

Bully for you: Are you an advocate for your child?

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SALT LAKE CITY — Recently, a KSL reporter did a story on the [showing of "Bully,"](#) a documentary following five kids and families over the course of a school year — particularly Alex Libby — and the horrific bullying they experienced. Just seeing the short clip had me in tears. Not just for Alex's experience, but because it reminded me of my son's.

My oldest son has Asperger's syndrome, which has often made him a bully target. For a long while, my husband and I followed the "protection through policy" and encouraged him and our other children to stand firm in following the school rules. I cringe to think I'm the one that told my eldest son, "Pull the teacher aside and tell him what's happening. He's there to ensure the classroom is a safe place."

Not.

When the bully — taller and double my son's weight — cornered him in a booth in the classroom, the teacher took cover in a remote spot, pretending to not notice the other kids gathering and taunting what was happening. Years later, my son still has nightmares about the experience.

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Many parents I know have children who have been bullied in some form. But this article isn't about how to deal with bullying, rather its a shout out to each and every parent to become aware, involved and unafraid.

Know your school's policy. A surprising number of schools and administrators either don't have a policy, don't know it or don't follow it. In Sioux City, Iowa, an administrator said to a child who had been physically assaulted to "just get over it." In Laramie, Wyo., it was noted there had been 14 youth suicides in 18 months, but administrators still claimed no connection to bullying.

Mind you, this is not to disparage administrators. This is to awaken us as parents that the system will not always protect our children. When my other son was assaulted by a teenager who had repeated and well-known anger management issues, we went to the vice principal. He told us, and I quote, "We don't really have a policy for bullying."

Right.

So we took our son to the police station, filed a report and the officer took a picture of the ugly large bruise on my son's arm. Now that angry young man, and his parents, were legally put on notice. If he did anything like that again, he would be formally charged.

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Bullying in schools is a popular topic in the press. It's an issue of concern for parents, teachers, school administration and law enforcement. But is bullying in schools worse now than in the past, or is the issue simply under more scrutiny?

Currently, my children are all at zero tolerance-policy schools, a fact I had only surmised by the wall posters but hadn't formally asked until I began writing this post. What's your child's school policy? It's worth a call to find out exactly what the policy is before the unthinkable happens.

Get involved, even if it's uncomfortable. Ask your children questions — what happens on the bus? When there's a problem, what does the bus driver do? Notice if your child is hesitant or downright fearful of going on the bus, to school, or to a certain class. We parents get busy and don't always see the slight nuances of a child, a shrug or a tight-lipped response that doesn't seem so out of the ordinary.

The "Bully" documentary shows a clip where Alex Libby is being asked questions by his mother who had been unaware of what was happening. Frustrated at not knowing, she asked if it made him feel good when they kicked, stabbed or choked him on the bus. He said with heartbreaking honesty that he didn't think he felt anything anymore.

Whatever is happening, be unafraid. You are the advocate for your child and they have a right to be safe. If they aren't, it's up to you. You can create change the old-fashioned way: by joining with other parents and stating your needs and requests until something is done. If that is not an option, take matters into your own hands.

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When I could see that my son with Asperger's was not going to be protected, I pulled him from the system and home-schooled him for a few years. Though I didn't know it at the time, that decision was one of the single most pivotal in his life. He later went on to graduate with honors from high school and attend college. He is now serving a service mission for his church.

No matter what your child faces, or how the system responds, as parents we can at least control our home environment. Creating a safe refuge is absolutely essential. Not allowing hurtful comments, teasing, belittling or rudeness is key to developing your child's self-confidence.

I have three boys, so I get that boys tease. But you and I know when that line is crossed, when the comments are personal and somebody is not laughing. That's our parental stewardship, to ensure that home is a soft place to fall, with positive words and warm affection and a safe harbor from the world.

I encourage you to view the film "Bully," but even if not, to start a discussion at dinner about this topic. Simply ask questions at first, without sharing your views, and find out what your children's experiences have been.

You might be shocked to hear what they have gone through. But better to know now and help them learn effective coping skills than to feel regrets later. Being an advocate for your child starts as simply as asking a question and listening to the answer.