

The Ring of Valor: From victim to target

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Fact Sheet #5

Being a target

How do we help young people respond effectively to bullying? We can begin by teaching young people to understand that there is a difference between being the *target* and being the *victim* of bullying. Bullies choose targets that are different and vulnerable. A target may be new to school or shy and have few friends. Another target may have physical features different from other kids. She might be tall or short, he might be thin or heavy. A target may have learning disabilities and poor self-control. For the most part, children who are targets have no control over these factors. Anyone can be singled out.

We have to help them understand that targets are not to blame. This is critical because a child who feels shame for being the target of cruelty is less likely to share their misery with parents and teachers. Suffering the torment of a bully alone is a horrible experience.

Although children probably have no control over being targets, they have the capacity to choose not to be victims. Victims capitulate to what bullies want. For example, they give bullies their lunch money, cry in shame when called names, run to adults to get help, or beg for mercy. Children become targets for who they are; they become victims for what they do. Targets have in their power to choose not to become victims.



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The courage to resist

This power is the choice to “not feed the bully.” What do children who bully want? Refuse to give it to them. Deprive them of the “fear fuel” that sustains their brutality. Fear is the oxygen that gives cruelty energy. For example, a child who is targeted can keep her head up when a bully wants her to hang her head in shame. Another can refuse to hand over his lunch money. A third can stubbornly refuse to be pressured to do something wrong.

Targets who become victims by “feeding” bullies purchase safety by choosing servitude. Victims attract bullies. Surrendering to bullies rewards their behavior and increases the likelihood that the bullying will continue. Targets have to prove to bullies that they will not be partners in their cruel game.

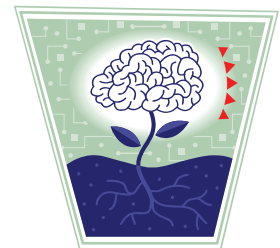
This assertiveness is a difficult step. Targets have to be willing to manage the consequences of the choice to refuse to give bullies what they want.. They have to be willing to endure these consequences without retaliation and provoking greater aggression. They might have to suffer a physical blow or endure humiliation and laughter. Putting this strength of character into action requires courage. Courage requires vigilance. We want children to act intelligently as well as honorably. Sometimes the smartest thing to do is to hand over the money or run away. But these choices do not solve the problem and can actually increase the danger.

Children can learn to understand the motivation of bullies to know better what they want. Targets can also learn how to be assertive without becoming predators themselves. They can also learn to become vigilant toward danger and to quiet the voice of fear that can prevent them from making good choices. As parents, we don't want to see our children in danger. Only by risking assertiveness, though, can our children avoid the greater danger of becoming a victim.



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