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Bullying game sorely misses the point

The Star recently awarded a "flower" to Rockstar Games for its new "Bully" game, apparently persuaded by the game manufacturer that the game contains positive messages about bullying in schools. The Star's endorsement was based on a laudatory article about the game in The New York Times.

Both the Star and the Times are treading on dangerous ground; the messages included in the "Bully" game are more likely to encourage bullying than to stop it.

For example, the Times noted that "Standing up to and even fistfighting bullies to stop them from tormenting geeks and other students is encouraged." That is the wrong message to send. Here is why:

- It suggests that children who are victims of bullying need only to confront and fight the bullying child, creating an unreasonable expectation. Bullying behavior is intentional and repetitive, and bullying victims are subjected to ongoing mistreatment. If the bullying victim could fight back effectively, he or she already would have done so.
- Fighting on school grounds should never be encouraged, even to keep children who bully from "tormenting" others. The answer is responsible adults, not juvenile vigilantes. Students should report bullying to adults. Students who commit an assault on school grounds face serious discipline and, in many cases, a referral to law enforcement authorities. It makes no sense to encourage school violence.
- The key to preventing and correcting bullying behavior in schools is the responsibility of adults in the schools. The game suggests that the responsibility for stopping aggressive behavior lies with the students themselves.

The Times also said this about the game: "Giving a smaller child a noogie or other gentle razzing is allowed, though not encouraged." Where does the author think bullying starts? The answer: It frequently starts with behavior that may begin as "just joking or teasing" that quickly crosses the line to humiliation or intimidation.

Bullying behavior relies upon an uneven power relationship between those who bully and their victims. Being older, bigger and stronger, with friends serving as henchmen to torment younger children, are examples of uneven power relationships.

Children who bully other children learn bullying behavior gives them a sense of power over others, and it frequently starts with behaviors like "noogies" and razzing. If a child does that to

other children and enjoys the discomfort of his or her victims, you have a newly minted bully.

Ironically, by suggesting that this kind of mistreatment is permissible, the "Bully" game effectively becomes a how-to-bully course: Bullying 101.

The danger in the "Bully" game is that parents might consider it a teaching tool, which it clearly is not. When media sources laud the game's allegedly positive message, parents might think that the game can help discourage schoolyard bullying and buy it for that reason. Parents of children who are bullied will do whatever they can to stop the bullying.

However, if the parent believes the proper response is to fight back, and encourages the child to do so, the child who has been bullied is twice victimized: once, by the bullying child; second, by the parent, who aggravates the child's trauma by creating unreasonable expectations and, possibly, placing the child in danger.

The most discouraging aspect of the game is that it encourages fighting back physically, instead of the most reliable remedy — reporting the bullying behavior to a competent adult at the school. Students are not in charge of schools; adults are.

The remedy to stop bullying in schools lies in responsible adult behavior. Sitting a child down in front of the "Bully" game with its dangerous and erroneous messages is counterproductive.

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