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## Don't bully the bully



*by Christy Barbee*

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I do not feel sorry for the young people who are accused of harassing young Phoebe Prince to the point where she took her own life. The systematic cruelty they are said to have dealt the 15-year-old South Hadley girl is abominable.

But I do regret the waste that the media glare and the pending court action will likely make of this tragedy. It is hard to imagine that the public condemnation, however satisfying it might be in the short term for those indignant on Phoebe's behalf, will teach the bullies a lesson or provide an instructive example for others. The punishments the judicial process will likely mete out will not serve our schools or our society.

Often, when people (especially young ones) are accused, shamed, and punished, they rationalize their actions. Some even come to think of themselves as victims.

So what would serve?

Barbara Coloroso, a widely known expert on bullying who has worked with schools all over the country, says that the only approach that works with those who have bullied is restorative justice, with the perpetrator being held to account, meeting with the target and hearing what that person has experienced. In most restorative processes, the victim, the person who hurt him, and others who support them agree to a plan of action in which the bully repairs or makes up for the harms. Rather than condemning the bully, supporters help her learn about her motives, how to recognize the harm words and deeds can cause, and how not to be a bully.

What doesn't work is trying to find a way to hurt the bully equally. This results in further ill will, shame, and the kind of worldview that set him or her on course as a bully in the first place.

We can tell children it's wrong to bully, but we can't convince them that what they do is bullying without holding a sort of mirror up for them. Restorative circles or conferences can be a very powerful way to do that. Research shows that the great majority of those who bully have themselves been belittled, shunned, or hurt. They have been victims. That's an opening for empathy.

In Carlisle, as everywhere, we have children who are bullied, children who try to dominate those they believe to be weaker in some way, and children who go along, abetting the bullies — this despite anti-bullying programs and many caring adults.

We are fortunate to have a strong restorative justice program in the area that works with police in criminal matters. Communities for Restorative Justice also has people and resources that can help administrators, teachers, and parents interested in learning restorative practices and discipline.

I hope our schools will explore more dialog between children in conflict. We do it in the lower grades with Open Circle, which is good, but not enough. We need to model for children, continuously, how to differ with each other without dissing, how to stand in another's shoes. It is our best hope for making them safe and for making our future society less contentious, less nasty, less violent. Δ

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