Throwing Punch Lines Instead of Punches

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Whether you’re a fan of the young pop star or not, Justin Bieber’s recent appearance as the subject of a Comedy Central roast is notable for more than just the brutally cutting humor that was on display. Bieber was laughing at many of the same jokes and comments that had first been voiced by people he referred to as “bullies” in a December 9, 2013, radio interview with Ryan Seacrest.

In that interview he said, “I’m still finding myself, and when I have the media attacking me every day it’s no different than bullying that happens in school, these people calling me names and saying things, and they don’t know what’s true or not.”

In past years Bieber maintained a defensive response to cruel comments from the public and other celebrities, only to be met with further ridicule. In participating in the roast, it appears that he has finally realized a very basic truth: people will continue to laugh at you until you laugh with them. This is especially true of bullies.

Bullies seek a reaction and enjoy seeing their victims respond with hurt or anger. Those reactions confirm for them that their destructive arrow has hit its target, and their sense of control and power grows. If the intended victim laughs off a bully’s hurtful comments or responds with a witty remark, the bully is denied the sadistic gratification he or she is seeking and loses power.

As humorist Art Buchwald famously said, “When you make the bullies laugh, they don’t beat you up.” Raised in several different foster homes after his mother was committed to a mental institution, Buchwald was familiar with both bullies and the power of humor to combat them.

If a child or teenager is not physically big enough or socially or economically powerful enough to battle a bully in any other way, humor is an exceptionally effective tool to escape the sadistic game being forced upon them. This isn’t to say that victims should use humor to turn the tables and ridicule their bullies. Rather, they should use it to defuse the situation by giving the bully a reaction that is the opposite of what he or she is seeking.

There is much more to humor than making fun of others or putting them down. Self-deprecating humor is a far more effective means of calming aggressors and making friends than abusive or critical humor, for example.

Those who are most adept at using humor to elicit positive responses in others are the pros — experienced stand-up comedians. Stand-up comedians engage in verbal battles with hecklers, drunks and their own dysfunctional family members. They are the masters of the use of humor as a powerful tool of influence and self-defense.

Many comedians have begun teaching their craft to kids and teenagers in an effort to battle epidemic levels of bullying, and to build young people’s confidence and social skills. The more confident kids become in defending themselves verbally, the less they have to worry about needing to defend themselves physically, and comedy classes are a great training ground.

Although humor often is thought of as frivolous silliness, it is actually an advanced intellectual means of reframing situations, reinterpreting meanings, and taking control when one has no other way to do so. Justin Bieber’s participation in a roast at his expense demonstrated his understanding of this fact and diminished the power of those he called bullies less than two years ago. Kids and teens can learn something from Bieber’s journey and can take power back from their own bullies by adding humor to their social toolbox.

We all recognize the truth of the saying, “Laugh and the world laughs with you; weep and you weep alone.” For many struggling kids, the weeping comes easier than the laughing, but the laughing can be learned from devoted pros such as the ones listed below. In the battle against bullying, throwing punch lines instead of punches is the most civilized and safe option, and one that will build confidence rather than break spirits.

Comedy classes for the bullied is a concept whose time has come. The lessons learned not only will calm conflicts, but will also soothe wounded souls and increase personal resilience in kids who need it the most. In the ongoing fight against bullies and the destruction they leave in their wake, the power of humor is no joke and should not be underestimated.

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