

SPOTLIGHT

It is important to empower the child and encourage him/her to stand up for him/herself. Strong comebacks at times work great with bullies; looking them in the eye and telling them you are not scared of them, takes away the power of that bully to hurt you.

Although an eye-for-eye may seem like the best option for the sufferer, be warned that many a times open confrontations might lead to bigger problems. If, however, the bullying takes the form of physical assault, no time should be wasted to take stern actions.

When to lodge an official complaint is also at times a tricky decision. Empowering a child getting bullied is not always enough, but it is also important that the bullies are held accountable for their actions.

Today, it is possible for children who are bullied to go through therapy which will not only boost their morale, but help them find a smooth, amiable solution to the problem. This can have a tremendous positive effect on the child. Stories of one-time bullies becoming good friends is not unheard of!

Another helpful step a parent can take is to try and increase the child's network of friends so that s/he does not feel isolated, which is one of the primary repercussions of being bullied. Building stronger familial bonds among siblings and cousins should also be encouraged.

Bullying can have a long-term negative impact on an individual and prolonged bullying can leave deep scars, some which never heal. It is best to nip it in the bud.

A consolidated effort between parents and school authorities with regular counselling of the children involved and positive reinforcements from all quarters can ensure that the situation does not go out of hand.

It has been a while since Areeba went through that devastating episode. Although she has now been able to build her own circle of friends, Areeba prefers to stay silent regarding the tormenting episode. Even as it seems that Areeba's wounds have healed, yet clearly the scars remain. And the most disheartening aspect of the whole affair — Areeba is probably one of the lucky ones!

THE EVIL THAT IS

Bullying can be termed as the intentional use of force by an individual to intimidate, coerce or abuse another person. It can be carried out in different ways and at different levels of severity. It can be verbal, social, or even physical. From being called names, being teased and humiliated, to being ignored and left out; from having lies being spread about a child to his/her possessions being hidden or forcefully taken; from being threatened and/or intimidated to being pushed around or being harmed physically.

Widely considered a severe violation of child rights, bullying often leaves long term negative impacts. It can severely disrupt the ability to learn and often becomes an impediment for a child reaching his/her full potential.

Children who are bullied at school, coaching centres, or even at the city's last remaining playgrounds suffer from lower self-esteem than their peers who are not. Specialists also note that these individuals

do nurture a feeling of worthlessness. They harbour feelings of exclusion and feel isolated from society.

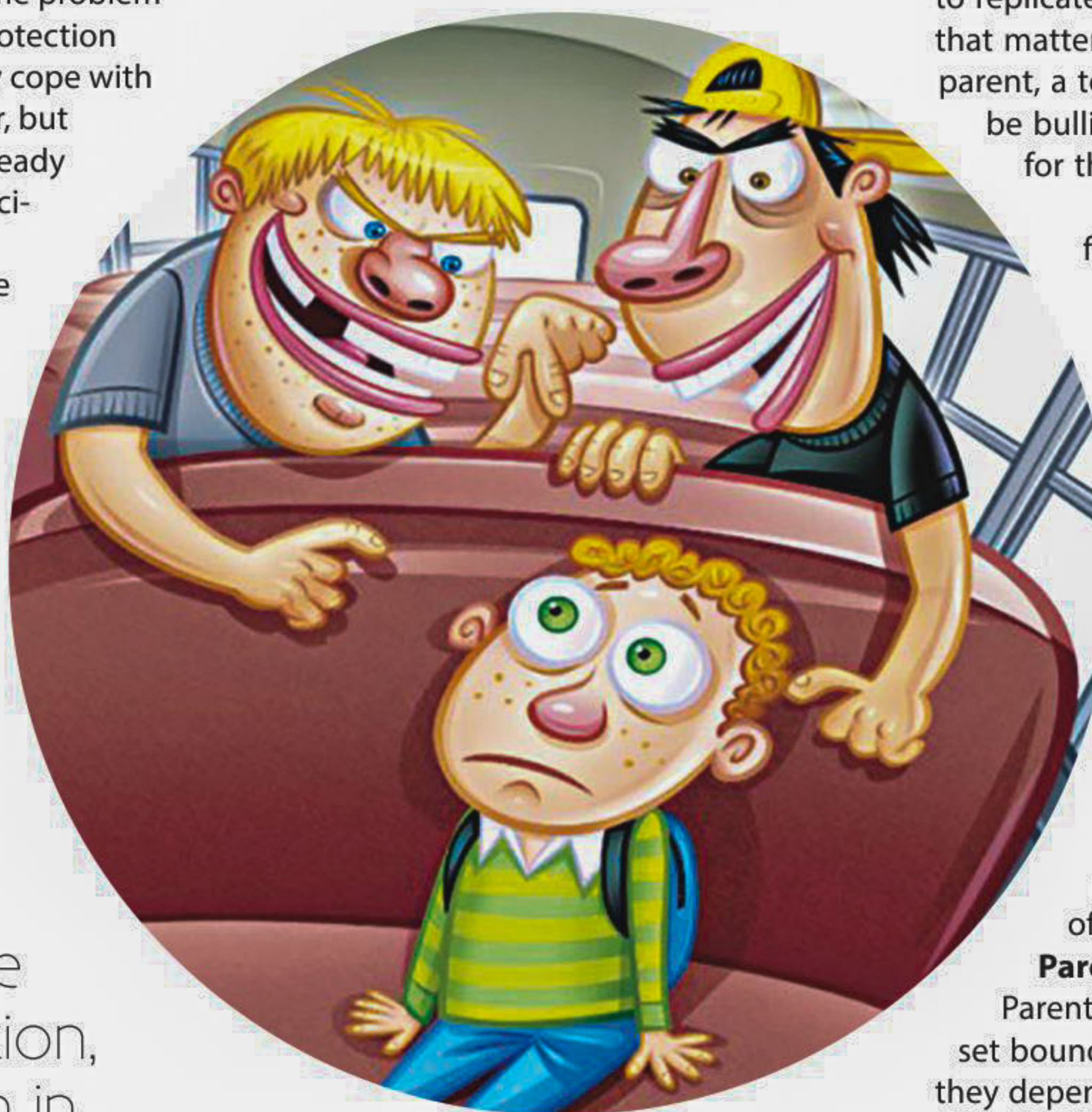
From the point of view of protecting child rights, creating a harassment free environment should definitely be given priority. In public health departments we suffer from what is called double burden of a disease, which is to say, that as an under developed nation, where we are still struggling to address communicable diseases, yet lifestyle issues have already emerged.

We are experiencing the same problem of double burden with child protection issues. As of now we can barely cope with child marriage and child labour, but problems like bullying have already taken a foot hold within our society. We should not and cannot afford to give preference to one childright issue over another, simply because ultimately they are all negatively affecting our children.

Part Two: The silent victims

Laila Khondkar, Director, Child Right Governance and Child Protection, Save the Children in Bangladesh is a well-known expert in this field and she addresses a very relevant but misrepresented aspect of bullying in the current context. She says, "A vital question we need to address is how a child learns to bully? It is essential to remember that children initially learn from adults. They do what we do, not what we tell them to do. If they see misuse of power by a person of authority, or they see parents or teachers mistreating others and not giving them due respect then they learn

from that. So it is of utmost importance that teachers and parents model the behaviour they want to promote."



Amir Abdullah, a soft spoken, shy boy of grade IV, was having a regular school day when some of his peers approached him during Physical Education class, teased Amir, and pulled down his pants. Prior to this incident was a series of other occurrences where he was bullied by this very group.

On investigation it came to light that these boys were serial bullies and picked on other shy children too. Amongst them, one of the boys was identified as the initiator, whereas the others were found to be his followers. The remaining children who watched them bully from afar were recognised as bystanders.

The conclusion that can be drawn from such a scenario is that apart from the victim, all the others are culprits by direct or indirect participation. What most fail to realise is that in every bullying scenario, there are two victims — the child who is being harassed, and the bully himself! We need to understand that at the end of the day, the bullies too are juveniles.

THE PROBLEM

Children abuse others for multiple reasons. Some suffer from low self-esteem; others victims of deep rooted insecurities. Abusive behaviour towards peers often gives abusers a false sense of empowerment and security.

Seeking popularity is another incentive of bullying behaviour, especially for those children who may not be doing well academically and are constantly made to feel bad about that. Learning disabilities and mental health issues can also cause chil-

dren to act out.

There are parents, abusive or overly strict with their children, and others who take no steps to set ground rules. Both extremes often show similar manifestations in the child's behaviour.

Children who are neglected at home and crave attention from parents often lash out at others in an attempt to get noticed.

Many a times a child is bullied at home by older siblings, causing the younger one to replicate this behaviour in school. For that matter, the child's role model — a parent, a teacher or a coach, who may just be bullies themselves set the example for the child to follow.

There can be multiple reasons for someone to turn into a bully. For both parents and teachers such behaviour should be a wake-up call to realise that the child is asking for help.

PREVENTION

The best way to address the topic of bullying is to take adequate steps to ensure that it does not start in the first place. The role of parents can never be undermined; neither can be the role of schools in ensuring the safest environment possible for the healthy growth of their students.

Parental aspect —

Parents need to provide structure, and set boundaries as children grow because they depend on these very rules to set them on the correct path. Explaining to the child that lying, or any sort of name calling, hitting, pushing, or groupism is not acceptable behaviour can yield great results.

Teaching them empathy and talking to them about what it feels like to be bullied can help them realise how wrong this can be.

Communication is key to finding out how a child is behaving in environments outside the home. If complaints from school, or other parents, lead you to suspect that your child is gradually showing signs of being a bully, accepting reality will be the first step towards solving the problem. Denying or belittling these incidents only harms the child in the long run.

Parents should exercise caution, but be careful not to blow it out of proportion. According to Laila Khondkar, they need to start asking some tough questions — Is anyone in the child's home environment being mistreated and are all family members being respected equally? Are conflicts in the family resolved in non-violent ways? Could someone at home be bullying the child?

She believes, "Even though we cannot say with certainty that a child's bullying behaviour always stem from a troubled home environment, we can be sure that there is something lacking in the child's upbringing, which is resulting in such behaviour, and to help the child reach his/her maximum potential we need to rectify it."

Photo: Collected