

untitled

By Ruth Ostrow

Most schools say they won't tolerate bullying in any form. "Don't ever gang up on other kids!" I recently heard a teacher warn a group of students, before launching into a diatribe about the heinous punishment that would befall those who did.

The irony of the threat was not lost on me. And it occurred to me that eradicating schoolyard bullying is a bit like eradicating fleas. Nice in theory. But the bully is to the world what the flea is to the dog. In short: forgeddaboutit.

In this world, everyone bullies everyone all the time. There are restaurant bullies, who wave their hands around if the food is one second late; road bullies; celebrity bullies such as Mel Gibson and models who throw hissy fits in nightclubs, like the recent case involving Paris Hilton. There are politician bullies; barrister bullies, who get guilty people off serious crimes because they are louder and smarter; religious groups who curb freedom of speech and bully countries.

And let's not forget corporate bullies who control the very food we eat. Don't like genetically modified food? Bad luck!

Our world is predicated upon Darwin's rule that the fittest and toughest survive. And when we look at our personal lives, guess what? More bullies. Who isn't intimidated by a boss, doctor, lawyer or work colleague from time to time? Or a friend or partner who bullies through manipulation and subtle threats of withholding love? Worst are the ones you don't see coming, so gentle and sweet - and yet you mysteriously end up following their agenda.

"How do you know when someone is bullying and not just being assertive?" a friend asked. The answer is that you consistently find yourself doing things you don't want to do, or you're feeling unheard, powerless and steamrolled. And it has become the norm - friends who overcontrol, professionals who don't listen to you, dominating partners.

Society has become so aggressive and litigious. A mediator told me recently: "No one really wants to mediate, they just come along to find out the other side's arguments so they can smash them in court." As a result, gentle folk have been forced to become bullies too, in self-defence or simply to let off steam, honking horns at other drivers, kicking the dog, yelling at the kids.

How can school be different when adults operate in this way? I don't have the solution to school bullying, and find it heartbreaking. But ultimately we have to lead by example before we expect more of our kids.

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