps to think in terms of friends and enemies rather than bullies and victims. It is obvious that the apparent bullies are treating their victims like enemies. What isn't obvious is that the victims are treating their perceived bullies as enemies. We cannot treat people like enemies and expect them to treat us like friends.

Try the following procedure. Tell your student, "I am going to play a game with you. Your job is to call me an

idiot and my job is to stop you. But don't let me stop you or I win and you lose. Don't worry about hurting my feelings. It is only a game."

It should go something like this:

**Child:** You are an idiot!

**Adult:** No, I am not!

**Child:** Yes, you are!

**Adult:** No, I am not! You have no right to call me an idiot!

**Child:** You are an idiot!

**Adult:** Shut your mouth already! I am not an idiot!

**Child:** Yes, you are. Ha ha ha ha ha! Idiot, idiot, idiot!

**Adult:** Stop it already! I am not an idiot!

Keep this going for a little longer, until it is clear that the child isn't stopping, and is having a great time. Then say, "I give up. You win. So if you want to call me an idiot, can I make you stop?" The child will say, "No."

Then say, "We're going to play again. Call me idiot and don't let me stop you." This time, treat the child like a friend and make it clear it's okay for them to insult you all they want. It should go something like the following:

bullying causes everlasting harm so they shouldn't do it to anyone; to decide that we should have no tolerance for bullying and step in to stop it as soon as it begins; to constantly supervise our children; to instruct kids that they must inform us whenever another child is mean to them; and to investigate every bullying complaint and punish ("administer consequences to") the bully. Parents routinely do these very same things, yet their kids continue to torment each other. Is it any wonder that when schools do them, the bullying continues?

Let's look at the issue in a different way. There is a good chance you have more than one child. Perhaps Hashem blessed you with a whole tribe! If so, how do they get along? Are they always nice to each other? There is a good chance you

have at least a couple of kids who are constantly tormenting each other and all your efforts to make them stop aren't working. If two parents can't get their own two children to constantly be nice to each other, how can

we expect a teacher, who may have two *dozen* students or more, get the kids to always be nice?

### **ARE ADULTS ANY BETTER?**

Furthermore, are adults

always nice to one another? Many if not most of us have a spouse or sibling or someone at work who sometimes makes us miserable. If we adults don't know how to get everyone to be nice to us, how can we expect our children,



Izzy Kalman shows educators how to help victims of bullying.

**Child:** You are an idiot!

**Adult:** Oh, so you think I'm an idiot?

**Child:** Yes!

**Adult:** You know, I do dumb things just about every day.

**Child:** You do?

**Adult:** Haven't you noticed?

**Child:** I guess so. So you really are an idiot?

**Adult:** Sure, sometimes.

You should find that very quickly your student runs out of steam and stops calling you an idiot. Ask, "Who won this time?" The child is likely to say, "You did." Then explain, "It's only fun to insult me when I get upset and try to stop you. And that's why your classmates are insulting you over and over again. It's because when you get upset, they have fun. So let them do it all they want, respond as I showed you, and you'll see that after a few days they give up."

What if the insults are about something obviously true, and it bothers the child? One of the most common situations is for an overweight child to be called fatso. How can your child deal with it? The very same way. Your child thinks they're being called fatso because they're overweight. But that's only an illusion. The real reason they're getting called fatso is because they are getting upset when they are called fatso.

You can demonstrate as follows. Say, "Let's say I'm overweight. I want you to call me fatso and don't let me stop you":

**Child:** You are a fatso!

**Adult:** No, I'm not!

**Child:** Yes, you are! If you were Yonah, you would have swallowed the whale!

**Adult:** Shut your mouth! I am not fat! I am big-boned!

**Child:** No, you're not! You are fat, fat, fat!

**Adult:** Stop it! You have no right to call me fat!

**Child:** But I'm only telling the truth. Everyone knows you're fat. Why can't you admit it?

**Adult:** Because I'm not fat! I'm only a little overweight!

Let this go on for a while, till it's obvious that you can't make the child stop. Ask, "So if you want to call me fatso, can I make you stop?" Your student will say, "No." Then say, "Call me fatso again and don't let me stop you."

**Child:** You are a fatso!

**Adult:** How do you stay so thin?

**Child:** Simple. I don't eat too much.

**Adult:** You think I eat too much?

**Child:** Of course!

**Adult:** Thanks for letting me know. Perhaps I can cut down.

**Child:** It's about time you realized you eat too much.

**Adult:** Better late than never.

**Child:** That's right.

You will see that it fizzles out very quickly. Then explain to your child or student that if they stop getting upset when they are called fat, and instead treat their insulters like friends, the insulters will have no fun and will quickly stop doing it.

who have had far fewer years of socialization and Torah study and are driven by primitive biological impulses, to always be nice to each other?

### **WHY AREN'T THE POPULAR ANTI-BULLYING PROGRAMS WORKING?**

There are many reasons the popular bullying prevention programs have limited results, and explaining them all is beyond the scope of this article. But perhaps the main reason is that they instruct kids to report to the school authorities whenever other kids are mean to them. This often earns them a reputation

as a snitch, and then the other kids feel they have a *truly* valid reason to hate them.

This instruction to report to adults so we can save them leads to the well-known psychological phenomenon called *triangulation*: When we get in the middle trying to rescue apparent victims from apparent persecutors, we make them hate each other even more; at least one of them hates us as well; and we prevent them from solving their problems with each other.

Another reason is that the anti-bullying lessons kids are getting are a double-edged sword. They are being taught that they should always be

nice to each other, and that being mean to other kids can hurt them forever. Some kids will, indeed, take these messages to heart and will try to act nicer. However, the other message they get is, "*No one is allowed to be mean to me. It's horrible! It can cause me irreparable harm.*" So when they are treated badly, they are *more* likely to get upset. And when they get upset, the bullying against them intensifies.

### **SO IS THERE A SOLUTION THAT ACTUALLY WORKS?**

Fortunately, the answer is yes, and it is not new. The

Torah has been teaching us all along to listen, really listen, to what others are saying, and not to dissolve into anger even when insulted. We can learn to use our brains and our own capacity for self-control to understand and solve this life-problem and other life-problems. In fact, many people who have learned to deal with issues this way tell me, "I now use what I learned from you [about preventing bullying] in other areas of my life too. My marriage is better. My kids are easier to live with. And when I see my kids copying me in their dealings with each other, I know I've given them a real gift that will

help them throughout their lives.” [To see Izzy Kalman’s method in action, go to nsheichabadnewsletter.com home page and watch a three-minute video entitled “The Idiot Game.” -Ed.]

Trying to protect kids from each other and teaching them how terrible bullying is does not promote wisdom, success, or popularity— it promotes helplessness! Of course, there is nothing wrong with teaching kids to be nice. It is the basis of good relationships and a happy life. And we are constantly doing it at home and in school. But there is something missing from this education, and this missing element is the crux of the problem, causing bullying to continue.

It is easy to be nice to people who are nice to us. That comes naturally to us. What we need to know is, “What should I do when people are *mean* to me?” And this is the area in which the typical anti-bullying programs fail. It is, by the way, also why adults can have difficulty in their relationships.

The wisdom for dealing with bullying can be most concisely expressed as the Golden Rule: *Ve’ahavta lereyacha kamocha*. We may think we know what this principle comes to teach us, but most of us don’t. We tend to think it means that it is important to be nice to people. But we don’t need it for such an obvious message. What we truly need it for is to instruct us how to handle people when they are *mean* to us—when they treat us like *enemies*. After all, *reyacha*, your fellow human being, is not always nice. People are

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**Izzy Kalman says, “Teaching tolerance has become very important in schools, especially since Columbine. This is how schools are teaching tolerance today: It is very important to be completely tolerant of everyone. And if anyone shows you any kind of intolerance, we will have no tolerance for them!”**

not *malachim*, programmed by Hashem to do only good things, and few are *tzaddikim*. Sometimes people treat us like an enemy.

How should we respond to them? And the answer is, *like a friend*, because we want to be treated like a friend.

Our natural animalistic inclination is to respond with *reciprocity*. Reciprocity means treating the other person the way they treat us. If you do some introspection, you should notice that when people are nice to you, you feel like being nice back. On the other hand, when they are mean to you, you feel like being mean back. We are all like that. It is our default biological programming. In the dog-eat-dog world of nature it works well.

However, we are supposed to be civilized, not natural. As Jews and especially as Jews who learn *Tanya*, we are taught that we can rise above

our natural impulses: *Moach shalit al halev*. The mind can control the heart.

#### **BRAIN VS. EMOTION**

When we let the heart control the mind, we live by reciprocity and we put the other person in control of our relationship with them. If they’re nice to us, we are nice back and are friends. But when they’re mean to us, we are mean back, and they are likely to be even meaner. We may get into a never-ending, intensifying spiral of meanness, with each of us being certain we are the good guy and the other is the bad guy.

*Ve’ahavta lereyacha kamocha*—treating people nicely even when they are mean to us—puts *us* in control. We use reciprocity to our benefit. The other person is also programmed for reciprocity. So if we are nice to them when they are mean to us, they are more likely to

respond by being nice. If we do this consistently, within a short amount of time they are almost certain to stop being mean to us, and we can become friends.

Being nice doesn’t mean we have to let them do whatever they want. Of course, as parents, teachers, colleagues, and classmates, we need to try to stop them from doing bad things to us. But we do it nicely, without hostility, like we’re dealing with a friend.

One of my favorite sayings of the Rebbe’s, one that I almost always mention at my secular seminars and is in my seminar manuals is, “Love criticism; it will bring you to your highest level.” This can certainly be applied to insults, which can be treated as a form of criticism.

Thanks to my work as a school psychologist and counselor, I have been blessed by Hashem with the *zchus* to clearly see the dynamics of bullying and to develop a comprehensive yet simple, fun, easy to learn and effective approach for both individuals and schools. I call it the *Bullies to Buddies Golden Rule System*. I have taught it to thousands of other mental health professionals and educators, and people are getting unprecedented results.

This approach is based on the true morality of *Ve’ahavta lereyacha kamocha* rather than the illusory knee-jerk morality of *bullying will not be tolerated*; *we must take the side of the weak against the strong*. The highest morality is to equip kids to deal with bullying on their own, by teaching them how to treat their perceived enemies



At a farbrengen held Motzoei Shabbos, Jan. 3, 2015, at which the Chabad Israeli Center of Staten Island wished the Kalmans well on their move to Eretz Yisroel. Standing: Izzy with Shliach Rabbi Nachman Segal.

like friends. Bullying goes on throughout life, and the sooner people learn to respond effectively, the better the rest of their lives will be.

### **CAN HELL REALLY BECOME HEAVEN?**

In recent years, I have been blessed with the opportunity to treat several students from Chabad schools. Within a short amount of time, I was able to quickly empower all of them with the skills to deal with bullying on their own. One of these kids, in fact, was one of the most serious bullying victims I have ever encountered.

A teenage student in a residential yeshivah, he had been bullied since the age of five. Now he was being bullied 24/7, all week long. He couldn't pay attention in class, and he told me, "School is a living hell for me." When

his parents contacted me, he had stopped going to school altogether. Over the phone, I taught him how to handle the bullying, and when he finally got the courage to go back to yeshivah, he couldn't believe how quickly his hell turned into heaven. His difficulty paying attention in school immediately vanished and he was finally able to succeed at and even enjoy learning.

The problem of bullying can be devastating. But that doesn't mean the solution is difficult. There is no reason any intelligent kid needs to suffer from being a bullying victim. Generally, it only takes a few sessions in person or by phone to learn the techniques, which are fun and make the bullying dynamics easy to grasp. As a byproduct, the child grows in self-esteem and self-confidence, resilience and emotional maturity,



Izzy Kalman with his family, L-R: Yannai, Izzy, Lola, Miriam and Ayala.

benefits that last a lifetime.

Children deserve to be given strength, wisdom and skills to solve their interpersonal problems, not to be

protected from them. You can't follow them around their whole lives punishing anyone who insults them, can you? ■

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