

Everything I Didn't Need to Know About Bullying  
I Learned From the Movies – Natasha Deen

Bullying, for me, is this definition: someone who uses the gap in power/authority to push his will on someone weaker. I applaud Hollywood for trying to address the issue, and I'm up for the under-dog-wins finish as much as the next girl (I did the fist pump when Ralph Macchio finally kicked the bully's butt in *The Karate Kid*), but some of their solutions are laughable, and if implemented, dangerous:

**Fight back:** Listen, Ralph Macchio may have lucked out when it came to finding a martial arts master to teach him the ways to defeat his bully, but honestly, as hard as I looked when I was being bullied, I never found a random handyman who knew the secret hand jab that can kill a person. And let's face it, bullies know how to fight. Unless we're willing to spend years finding pier posts on which our kid can practice his crane kick, we're not really helping, are we? Violence, said Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., begets more violence, and he's right. Gone are the days of hitting a kid to prove a point. Your child hits, this kid will come back with a gun. It's an escalating ride of violence and its only end is tragedy.

**The Mouthy Smack Down:** I cheered when Matt Damon's character in *Good Will Hunting* ripped apart the snotty kid in the bar scene, but again, is verbal confrontation the way to go? In high school, I had a friend who was being tormented for being gay. In a fit of anger, after having one too many football players yell, "Hey, are you gay? Hey, are you a fag?" tossed at him, my friend yelled back, "Why? Are you looking for a date?" Hands down, the *funniest* comeback I'd heard, but the line didn't get him any peace. It did get him five guys from the defensive end chasing him down the hallways. The only thing that saved him? The ring leader's girlfriend happened to be there and threatened—*ahem*—to withhold her affections should they do anything to my friend.

**The Kindly Parent/The Take Charge Teacher:** I miss being nine. When I was in elementary, all the after-school specials taught me that if I went to a teacher or a parent if I was being bullied, they would help me (and, if I went to the right adult, as soon as I poured my heart out, soft violin music would play in the background and the scenery would take on a soft, lustrous effect). Fast forward to junior high and I'm being bullied. I go to my teachers and parents whose sage advice is "Ignore it. They're just words." Wow. Nothing like platitudes to really make a kid feel both worthless and helpless. If they were "just words" we wouldn't have a term for it (mental abuse) would we? Words hurt and they hurt more than fists because no one sees your bruises and no one can see your pain. Teachers and parents need to step up and stop with the empty platitudes. So, what are parents to do?

For parents, the first thing to do is put yourself in your kid's position. Sure, her friend telling her she's fat may seem easily solved ("She's not your friend. Find someone

new.”), but this is school and school has its hierarchies and rules. It’s not so easy to find someone else. When you’re a kid, the world is as big as your school. Your life begins and ends with the bell. So. What can parents do?

**Find her a port in the storm:** If she can go home for lunch, let her. If she can’t, then talk to the school about getting her library/classroom privileges. There’s *nothing* more soul-searing than being stuck in the cafeteria when no one wants to be with you. Find some way to give her some break time during the day. Think of the bullies as a radio that’s constantly squawking in her ears. Find a way to give her some silence.

**Get her help:** Yes, we all have soft visions of our child pouring their secrets out to us, but let’s be honest: sometimes it’s hard for kids to verbalize what’s going on to their parents. There are a lot of therapists who specialize in bullying. Find someone who can help her cope. Other options include the National Bullying Prevention Center: 1-800537-2237 or, in Canada, The Kids Help Line: 1-800-668-6868. It’s anonymous, free, and available twenty-four hours a day. Another great option: find an adult that you both trust, one who was also bullied and have that person mentor your child. There’s nothing quite as comforting to a kid who’s being bullied as knowing there are adults in her life who went through it, and not only survived, but thrived. Sure, with all these options, she’s talking to others and not talking to you, but at least she’s *talking*. And if she’s doing that, then she’s got an outlet and resources.

**Be innovative.** During my grade nine year and into high school, my mother made me a deal: as long as I kept my marks up, I could have one day off from school where I didn’t have to be sick. A free day. It was genius. We all know kids’ grades can suffer when they’re being bullied. Now, I had a reason to stick through and keep my marks up. Second, it brought an added layer of honesty to my relationship with my mother. I didn’t have to lie about being sick. I could be honest and say, “I don’t want to go to school today.” And let me tell you, being home, in the quiet and the safety of my parents’ house meant I could study and learn in peace. The added benefit was that it helped me be a self-learner, which as I got older, was an added advantage in life.

**Be present:** That means, take away the smart phone and give her a regular phone. I have no idea what this generation’s compulsion is with checking their status on Facebook, but when you’re being bullied, it’s dangerous. If your child can’t tag out, then step in and tag out for her. Also, keep the family computer in a central area. This helps on two levels: if you’re the kid being bullied, Mom and Dad will see it on the screen. And if your child is tempted to bully, there’s no deterrent quite like a parent walking by and looking over their shoulder.

I’m a writer by trade and have accounts on Facebook so I can connect with fans. You know what I love seeing? When my teenage fans friend me, and their parents are on their friend list. What a great way to be present on the internet. You know what else I really

like? When their parent friends me. Awesome. Fantastic. Parents *should* know who their kids are connecting with on the internet.

Bullying, in my mind, is harder and more brutal today than it was when I was a kid. And the sad thing is sometimes the only solution is to live through it. But if we come together as a community and put safety nets in place for children, then we give them what they need: support, comfort, and a light at the end of a very long, very dark tunnel.

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Natasha Deen graduated from the University of Alberta with a B.A. in psychology. An advocate for vulnerable groups, she's worked with the Alberta provincial government's Children and Youth Services department as well as with non-profit agencies dedicated to helping functionally illiterate adults and differently-abled people. Realizing the power of allegory and myths to affect change in the lives of those around her, she turned to full time writing in 2005. Under the pseudonym Bronwyn Storm, she is a multi-published author with The Wild Rose Press. Her novel, *Ethan's Chase*, was nominated for a 2008 CAPA Award for excellence in romance. When not working on her manuscripts, she is a writing instructor and editor to teens, adults and children, and uses the template of the story to teach conflict resolution, empowerment and the "why" behind human behavior. Natasha is a member of the Writers' Guild of Alberta, the Canadian Authors' Association, the Young Alberta Book Society, and sits on the board of YouthWrite. She is also a co-founder of the Edmonton Writing Group.