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James Burnett

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Group-think can make or break bullies at school



Reenie Brewer, grandmother of teen burn victim Michael Brewer, talks at the Teen Violence Summit, organized by Memorial Healthcare System on

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BY JAMES H. BURNETT III
JBURNETT@MIAMIHERALD.COM

Child behavior experts believe that it is only a matter of time -- perhaps just days or weeks -- before Michael Brewer, the teenager who was set on fire by "friends" in his old Deerfield Beach neighborhood for reporting them to authorities, is bullied again.

That's right. This 15-year-old, who spent months hospitalized and fighting for his life against infection and severe burns, will almost inevitably be subject to other kids picking on him, thanks to pack mentality.

"The irony here is that we know that bullying is rarely a one-on-one enterprise," says Corrine Gregory, a Seattle-area behaviorist and youth-violence expert who consults for school districts nationwide. "Even if there is a single bully, he or she tends to be egged on by a group. And yet, while we encourage children to be individuals and think for themselves, we do nothing to discourage group mentality. Cliques are just kids being kids, sometimes. But they have potential to be dangerous -- to cause violence or to let it happen."

ASSESSING THE DANGERS

She has a point. Godwin's Law notwithstanding, it was group-think that allowed an entire nation to stand by while Adolf Hitler built an army and then stand down when Hitler carried out the Holocaust.

A more politically "acceptable" but still tragic example? Phoebe Prince, the South Hadley, Mass., high school freshman who committed suicide in January after merciless bullying by nine classmates who've since been criminally charged in her death.

"For some reason, we just don't make the connection between the group and bullying," Gregory says. "When my eldest daughter was 5, for example, she attended a nice, middle-class private kindergarten. She was bullied and attacked by one little girl, who convinced six other students to join in. They held her arms and legs down, and the largest child sat on her chest -- something that could have caused serious injury. Were they troubled children? Only the ringleader. The rest came from what we'd all call normal homes."

The U.S. Bureau of Justice Statistics says children have a one-in-four chance of being violently bullied before high school. And a third of 12-to-18-year-olds report they've been bullied or have bullied.

If there was a one-in-four chance we could catch swine flu during train and bus rides home from work, the National Guard would be dispatched. If we learned that one-third of our domestic pets were being abused or used to torment other animals, we'd call for congressional hearings.

THE WAYS WE CAN RESPOND

There is a potential upside to group-think, though. It can be an anti-bullying weapon.

One middle school that Gregory advised had a bully problem, a popular jock who evolved to being mean when he saw other kids eager to follow.

The school mandated everyone, from staff to students, play nice. That simple. Zero tolerance actually created a relaxed atmosphere. Folks lightened up. The bully? "He didn't want to play nice, but he was surrounded by it from the other kids, like white blood cells surrounding a cancer. He had to change or be isolated," Gregory says.

There's one other way group-think can have positive results, Gregory says: "When one kid demonstrates calm and strength. Kids may be pack animals, but they're smart. They follow leaders, period. The way Michael Brewer has carried himself in the news, on television? He's showing it. Ironic, isn't it? He may get bullied again. But he could also be the catalyst in his new school to force the bullies to change."



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JamesBurnett wrote on 04/23/2010 12:15:04 PM:

MistaR, I'd write something bashful and sheepish about how embarrassed I am for the media. But I'm neither of those things. You know, as well as I do, that it's news - very, very, important, interesting community news when a kid is the victim of a crime the way Brewer was. So any local news organization that didn't cover his saga from start to finish wouldn't have been doing it's job. Second, if media was an issue for Brewer or his family I don't think they would have voluntarily gone on the Today Show before millions of viewers.

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MistaR wrote on 04/23/2010 12:05:57 PM:

If the media was not all over this, he could have gone back to school (a different one than his last) and nobody would know him or his past. But now everybody knows him.

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JamesBurnett wrote on 04/23/2010 11:59:48 AM:

akamiller, thank you for the kind words, and yes, best wishes to Michael.

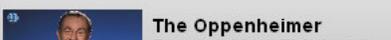
Folks, if you want to chat more in depth about this or any other topic (check out the links above to other recent columns I've written), come on over to my blog at miamiherald.typepad.com/burnettiquette. The most recent post there is about today's column and about a hair controversy in a big city police department. That's right. Hair!

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akamiller wrote on 04/23/2010 10:42:05 AM:

This article should go out to ALL our schools, elementary, middle and high school levels! Thank yoU, James H. Burnett, III, for a well-written piece and yes, let's pray that Michael will be a leader for positive change wherever he walks and that others can be leaders at their schools for the same thing.



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JamesBurnett wrote on 04/23/2010 10:12:39 AM:

MarciV, thanks for the comment. Sure Michael would appreciate your thoughts.

Bienve, thanks for weighing in. Values are tricky. Order though? I agree. Kids need it. Their parents need to give it.

KJMartin48, I had a couple of bullies. I think I bullied a couple of times too. I recall teasing another kid a few times in middle school. I won't use the excuse that I was egged on. I was, but I didn't have to take the bait.

Kernel85, interesting point. I'm all about genuine spirituality, but I'm not much for religion. It can be misused to manipulate. That being said, I wouldn't blanket label all folks who consider themselves to be religious as being bullies toward gay people. I know religious people who have an open-armed policy to lots of folks.

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kernel85 wrote on 04/23/2010 09:38:00 AM:

Replying to bienve (04/23/2010 08:34:24 AM):
"history speaks for it self social order has always been kept whith the respect of god or a strong gov. ,family, and staff they should all be ashamed of their incapacity to keep values and order.":

If god had much to do with it, religious people wouldn't be trying to bully lesbian-gays and others who don't quite fit their "group-think." The religious have always bullied those who they consider to be outsiders.

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kjmartin48 wrote on 04/23/2010 08:44:02 AM:

I think everyone reading this can remember bullies actions if not their names.

There were a couple of boys in H/S who loved to bully me, I did not even know who they were. Made H/S even less fun. I was a shy quiet kid so ideal target I guess. The boys probably lived in abusive homes so bullying was just stuff that happened.

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bienve wrote on 04/23/2010 08:34:24 AM:

history speaks for it self social order has always been kept whith the respect of god or a strong gov. ,family, and staff they should all be ashamed of their incapacity to keep values and order.

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MarciV wrote on 04/23/2010 08:21:24 AM:

... and we're all praying that he IS the catalyst for change! It would be horrendous for anything else to happen! We should pray for him!

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