

It's good to see our schools are taking a stand against bullies, although I hope it consists of a little bit more than making children lie down in the grass and spelling out the campaign slogan. I'm not convinced that making children pretend to be letters will change anything.

In my day you never complained about bullies for a number of reasons. Firstly, we were never entirely sure what being bullied was. Sometimes I got called names, sometimes - for no reason I could fathom - my friends would not talk to me and sometimes my classmates would make fun of my family or friends.

Secondly, we were never sure that complaining would do any good. Did we expect our teachers to come and sit on the steps after school, and force people to let us join in? In any case, some of our teachers were bullies themselves. They introduced random rules and humiliated the poor person they decided would fall foul of them on that day.

Thirdly, I suppose we thought it was something we should be able to work out for ourselves. If my classmates regarded me as a waste of space, surely grassing them up would only make me a teacher's pet, pathetic and even less desirable as part of their gang?

Finally- and whisper this - it wasn't actually that bad. Sure, no-one likes to be excluded or laughed at, but it seemed to be part of growing up.

I was even known to bully others in my day. Not something to be proud of, I know, but true nonetheless. If Catherine decided one day to pick on Jackie, then it was much easier to join in the torture than to risk being on the receiving end. There were one or two characters (who I now realise to be the ringleaders) who could pretty much make any of us do what they liked. The only thing that most of us wanted was to be part of the gang, and to wallow in the inner circle

that surrounded our leader. She was charming, bright, liked by parents and teachers, and used it to her full advantage.

As an adult, when I watch children interact, it can be quite shocking how selfish and nasty they can be to each other. When they are young and play within earshot, you step in if it goes too far, but intuitively it seems like they need to go through some sort of give and take with each other as part of learning to be a social animal.

But this isn't this kind of behaviour that teachers and parents are concerned about now. It's a different level; more than just children being children. A nastier element has been introduced into the picture. Campaigns against individuals are lasting weeks and months, actual physical violence is being used and mobile phones and internet chat rooms allow bullies to raise the raise the torture to a new level.

Why do you think children are treating others in this way? It's summer so we are being treated to another new series of Big Brother; Gordon Ramsay is after incompetent restaurateurs, Trinny & Susannah are sorting out women's outfits, Alan Sugar is firing people and Britain is being told quite bluntly that it does not have talent.

Arguably, Simon Cowell is not a bully; contestants are putting themselves forward and he is simply being honest with them. Of course if performers and business executives want to develop a career, they do need honest feedback, but should it be for our entertainment? Is allowing us all to watch them make mistakes and then sit while they squirm at the criticism turning us into a nation of bullies by proxy? Is it any wonder that youngsters tolerate a different level of behaviour in themselves and in others?

Campaigns are all very well, but we need to look at the role models our children have, and speak out against the bullies. We need to teach youngsters not just about acceptable behaviour, but about tolerance and empathy for others. Anything else is just a sticking plaster.

© Karen Ray 2008