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Standing By or Standing Up to Bullies

By Andrew Malekoff

My friend, Ralph Kolodny, professor emeritus at Boston University School of Social Work, commented on the brutality of the schoolyard in children's lives. He said, "we tend to forget the pain that normally characterizes interaction among children. Oddly enough," he added, "the work of the imaginative journalist or novelist often provides a more accurate picture."

For example, in Ray Bradbury's short story "The Playground," Charles Underhill, a widower, tried to protect his son from the terror of the schoolyard. Underhill wondered how childhood could be considered the best time of life, when it was the "most terrible, most merciless era, the barbaric time when there were no police to protect you, only parents preoccupied with themselves and their taller world."

Closer to home, four Long Island students - Gavin, Maria, Jake and Sam – had the guts to stand up by giving voice to their pain in a recent *Newsday* exposé entitled, "In their own words: Battling the bullies" (November 14, 2010). Jake, a freshman, said, "Kids would [harass me] and get detention. Then their friends would do what the other did. It was almost like a virus getting passed from one friend to the next...school was just hell." According to his mom, Jake recently developed stress-related cardiac issues.

I wonder what the consequences will be for these four young people for publicly revealing their suffering and the powerlessness of adults to protect them.

We all know that the boundaries of Bradbury's fantasy schoolyard now extend into peoples' homes through cyberspace, virtually obliterating any sense of sanctuary that children once found in the evenings, on weekends and during the summer.

Attempts by adults to rescue children who are bullied by exposing, reprimanding, lecturing or squashing the attackers typically leads to an escalation of the very behavior they to eliminate, further entrenching everyone involved in the process.

Bullying is not about a fair fight, it is about the abuse of social or physical power. Bullies love an audience and, therefore, depend on bystanders. According to the journalist Marian Wilde, "Bystanders are important because bullying most often takes place in front of peers and it almost never happens when adults are watching."

According to Wilde, "If the audience shows disapproval, bullies are discouraged from continuing. However, bystanders, especially children, need to be empowered to act. The majority of children won't act for a variety of reasons, perhaps because they are afraid, confused or unsure of what to do."

Bullying is intensified today by a broad decline in civility. We live in a world of grown-ups who do not think twice about overstepping personal boundaries through rude, intimidating and obnoxious behavior.

If we cannot turn back the hands of time, we can at least slow down and teach our children, after we remind ourselves, the importance of putting a reflective pause between impulse and action. Sometimes this involves making the decision to act and to move from *standing by* to *standing up*.

Gavin, Maria, Jake and Sam showed great courage in standing up for themselves and thousands of other victims of bullies. They stood up publicly, even permitting their photographs to accompany their powerful words. We owe it to them to stand by their sides by joining with our children to stand up for those who suffer in silence at the hands of bullies.