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How do you solve a problem like exclusion?

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Last week I attended a Joint Oireachtas Committee for Education. I was there to speak on the topic of bullying in childhood in Ireland. I was not alone. There was a number of other experts from the field of child and mental health who were also there to present an opening statement and to answer questions from the panel.

At the meeting, I outlined my definition of bullying behaviour and described it in terms of 'intent', making a distinction between robust banter and bullying behaviour that can occur in all age groups from small children to late teens.

Roughly one in four children will experience bullying in one form or another. This incidence is persistent as children progress to secondary school, although the manner of the bullying behaviour might differ.

As school is so often a mixed bag of personalities you are nearly always going to have friction in the way different children relate. When a clash of these personalities occur, it is important to let each child know that the way in which they are interacting is negatively affecting one of the children and this needs to stop. For example, the child who is the youngest of four might be well used to the rough and tumble of physical play and use of slang or nicknames in the course of their communication, but there may be another child who is the eldest of two who has had no such experiences and may feel utterly uncomfortable with these ways of interacting.

Once this dynamic has been pointed out and addressed, the issue should resolve. However, when it does not resolve and the behaviour continues, this is different. Cue the dimension of intent. If someone is aware that their actions, either verbal or physical are hurting someone else, and they continue the bullying behaviour then a firmer approach is required. There is, of course, the view that 'kids will be kids' and we should let it sort itself out and in minor cases this may be true. However, prolonged exposure to persecution, hostility and verbal abuse can have devastating effects on a child's self-esteem. Around 80% of the young people currently attending my psychotherapy practice have experienced some form of bullying.

But a deeper dive into these presentations suggests

the overt name calling, physical assault or active presence of visible bullying is the thin end of the wedge. These are not the predominant presentations. Instead by far the largest incidence of bullying is described as exclusion.

Left on the sidelines

Exclusion, despite its prevalence, is incredibly difficult for parents, teachers and extra-curricular coaches to address. By the nature of freedom of choice, we cannot insist that children play with or accept other children into their group. The membership of these groups is complex and the politics of who is included and excluded seems to be arbitrary and random.

I have heard of umpteen examples of young people being ousted or excluded from a group or had their loyalty betrayed by a 'close friend' and they have no idea why this happened. The term 'out of the blue' or 'totally random' is commonly used in the description of how this dynamic changed. The manner in which close friendships end almost overnight, without any explanation is truly unfathomable, and although this does occur with boys, it is far more prevalent among girls.

There appears to be a con

temporary culture of disposability that has crept into young people's friendships over the last number of years that, despite much thought and exploration, I fail to understand.

Maybe we can look at what is happening on social media where the concept of 'friend' and 'being friended or unfriended' has changed young people's understanding of friendship. Could it be that friends in their lives have become dispensable?

Perhaps we have a low frustration tolerance compared to previous times. Perhaps the social currency of friendships has become more visible and in a hypercomparative culture a young person is more likely to be ousted if their social capital or popularity is perceived to be low.

Whatever the reason for it, the approaches we have taken to encourage inclusivity, diversity and togetherness, through SPHE curricula and so on is not working. In my experience, the exclusion is getting worse.

Cumulative effect of bullying

So what can parents do about it if their child is a victim of exclusion? The answer is very little. It does not work to approach the group or perthat son and instruct them to reinclude the child in question. To do so could risk further alienation. The school will say they can do no more in terms of encouraging respectful interactions between students, but this does not seem to go far enough. I do not mean we should subcontract all of the responsibility to schools as this seems to be a wider societal problem. But as a parent, to watch your child being upset, lost, isolated and alone, is deeply painful.

With so many avenues and platforms for a child to be visibly excluded, the cumulative effect can be swift and distressing.

Being left out of private Snapchat groups, seeing peers meeting up and sharing photos of them having a good time or the subtle but not so subtle attacks on your child's value by omitting him or her from activities will take its toll. Eventually, the child will conclude that their reason for exclusion has to be something to do with them not being 'enough' and an erosion of their self-belief, self-value and self-worth will begin.

I don't have a neat answer to the collective culture of exclusion. The only advice I can give parents and children is to try to find their worth elsewhere. To avoid changing themselves to 'fit in' and rather try to find an alternative tribe where you can get a sense of 'belonging'. We

cannot control what others do to us, but we can control our reaction and response and taking control of how much we allow something to affect us is the key here. But I am the first to admit that this is easier said than done.

This is a very short list of solutions but it may help to control the erosion of your child's self-belief and selfworth, which is the priority.

Find your tribe

I often explain to young people that sometimes life is like a glass of cordial, the concentrate representing the difficult experiences in our lives and the water being the good or hopeful ones. Sometimes we cannot remove the cordial, so the only solution is to dilute it as best we can with water and so, by maximising the experiences that make them feel good, respected and wanted, they can preserve their self-worth from the toxicity of exclusion.

This can be done through an extracurricular activity where we find our tribe in a different group of people who acknowledge and remind us of our value.

I'm keenly aware this solution is not good enough. There needs to be a way of tackling exclusion in a more systematic way than we are now, and just because it's difficult and complex does not mean we give up trying. Instead, it means we have to try harder.

One of the interim suggestions I made at the Joint Oireachtas Committee was to have more therapeutic support for children in schools to help maintain their selfworth while bullying incidents are being resolved, and I also believe there needs to be a wider look at the societal responsibility of clubs, parents and tech companies to examine the values that espouse so that inclusivity is more than just an altruistic gesture but instead is embedded in the fabric of who we need to be.

I believe that if we are to best support the mental wellbeing of young people in Ireland, then all of us, parents included, need to start by addressing exclusion as a form of bullying.