

Nancy E-C: Hi, welcome to Doctor Nancy Live on Wednesday for lunch. Today, we're gonna be discussing bullying. It's something that I know a lot of parents struggle with with their kids, especially once they start to go to elementary school, middle school, and high school. So we sought out a counselor to help us. Maybe help some other parents with bullying issues that your kids may have. Or even he's gonna share with us later some signs to that. You may not even know they're being bullied and some signs to pick up on, to see if they're being bullied.

Nancy E-C: So I want to welcome Mike O'Connell. He's a counselor. He's actually getting ready to branch off his own practice, so we're gonna post his website here soon, but thank you, Mike, for ... Did I say Conner? It's O'Connell.

Mike O'Connell: That's okay, yeah.

Nancy E-C: I don't know. I don't know.

Mike O'Connell: Kind of the fun thing with those Irish names, right? You get O'Donnell, you get Connor, you get all of the above. Yeah.

Nancy E-C: Yeah. Elwartowski, you know. Well, Mike, thanks for joining us today. And I'm gonna let you go ahead and take it from here. And if anybody has any comments during this broadcast, please comment below. And if you have any questions, we'll be happy to answer them if we can.

Mike O'Connell: Great.

Nancy E-C: [crosstalk 00:01:21] Mike.

Mike O'Connell: Well, thank you so much for having me, Dr. Nancy. I'm super excited to be here. Just a little bit about my background just in case anyone's wondering. I started my career in youth ministry so working with high school teens for 10 years. And so that time of bullying and that space is always a big deal there and getting to journey with a lot of teens as they went through that process. So I'm excited to jump in and get to kind of talk about this topic. I think it will be fun.

Nancy E-C: That's great.

Mike O'Connell: I don't know if fun is the right word, but it was good.

Nancy E-C: When you deal with the teens, did you actually see bullying happening or would they come to you for counseling for that?

Mike O'Connell: Yeah, all the time. And that was a little bit of where I wanted to maybe place that a little bit today is just what do we mean by bullying and what are we talking about? And a lot of times, when we talk about bullying, we're really referring to some sort of aggression and some sort of power dynamic that is

causing the other person who's being bullied to really shut down in some sort of fashion. Whatever that might be. So it might be a little bit just straight on one on one. So somebody is making somebody feel bad about themselves or it might be something a little bit more systemic. Maybe they are in a social group and the whole group is making them feel on the outs. And so that's really what we're getting at when we're talking about bullying.

Mike O'Connell: The danger here is that we want to think a lot of times ... I'll hear adults talk about bullying as if it doesn't still happen with adults. Which happens all the time. Right? But I think that the hard part with teenagers is that when it comes up, all of our hearts just break, and we all go back to that ... our own experience of bullying as a teenager and what we learned to do and that sort of experience. Yeah.

Nancy E-C: Right. Got it. It's really sad that it still goes on. I remember that when I was a kid. I don't think bullying was the name back then. You were just the outsider, basically. And I think as a parent, you think your child is strong enough to handle it. They're used to it, so they can handle it, but ...

Mike O'Connell: That's an important thing. And one thing I just want to encourage, I'm assuming mostly parents would maybe listen to this or watch this. And so that would be the biggest thing is to recognize and just validate the fact that you are still the most important person in your child's life. And maybe just to give that a little bit of an image, I still like to think of teenagers as basically ... in a lot of ways, they're a little bit like toddlers. They're trying to developmentally meet a lot of the same things that your toddler went through when he or she was three years old. There's still that desire for independence but still a lot of clinging to want that attachment and that encouragement.

Mike O'Connell: And so especially when we're talking about something like bullying, what we're gonna see especially for a teenager is gonna be that learning to manage an adult relationship. And what do I do when something really difficult pops up? And learning those coping behaviors, those coping mechanisms of how to deal with these really difficult things. And as a parent, it's very simple to want to maybe jump in in that moment and really try to do something about it. Which can be very important especially if it's overwhelming. But that can be the challenge is sometimes maybe discerning the difference between my teen just learning to deal with a difficult people, learning to deal with a difficult scenario. And actual more like an abuse sort of moment of literally this person is being targeted and systematically harmed in some sort of way. And as a parent, that can be a very tricky space to be in in discerning which direction we're talking about.

Nancy E-C: So you hear a lot about helicopter parenting, and I don't think it's so much with this subject, I think. It may be, I'm not sure. How much does the parent get involved with the situation that's going on?

Mike O'Connell: I think it depends. And the way I would suggest with parents is to really trust your gut a little bit. But also try to be a little bit reflective. So there's a big difference between I think ... maybe your student's getting a little bit teased in gym class. That can be a really great developmental moment for your son or daughter to really learn something about how to deal with uncomfortable scenario, right? They have to kind of take it upon themselves to learn how to deal when they're getting picked on in basketball class 'cause they're a short kid. That might have been a personal sharing there, but versus something like they are literally being a target.

Mike O'Connell: And at that point, they really need adult intervention and they need somebody to step in. And so that can be the danger and we kind of joke sometimes about those helicopter parents. It can also kind of go the other way around of not being too detached. I think parents with teenagers have such a hard role because you are constantly finding that balance. And I would lean more on the space of don't be afraid to get involved, don't be afraid to ask questions. And don't be afraid of also ask other parents. What they think of something like this 'cause that'll help keep you in check a little bit, too.

Mike O'Connell: But there is that space of allowing your teen that space to learn new ways of dealing with some of these issues. And the follow-up is key. So if you find out your teen is struggling with something, I'm gonna use my basketball analogy, again, maybe the short kid in basketball class and don't know what to do in gym. Really following up with them regularly and just asking, laying that seed, planting that seed as much as you can. But not directly getting involved with it until you feel like, "Okay, this is more than just this person can handle. My son or daughter to handle."

Nancy E-C: So if it is a situation like somebody's in picked on 'cause he's short, that's one of those situations I was kind of talking about was somebody who's shorter, they're always gonna get picked on, they build a tough skin. Well, how can you actually build their confidence and help them feel better about themselves in those situations?

Mike O'Connell: Yeah. One of the biggest pieces there is, again, you're having to watch. And I think as a parent that would be so hard, right? You're watching your son or daughter to learn ... we're gonna call them defense mechanisms of some sort. So for me, for example, I know one of my biggest defenses is I like to take a problem when it pops up, and I make it small. I'm really good at minimizing. So in that short guy scenario, that's a lot of what I did. I would take that bullying that maybe I got in gym class and just make it not a big deal.

Mike O'Connell: So you get to sort of watch your son or daughter learn those defenses, those coping strategies, those coping behaviors kind of from afar, and I think trying to engage them in any way shape or form in that is a really good thing. If you get that opportunity to talk with them about that which that's kind of the struggles

with teenagers, you're not always gonna get that opportunity. But any moment you have to ask them questions and around it but not just give them answers. So that piece of, you know, "So why did you kind of shut down when you were asked to do that thing?" Or, "Why did you get into a fight?" 'Cause it's gonna go either way. A lot of the times, the bullies are also just coping, but their mechanisms is to be more of the put your fists up. Unfortunately, they're sort of a natural pattern that goes with their ... You get those folks who naturally fight and those people who naturally run away. And they tend to find each other a little bit.

Mike O'Connell: So that can be really hard being a parent, though, and sitting from afar, recognizing those things 'cause those things are probably things that we do. Maybe we don't like that we do those things. So any way that you can constantly ask those questions, notice that pattern, and encourage your teen to think of other ways of doing things or little ways to not just get stuck in that one coping strategy can be really important.

Nancy E-C: Interesting. Yeah, getting the teens to talk to you is the hardest part, I think. I think for the newer moms, like the little kids, I know with my daughter, I just was open with her and encouraged her to talk to me. Our best talks are on her bed in the evening, you know, having talks. And then when she closes down and doesn't want to talk to me, I have my ways of kind of getting her to talk to me, too, which is ... you know, telling me what's going on because I praise her and say, "Oh, you're always so good at talking to me [crosstalk 00:10:40]."

Mike O'Connell: Yeah.

Nancy E-C: [crosstalk 00:10:41] you know?

Mike O'Connell: Yeah.

Nancy E-C: Share with me. But I kind of give her a little positive ... She's good on praise. She likes to be praised for the good things she does, so that's how I use ... get her to talk to me, but they do close down when they get to be teenagers.

Mike O'Connell: Yeah. And that's a really important thing, and that's what you're supposed to be experiencing right now 'cause developmentally that's ... all families have to make that transition. The hard thing about ... and all of us have this experience of being that teenager, right? Who wants the independence but still want to have that closeness with mom and dad. And being in that parent role of watching and waiting and allowing, it can be a challenge. But that's really important. I think the biggest key for parents when talking to teens is that your teen just needs to know that they are loved and that you are proud of them. And that proud piece is really important because they're having such huge experiences of pretending to be adults and what that means.

Mike O'Connell: To go back to a little bit of being that teenagers just being a toddler again a little bit, that's gonna be a part of that is in those moments when your toddler was throwing that big tantrum, they needed to know you love them. They needed to know you weren't gonna walk away. And that's gonna be important for anyone who's had the teenager who makes a huge mistake, crashes the car, and then something like that. And then comes back in. They need to know they're held accountable but that you still love them, you're still proud of them.

Nancy E-C: Right. Awesome. So do you have just maybe a few things you can share about signs of bullying that ... so not talking to you, how you might be able to tell things going on at school or somewhere else?

Mike O'Connell: I'm gonna take that two directions. I think signs of bullying as well as signs of being the bully-

Nancy E-C: Oh, yeah.

Mike O'Connell: ... if I could, I think that's an important thing for parents to recognize, too. Again, a lot of times these relationship interactions are gonna be based on the way that we cope when there are issues. And that's not a bad thing. A lot of us will make great careers out of the way we cope ... like I said, my defense strategy is I'm really good at minimizing problems. And so becoming a therapist is great for me 'cause I can sit with people that have great problems and I never let it explode. I can usually hold that with folks. So some of those signs might be you know your teen, you know to trust your gut in those moments. So if they seem a little bit off, maybe they're a little bit more reserved than normal, maybe you're seeing some more signs of just being ... they're not wanting to hang out maybe with their normal social crowd, they're not wanting to do things that they might normally like. Maybe they are becoming a little bit more reserved, maybe they don't want to specifically share about something. Maybe you might ask about especially ...

Mike O'Connell: And I don't want to go through this podcast without bringing up social media at all. But maybe if you see them not as involved in social media or even hyperactively involved in social media, more than the norm, those might be times to just be curious more than anything. And I think on the sides, that would be the side of those being bullied, but on the side of maybe also kind of paying attention to is my son or daughter being a bully? Paying attention a little bit to aggressive levels. Like I said, some people when they're experiencing maybe some insecurity or pain put their dukes up, right? And so when maybe you see a lot more controlling behavior coming out or maybe you're seeing a lot more blame behavior coming out, so looking for those little moments when you start seeing the extremes. I think the best thing for parent is really just to be curious. And then also trust your social network. So trusting that there are other communities in your teen's life who might be able to also be a part of that. So whether that's their school community, your church community, sport

community. And not being afraid to just pay attention those a little. I think that's really the biggest thing is trying to intentionally pay attention to and follow up with those questions.

Nancy E-C: Great. So if you do discover maybe your child is being the bully, do you handle that the same way you would if they are being bullied?

Mike O'Connell: I think from the parent's perspective, yes. I think there's ... my guess, or not my guess, just what I've experienced is that a lot of times you just have to be more direct. It's more of a teaching moment whereas if your child tends to be a little bit more either a self-shamer or maybe even somebody who escapes, so like that minimizing thing I was talking about. For me, that's a little more of an escape behavior, right?

Nancy E-C: Right.

Mike O'Connell: If I don't make it a deal. So for the person who might be in that fight mode, it'd really be more of a teaching moment. How do you interact with people without bossing them around or without picking on them or without shaming them? 'Cause what your son or daughter is trying to learn is how to interact and work with people and may grow up to be a really great boss someday or really great authority, a police officer, law enforcement. Those sort of things. Those are great things to do. Whereas more of those escape behaviors, maybe a little more self shame or that escape space, again, might grocery up to be really great therapist or doctors or whatever that might be. I don't know.

Mike O'Connell: But what you get to watch and observe in this time period is seeing them learn what to do with those things. How to interact with those things in the world. I think a great way to think about that is that nerd geek culture. Not long ago would have been seen as a negative thing, but not anymore. It's a great thing. So a flip there. How are they not the subject of just being bullied anymore and how it is [crosstalk 00:16:44]-

Nancy E-C: 'Cause the geeks are making all the money.

Mike O'Connell: Yeah, that's right. [crosstalk 00:16:48]-

Nancy E-C: [crosstalk 00:16:48]

Mike O'Connell: As parents being able to encourage that but also help your teen make sense of that.

Nancy E-C: Yeah.

Mike O'Connell: You don't need to shame the bully to get them to learn. It's really more that you have some sort of gift to offer. How do you do it in a way that is responsible and

effective? So asking questions, being curious, and at times maybe sharing a little bit of what you've experienced. Maybe 'cause my guess is they've learned these coping behaviors from mom and dad, right?

Nancy E-C: Yup.

Mike O'Connell: What have you learned about your tendency maybe to blame sometimes or control? I would say those are where those bullying moments come up. And how do you do that in a way that is fair to other people?

Nancy E-C: That's great. So with your practice that you have, should somebody, if your family does need help with a situation like this, do you take those kind of clients on?

Mike O'Connell: I do. Yeah. My private practice, what I was saying earlier is actually just, I'm starting my own private practice which I'm very excited about. So we open up here in couple of weeks. And the main folks I see, I see a lot of couples. I do a lot of couple's therapy, and then families with adolescents. So working with teenagers. But a lot of times I like to, again, like I said, the most important person in a teenager's life is still mom and dad. So any way that I can encourage and help the family wrap around that teen in that moment is really important. And then I do a lot of work with men as well and go on from there.

Nancy E-C: Right. Yeah, they need that for sure.

Mike O'Connell: Exactly.

Nancy E-C: [crosstalk 00:18:25] women but men tend to get left out sometimes.

Mike O'Connell: Yeah, yeah. A little bit. A lot of men don't know. They speak a different language.

Nancy E-C: Exactly.

Mike O'Connell: So a lot of men will come with these behavior things. I feel like I'm so anxious and controlling and usually don't come in with the emotional language. So sometimes it's meeting them where they're at. Whereas women are very good at coming in with emotional, which, not to generalize here, right? So ..

Nancy E-C: That's okay. We get it. Great. Well, Mike, I really appreciate you coming on and talking to us about bullying. You said you would send me some more information that I'll put in the comments below. And if you're on the podcast, it'll be in the podcast information, but I do appreciate this so much. And then hopefully we can have you come back on if we-

Mike O'Connell: Yeah, I'd love that.

Nancy E-C: ... other issues coming up in our world. But I think your information was great, and I think a lot of moms will benefit from what you shared today.

Mike O'Connell: Great. Well, thank you Dr. Nancy, I really appreciate it.

Nancy E-C: Oh, you're very welcome. Thank you again for coming.

Mike O'Connell: Thanks.

Nancy E-C: Have a great day.

Mike O'Connell: You, too. Bye-bye.

Nancy E-C: Bye-bye.