



Navigating the Emotional Journey

My Heart Is Breaking



Today, my heart is breaking. Yesterday I attended the funeral of William, a 14-year old boy who lost his life, two weeks after the start of his freshman year. This was a quirky, brilliant, sensitive, caring, funny, in-your-face

kind of kid, who loved to sail and play golf, and dreamed of being a pilot. William had many interests and kept his family hopping with grand new schemes. During the service his dad shared that had it not been for his son's intense prodding, they would never have bought that old used Bayliner boat. Boating became a regular and joyous family event.

No one knows for sure whether the cause of William's death was an intentional act, or the result of high-risk impulsive behavior. Regardless of the cause, anyone would agree that when someone so young loses his life, it is a terrible tragedy. The priest at the funeral shared how much William was embraced by the love of his family, but acknowledged that there are times when the deep abiding love of family just isn't enough.

No mention was made that William had a diagnosis of Asperger Syndrome, how he struggled with dyslexia, social interaction, and attentional differences and, at times, neurologically-based difficult behaviors. Nor did anyone bring up the extent to which he had been mercilessly bullied by peers in his life.

William spent one year in kindergarten tormented by another little guy who was constantly "in his face." His parents were thrilled when he was accepted into a private religious school for first grade. Although still bullied somewhat, a comfortable circle of friends helped make that bearable. At the end of third grade, the principal requested that William's parents find another school for him that could better address

his dyslexia, although he was getting outside help with reading. They knew that was not a battle worth fighting and, with sadness, transferred him back to the neighborhood elementary school.

The teasing and bullying began soon after William entered his new school and intensified by fifth grade. The flame was fanned by a teacher who singled out William in front of the entire class. This same teacher expressed a belief that the young man just needed some "toughening up."

Numerous emails, phone conversations and meetings with school staff did nothing to stop his victimization. At IEP meetings, his needs were discussed as his shortcomings and deficits. There were negative opinions stated in the IEP with no positive solutions to address the problems. Nobody clearly voiced William's gifts or his strengths.

One by one, neighborhood kids stopped being his friends. A once vibrant child began to withdraw. By sixth grade, William began to believe what kids told him, referring to himself as worthless, a "dork" or, even worse, a "retard." It was heartbreaking for his parents to see his reality. At sixth-grade graduation, they watched him walk around the gym by himself, holding back tears while other students laughed, joked, and congratulated each other.

Relief came at last when William was transferred to a small private middle school for kids with learning challenges. The school embraced him with all his "differences," and he finally felt a part of his school. He developed a few friends at school and flourished. He also resumed a friendship with a former neighborhood friend.

When it came time to choose a high school, his friend urged him to come back to the neighborhood school. It felt so good to him to be wanted. He also yearned to be in an inclusive school environment where he would once again be academically challenged. He was full of hope.

Nobody knows exactly what happened those first two weeks of high school. At the funeral



reception, William's Mom's heart broke all over again when she heard through the grapevine that some high school students had been harassing him the week before he died. It was even more painful to hear that the informant was sworn to secrecy about the names of those kids. William's Mom asked me, "How can anyone keep such a thing secret? How will this ever end? How can we stop this happening to other kids?"

William John Smeltz,

**March 24, 1992-
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From William's mom...

"William's body is gone, but his spirit lives on. I am not giving up the fight against bullying. I am always here to do my part. I believe God created children with different minds because the world needs them. Their perceptions are so fresh, so unique, and so straight-forward. Because of William I was able to see the world through a different pair of eyes, a pair of beautiful eyes."

How *can* we stop this kind of cruel harassment from happening to other kids, especially those with Asperger Syndrome?

Rebekah Heinrichs, in her book, *Perfect Targets: Asperger Syndrome and Bullying* (©2003) tells us that "children with AS lack the social skills and social support to counter their attackers and, therefore, often become chronic targets of bullying... The truth is that no child has the necessary social skills to stop severe bullying *without adult intervention and support.*" (pp. 55-56.)

Heinrichs cites difficulties with language and socialization, and a struggle to predict others' behavior as key issues that contribute to children and adolescents with AS being likely targets. While we must help our students with AS to strengthen skills in social interaction and perspective taking, they cannot and should not be expected to manage the assault of bullying without support.

Bullying happens in all schools. All too often, it typifies how young people interact in our culture. When bullying is ignored or minimized, students suffer ongoing harassment and anguish with the potential of causing lifelong emotional damage. If a school fails to address bullying, the safety of all students is threatened by allowing a hostile environment to interfere with learning.

First and foremost, a school must choose as its highest priority, to be a caring environment where differences are celebrated. The entire school must commit itself to ongoing bullying prevention if there is to be a positive climate in which all students can feel safe. But a verbal commitment and written anti-bullying policies are worthless without concentrated action. Again, it must be a school-wide effort that includes everyone: administrators, classroom teachers, counselors, paraprofessionals, parents, and, of course, students.

So what are some steps recommended to address bullying in the school setting? Bully B'ware Productions is an informative Internet site with extensive resource information. (<http://www.bullybeware.com/tips.html>)

Their action plan for bullying covered the following five steps:

1. Teachers must make it safe for students to report bullying...and respect the anonymity of the victim and/or reporting students. Until students trust that this will happen, bullying will go unreported, and bullies will continue to thrive.

2. Adults must be aware of all forms of bullying behavior...there is a difference between bad play and bullying. An episode of bullying has three identifying intentions:

- *There is a power difference between the victim and the bullier
- *There is negative intent on the part of the bullier to hurt, embarrass or humiliate the other
- *The behavior is repeated, perhaps with others or the same person over time

3. There must be a clear and effective plan for dealing with both the bully and the victim. All students must know the consequences for bullying. Victims need to be taught friendship skills and to build confidence and assertiveness.

4. School personnel must be informed about the different kinds of bullies and the many forms that bullying takes (physical, verbal, exclusionary, etc.).

5. The population of students who are neither victims nor bullies must be engaged to take action against bullying. How a student who witnesses a bullying situation reacts can determine whether that person will continue to victimize students.



Operation Respect was founded in 2000 by Peter Yarrow to address the increase of violence and bullying in the schools. And a curriculum called “Don’t Laugh at Me” was developed to “help teachers and students create respectful environments that nurture both the emotional/social and academic growth of students.” This curriculum also helps the entire school establish “ridicule free zones” in which staff, faculty, students and parents share a commitment to treat each other with respect and compassion.”

(www.operationrespect.org).

Rebekah Heinrichs’ book also provides many suggestions for implementing bullying prevention programs and emphasizes the need to individualize strategies that support students with Asperger Syndrome who are being targeted. She points out that although general strategies can be used successfully with many students, the needs of students with AS require modifications or even totally different approaches. p.138).

We need to increase our efforts to eradicate this behavior. We cannot allow our vulnerable children to be sacrificed. When I asked William’s mother for permission to tell his story, she answered that she felt her son would want me to do so. She said, “He would encourage any efforts to fight bullying, because it was something that he couldn’t do all by himself.” She added, “These are fragile children, and we need to help show them the way.”

Lisa A. Lieberman, MSW, LCSW is a psychotherapist with over 28 years of experience and the author of *A Stranger Among Us: Hiring In-Home Supports for a Child with Autism Spectrum Disorder or Other Neurological Differences*

