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Family Matters By Bonnie Rochman

PARENTING

That Outrageous Bus Monitor Video: Why Kids Don't Fear Consequences

Anti-bullying programs are everywhere, but are they having an effect? One new approach, "I Choose," was designed by kids. The hope is that engaging children in the solution, rather than simply telling them how to behave, can encourage better choices.

By **BONNIE ROCHMAN** | @brochman | June 26, 2012 | 2



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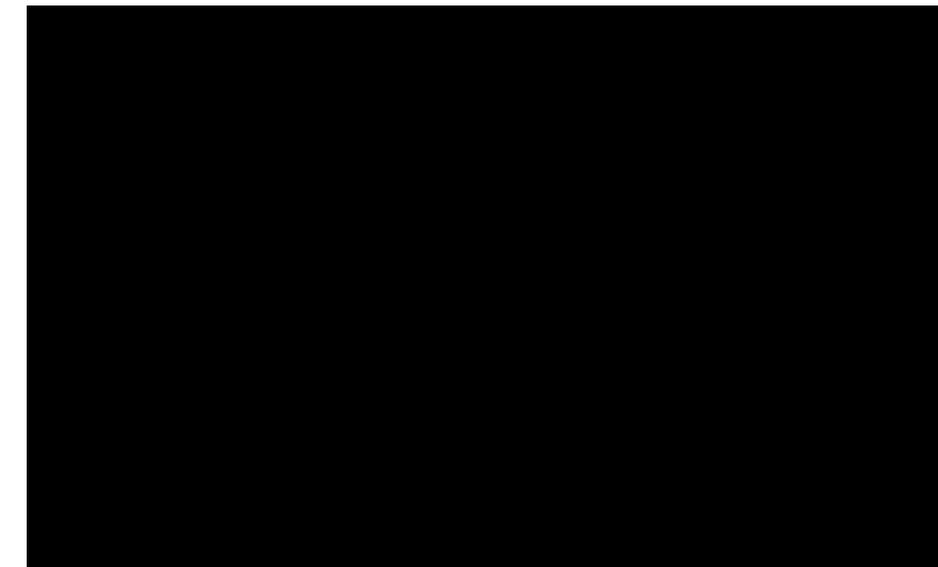
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By MAIA SZALAVITZ



We don't generally think of bullying as involving the gray-haired generation. But we've had to adjust our definition in the week since the **video** of silvery-coiffed Karen Klein being mocked on a school bus went viral. Klein, a bus monitor in Greece, N.Y., sat mostly poker-faced, tears welling up as a band of mean-spirited middle-school kids, mostly boys, taunted her.

The evidence was captured by a smartphone: seventh-graders a quarter of Klein's age are calling her an "ugly fat a—" and saying she's "going to die of f—ing diabetes because she's so fat." Even more outrageous is the jab the kids take at the memory of Klein's son, who committed suicide, when they tell her "you don't have a family because they all killed themselves because they don't

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want to be near you.”

Bullying doesn't always fit the classic stereotype of a skinny, nerdy, unpopular kid surrounded by jeering jocks. Sometimes it's a mean girl who announces to another girl that she can't play. Sometimes it's a gay college student's sexual encounter being recorded and broadcast on the Internet, **with fatal results**. And sometimes it's an unsuspecting woman on a middle-school bus being targeted by kids who think they're invincible.

“We see an awful lot of kids today who feel they are immune from any consequences of their actions,” says Jim Fay, co-founder of the Love and Logic Institute, based in Golden, Colo., which trains parents to hold their children accountable. “Today's kids live in homes where they're rescued when they misbehave. When schools try to discipline kids, parents intervene. Why do kids feel immune to any consequences for their actions? My guess is there haven't been any.”

(MORE: [The School-Bus Bullies: Are Adults to Blame Too?](#))

This whole incident was shocking and, as a parent, absolutely cringe-inducing. Judging from Internet comments, I'm far from the only parent who couldn't watch the clip in its entirety. I certainly hope — in fact, I feel 100% certain — that my bus-riding fourth-grader would not behave like that. And yet, one can only hope that's how the parents of the boys involved felt prior to their Internet infamy. No one would intentionally raise a child to treat an adult with such utter disrespect, right? “I feel bad how they were making fun of her,” the boy who recorded the humiliating exchange later admitted on television. Yet he did nothing to stop it; instead, he captured the cruelty for posterity.

It all makes you wonder about the effectiveness of this country's anti-bullying strategies. Both my older children go to schools that have anti-bullying curricula in place. Much like kids all over the country, they attend anti-bullying school assemblies and stride through hallways tacked with anti-bullying posters. And yet, the episode that played out on Bus 784 in Greece, N.Y., raises a really important question: is all this emphasis on stopping the bullying actually working?

There are countless programs that boost kids' empathy, enhance their self-esteem and encourage bystanders to speak up. But ultimately, it's up to kids to embrace the Golden Rule, that trite but true adage about treating others as you'd want to be treated. One of the newest approaches capitalizes on kids' hopefully innate desire to do what's right. “**I Choose**” was formulated with the help of kids who are members of Yoursphere.com, one of the largest social networking sites for children. “When it comes to kids and behavior, you have to understand that we haven't been teaching kids about digital citizenship,” says YourSphere founder Mary Kay Hoal. “Culturally we see that the more outrageous the videos are, the more views you get. I see the boys' actions as a direct result of the social media culture they're participating in that's intended for adults.”

(MORE: [How Bullying and Abuse May Age Children Prematurely](#))

When it comes to anti-bullying programs, Hoal feels that educators have been delivering a one-way message, telling kids how to behave rather than engaging them in the solution. Online, YourSphere administrators noticed kids talking to other kids about why bullying is wrong. “We were so inspired by their conversation that we jumped in and said, We love what you're doing and we want to take your message to a broader audience,” says Hoal.

Administrators asked members — their target audience is between the ages of 9 to 14 — how to end bullying. “Ninety-eight percent of kids said they can end bullying by making a choice not to bully and choosing friendship, kindness, respect, compassion and love,” says Hoal. Hokey? For sure. But heartfelt and true. Choosing respect seems pretty incompatible with choosing to humiliate a bus monitor who's just trying to do her job.

YourSphere is distributing free “anti-bulling challenge kits” to schools. As part of the program, teachers speak with kids about making choices. And students get a Livestrong-style rubber bracelet emblazoned “I choose friendship” or “I choose respect” or one of the other choices that kids singled out as having the potential to slap down bullying behavior.

As for Klein, more than 7 million people have chosen to watch the unsettling recording of the N.Y. teens lashing out at her. Presumably, many of those viewers are the generous sort, because they've also chosen to **donate more than \$624,000** to help ease Klein's pain. If the brats behind the taunting belonged to me, I'd make sure that every penny of whatever allowance they receive



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Bonnie Rochman is a reporter at TIME. Find her on Twitter at [@brochman](#). You can also continue the discussion on TIME's [Facebook page](#) and on Twitter at [@TIME](#).

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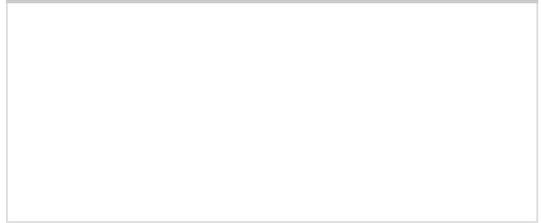
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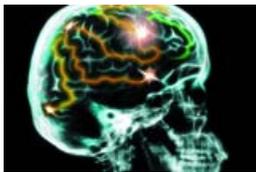
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