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Playground battles



When adults choose not to deal with bullies, children may feel forced to take it upon themselves to do so.

It is easier to build strong children, than to repair broken men. – Frederick Douglass

LATELY I have stumbled upon a disease that is ruthless and debilitating. I have known about the the virus ever since I was a child, all the way into adulthood and now well into the stage my Little Man calls the "white age".

(Yes, I bypassed the grey and started sprouting sparkly white unruly strands that my son finds extremely magical. Bless him.)

For some reason I have encountered a cluster of experiences, first-hand and also through stories related to me, of far too many situations leading to outbreaks. All in the space of a couple of weeks.

The number of victims has escalated within my small sphere of life. Which has led me to re-evaluate how I so underestimated this germ.

I am talking about bullying.

To give you an idea of what I mean, let me run down the list of incidents that have just come to light this week alone.

A handicapped child is so enraged and frustrated over being deemed different, stupid and a pariah that she has turned her focus to bullying and controlling younger kids. Because this is all she knows.

She is so sure that no one wants to be her friend because that's what life has shown her socially for 10 years. Now she is manifesting her own worst nightmare onto any kid she meets. She automatically feels that if a child does not want to play with her, he should be punished before he punishes her with more malicious words and actions.

A young kid who used to loved school – he begged to go even on days when he was sick – now refuses to step foot there. In fact, he is petrified of this girl in school who beats him, who keeps hitting him and gets nothing more than being sent to the "naughty chair". Which does nothing for the boy. The bully's mum and the school have done nothing to

make the victim feel safe.

A mum told me she ripped her son out of school because a teacher punished him by making him hop up and down in front of the

class. He did it until the whole class was howling with laughter. All because he talked during class.

What about the fat girl? The one no one wants on their sports team. I know her. Very well. She is a cancer survivor. Steroids have made her overweight. She is the bravest soul, yet is ostracised by her classmates. Her teacher doesn't know what to do with her, so she is made to sit on the sidelines or be a team reserve.

What a bloody mess! Why is this happening?

I think the reason is, quite simply, ignorance. If all the adults in charge of caring for kids who are being victimised by bullies had lived in a permissible system when they were growing up, the odds are they would think it's normal.

Or, they don't want to be unpopular themselves by standing up for these kids. Perhaps they support the prejudices that exist.

Playground bullies grow into adults and they don't really change. In fact, they find different ways to control and dominate.

The sad thing is that quite a few bullies I have known in my lifetime have either been victims themselves, or were mistreated by the adults who cared for them. Some are just really troubled. The point is, even the bully needs help.

Bullying behaviour doesn't just exist at the playground. Old people get bullied by their relatives. Maids get bullied by their bosses. Women are bullied to give up their babies because their families do not want to tarnish

their name. Handicapped children are bullied because they are not "perfect". A child born with HIV is shunned and dis-

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criminated against because she had the audacity to be born.

It's everywhere you look. All over society.

My Little Man was incensed when his friend got thwacked by a bully. He went to tell the teacher on duty, who basically told all the kids that she was going to "pap pap" (smack) them all and lock them in the cupboard for being naughty.

So he got furious and went over to the bully and smacked her back. He endured the naughty chair as punishment and came home to tell me that he knew it wasn't right, but no one was protecting his friend.

So my child felt forced to "deal" with the bully because he felt that justice needed to be served and no adult was helping.

Children are born with a vast capacity to be empathetic, sympathetic and loving. When we don't help them stay that way - by teaching them

to respect each other and to respect themselves - we do the world a great injustice.

■ *Asha Gill put her globetrotting life on hold to focus on the little man in her life and gain a singular perspective on the world.*

