

“Mom, I don’t want the bullies to bully me”

Let that sink in.

Avery was four when she spit that line out as her little pink princess running shoes hit the bottom step of the school bus.

It took a moment for me to pick my heart off the driveway and find the courage to ask for further detail. I was not prepared for such a parenting moment only a few weeks into her first year of kindergarten.

To my relief she had not been bullied. Avery had attended her first anti-bullying assembly at school and been introduced to the concept of bullying. Phew!

But my relief was quickly replaced by the reality that the odds of being bullied at school are not in Avery’s favour. Bullying Canada reports that 1 in 3 students experience bullying at school.

School yard bullies aside, life is difficult. The skills, resilience and self confidence that will allow her to navigate an attack from a bully will also enable her to confront future life challenges head on.

I felt we had been given a peak into the future, a free pass, a ‘heads up’. Mindful of the challenges she is likely to encounter I felt I was graced with the opportunity to influence her fate. By the time we had sauntered down the driveway and into the house my mission was set; to instil self esteem, self confidence and resilience in a four-year-old.

The longing for our children to possess high self esteem, self confidence, and self worth is not unique to me of course. Surely the desire for our children to grow up secure in their ability to triumph over adversity and take ownership in their successes is something shared by most parents.

But how do we do it? How do we infuse in our children a life skill or feeling that many of us are not sure we ourselves possess?

Now my wheels were turning. Once a clear problem is presented, I become fixated on finding a solution.

We know that the long-term damage from being bullied sets in as the victim begins to adopt and internalize the judgments and criticism forced upon them.

If Avery is secure and confident in herself, if she KNOWS WHO SHE IS then perhaps she can repel the bullying’s poison, or at least keep them at arms length until she can find support. ‘I do not know who they are talking about because they are not talking about me’.

But how will I do this?

If we ask a child to list personal characteristics, they will likely start with ‘smart, kind, funny...’ But when they create their list we do not know if they are simply supplying

words they have been 'trained' to recite, if they are providing a list of characteristics they know represent them (high self esteem), or characteristics they DO NOT believe they possess (low self esteem).

How do I ensure the words Avery uses when asked to describe herself are words she KNOWS describe HER?

A simple list of characteristics is subjective. Subjective arguments are weak and vulnerable to persuasion. Imagine, how quickly a vulnerable student will come to accept the hate filled words spewed at them by an aggressive and relentless bully. No time at all.

But if we can transform the student's perception of themselves from a weak subjective position into a powerful objective one, they become less likely to succumb to the bully's influence.

Recent and specific evidence is the key.

If Avery picked a word like 'kind', I want to know HOW she knows she is helpful. So, for each word she chooses she is asked to produce 2 specific examples of when she demonstrated that characteristics.

I AM kind.

I KNOW THIS BECAUSE yesterday I invited the new student to join our group.

I KNOW THIS BECAUSE I hold by brother's hand when he is scared at the dentist.

A child with high self esteem and a secure sense of self will be able to recognize their desired behaviour as they go through their day. A child with low self esteem, who does not believe they possess positive characteristics, will not be able to provide evidence for the words they chose. These are the truly vulnerable students who are mostly likely to become a bully's target.

Protect potential victims, not just identify them. This is the goal. Inner Armor provides a structure to not only identify vulnerable students but empower them as well.

If a child completes the I AM fields with characteristics they aspire to have then we can go to work helping them to recognize those behaviours as they go through their day.

Often, we as the parent or educator know the vulnerable child to be kind because we witness their kind behaviour. We can provide an abundance of evidence to support our perception. But what we want is for the child to identify and own desired behaviour independent of our support. We are in effect training them to perceive themselves differently.

At first, we can act as a crutch by bringing to their attention an act of kindness, patience or bravery and have them note it on their Inner Armor worksheet. We could even go further and manufacture opportunities for the student to display a characteristic on their worksheet, 'Jimmy, could you please help John tie his shoes?'

With each piece of evidence added to their worksheet their inner armor takes shape and strengthens. The visual representation of all their positive characteristics and the evidence to prove, to themselves or others, that they are in fact kind, helpful, loving, brave, powerful....

As Inner Armor took shape in my mind, I needed to test it. I have a degree in Kinesiology, a Bachelor of Education, and an Ontario Teacher's Certificate. I am a farmer, a mother, a wife and I am an active volunteer in my community. But I do not have a background in psychology or mental health.

The Inner Armor concept was sound and potential impact was substantial, but I wanted data to show that Inner Armor works.

The pilot project consisted of 110 participants ages 6 to 82, male and female, and with varying intellectual abilities. To assess self esteem participants completed the Rosenberg's Self Esteem Scale before and after completing the Inner Armor activity. A comparison of the pre and post scores indicated that of the 110 people 84% showed an increase in self esteem and 99% were impacted by the experience. However, the finding that I found most impressive was that of the 110 participants pretests indicated 24% suffered from low self esteem. After completing the Inner Armor activity that number was reduced to just 2%. And even those 2% increased their self esteem score, just not enough to break the 'not at risk' threshold.

It works.

Each of the programs or services I create exists because of a specific problem or need brought to me. The need for a self esteem and resilience building tool that addressed the issue of bullying in our schools by empowering potential victims is no different.

Avery's cry for help that September afternoon has led to the creation of Inner Armor. A simple and effective tool available to parents, educators and mental health professionals worldwide.

Thank you Avery!