

About Health TV with Jeanne Blake
Girls and bullying
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JEANNE BLAKE: Welcome to *About Health TV*. I'm Jeanne Blake. Imagine being a young girl and enduring so much ridicule about the way you look that you're afraid to go to school. That kind of harassment is not unusual. According to the National Association of School Psychologists, 160,000 children in this country miss school every day for fear of being bullied. That happened to one of our guests on this edition of *About Health TV*. Her name is Lisa Sonbolian, and she is here to tell us her story, speaking out to help others who may find themselves in the same situation. And we've also asked Dr. Paula Rauch, chief of the child psychiatry consultation service at Mass General Hospital here in Boston, to join us as well to explore the subject of bullying among girls. Thanks so much for coming in to both of you. Lisa, tell us when the teasing started for you.

LISA: Well, it started happening in sixth grade and it quickly worsened. My first day at school was okay. I really was looking forward to it and I thought I was going to be popular and make a lot of friends.

JEANNE BLAKE: In other words, your life had been going swimmingly up to that point.

LISA: I wouldn't say swimmingly, but basically it had been bully-free. I didn't have to go to school and endure taunting every day. I always felt like I had been different, because I was in a town that was basically white and I have a father who is Iranian. So I think that already separated me and was a catalyst for some of the bullying that went on, because of the way I looked. But I remember on my second day of school in the sixth grade, I sat down, and this boy sat next to me, and I actually thought he liked me, but he looked at me and he said, "You have a big nose." I was completely in shock, because although I thought it was big, I never really thought about it in general. I would look in the mirror and I thought I was fairly attractive. My nose wasn't really a big deal, but then when everyone started pointing it out to me every day it started becoming a real problem.

JEANNE BLAKE: Now, we should point out that you've since had cosmetic surgery. So let's show right now the pictures of what you looked like before your surgery so folks can understand the context of your story a little bit better. What was your response that first time to the boy who said that? Do you remember the feeling inside and if it had that much of an impact, or was it really the combination of

teasing that followed that?

LISA: I would say it's a combination of both, but the first time he said that to me it did have an effect on me. I really felt shaken up and more surprised than anything else. Just the fact that someone was saying that to me and pointing out something about the way I looked. It was more of a shock, but it was sixth grade, so I also figured that maybe it would stop and maybe this will only be one comment, maybe tomorrow it will be fine. So I also wasn't thinking long term. I was thinking this would be a one-time thing and he would stop. But at the same time, you can't help but be surprised when you're going through puberty and you're trying to fit in and someone's attacking you for the way you look.

JEANNE BLAKE: And it got worse. It wasn't a one-time situation.

LISA: It wasn't a one-time situation. I think the second week of school it started getting worse. People were making comments left and right. Basically, one comment generated millions of comments.

JEANNE BLAKE: So other kids heard him? It wasn't as though other kids independently joined in.

LISA: Right. It almost seemed as if one person started, upper classmen, people in my class, and people in the school just making fun of me all the time.

JEANNE BLAKE: What kinds of things did they say?

LISA: Basically, from the moment I got on the bus I had to hear "Big nose," I had to hear people tell me they hate me. The teasing started getting really bad, especially in the middle of sixth grade, and people who were my friends turned on me. I still remember this, because this one girl who I was good friends with looked at me on the bus and she said, "I hate you because you're a beaker." And that was one of the names they would call me. I would go into the classroom to start class and I'd get things thrown at me. I'd hear people laughing at me, girls and boys. Boys would call me alien, they would tell me I should get plastic surgery. I once came home with egg in my hair and I didn't know where it came from. I used to cry a lot. I remember coming home from school and just crying in the bathroom and thinking, "Why am I here? Why am I alive?"

JEANNE BLAKE: Dr. Rauch, Lisa's really describing a real mass sort of attack against her, and she also now has the insight to say, "I was going through puberty and it was a particularly sensitive time for

me.” You weren’t there, but it does happen in cities across the country. What do you think was going on, where one comment led to so many others and kind of ganging up on Lisa?

DR. RAUCH: Well, I think it’s a sensitive time for children, sensitive for Lisa where she was the recipient, and I think what’s happening is, as children are moving from earlier grade school where they define themselves by their accomplishments, the things that they do, as they’re moving into adolescence and middle school, which you’re describing, as sort of the first step towards that, their self-esteem has some new determinants, including what group you’re part of, are you in the “in” group, and how attractive or unattractive are you. And that fragile sense of identity often makes kids feel insecure, and insecure people behave badly. In fact, many of those children, I suspect, didn’t like how they looked, didn’t feel comfortable themselves, but that’s cruel comfort to Lisa and children who experience that kind of brutality.

JEANNE BLAKE: Do you hear it happen often that kids will sort of jump on the bandwagon, though? And what you describe makes sense in a way, because I remember those were incredibly painful years for me, because I was as tall then as I am now, which I’m almost six feet tall. And I was called names, so I remember the pain of those years. But is it so typical for so many people to jump on the bandwagon? I remember one or two people had names for me, but I don’t remember it being a school-wide thing.

DR. RAUCH: I think there are some children who are more vulnerable, in part because of their reaction to the teasing, and I also think very much depends on the school community. We think about the people who do the teasing maybe as perpetrators, but everyone who stands by and lets it go on is just as much to blame, because tacitly, when the grownups in the environment don’t step in and say this is absolutely unacceptable, then really they’re giving permission that somehow making fun of how people look, that’s not serious. Whereas there are other issues that there’s zero tolerance about.

JEANNE BLAKE: Lisa, what was the reaction to the teachers and the folks in the school? They had to have known this was going on.

LISA: They did know it was going on, but basically the reaction was no reaction. I still remember when I was in wood tech class and we all had to make these wooden cars, and this one boy said, “The car looks like your nose.” And when it came time to race the cars, everyone was chanting “Beaker” over and over again. And the whole class, it seemed like they were all yelling. The same way you chant a racecar driver and the way you cheer them on, that’s what they were doing to me, and the

teacher just stood there and did nothing. I don't know how he felt about it. I don't know if he even thought it was funny. I don't know if it was making him laugh. Teachers are people too, and some will feel compassion, but I felt a lot of favorites toward certain students, toward the popular students, and the fact that it happened in so many of my classes and teachers just stood there and stared at me ... In another class a boy was calling me an alien and then throwing spitballs at me, and the teacher just stared at me. I could tell she felt bad, but I don't really think she knew what to do, and I think that's a part of the problem.

JEANNE BLAKE: You said you were going home after school and isolating and crying. Did your mom and dad know what was going on?

LISA: Yes. When it started happening in the beginning of sixth grade, it got bad really quickly, to the point where I couldn't even get on the bus and have peace. So my parents went into the school and spoke to the principal really quickly on, but the problem is, unless you have your parents sitting with you in class and the principal of the school, it's very difficult to stop these kids. So they went and spoke to him and it probably stopped for a couple of weeks, but once it blows over it just starts all over again.

JEANNE BLAKE: What kind of advice did your parents give you about how to handle it?

LISA: They tried to tell me to just ignore it, you're better than them, you're prettier than them. I think most of the advice that any parent would give. But it got to the point in which I wouldn't talk about it as much with my parents because I just felt really ashamed of myself. You know, you feel like the loser, you feel like some kind of freak of nature when people are telling you to donate your body to science, and your face and your eyebrows, which is what they did to me.

JEANNE BLAKE: Incredibly painful. Dr. Rauch, the suggestion to ignore it does not work for children, because it's impossible to ignore it.

DR. RAUCH: I think had it been a one-time comment, not reacting to it probably would have worked, but once it got to a place where Lisa was being teased in a merciless and ongoing way, she needed a more aggressive and active response, and probably with 20/20 hindsight I think her parents would have wanted to go back in at the two-week point and two weeks later and two weeks again, and to really continue to keep it as an issue that amongst the adults is simply not acceptable. But I think, particularly for girls, often the strategy that is suggested to girls is turn the other cheek, just be quiet,

think nice thoughts, don't be mean in return, so that frequently particularly shy or quiet girls don't feel like they have any tools to speak back in a harsh manner and similarly hold their ground.

JEANNE BLAKE: Well, you've got a daughter who is going into her teenage years. What would you tell her if this were happening to her? It sounds as though you would go to the school, right?

DR. RAUCH: Yes.

JEANNE BLAKE: But what would you tell her instead of to ignore it? How would you ask her or hope that she would react to the people who are doing the bullying?

DR. RAUCH: I think one of the things that I would do is to ask her, if she ever sees anyone else getting teased, what do they do, what would she like to say, okay, let her tease me and let me try out some particular things I might say in return. And I think I would give her permission with her words to fight back, to not be so generous, and frequently girls who fear hurting other people's feelings, particularly the kind of girl who is sensitive and has her own feelings hurt easily, have a very hard time saying mean things back.

JEANNE BLAKE: Give me an example of what you think Lisa might have been able to say, because I suspect that others would hear this and maybe be able to use those words.

DR. RAUCH: Saying to someone, "Like you're so perfect?" or "Boy, I look forward to a time when you would ever grow up and have something worthwhile to say," or "You're a mental midget." I'm not sure I want to be quoted. But even this many years later I feel outraged on Lisa's behalf and have the sense that you would have wished that someone would have been there to defend her.

LISA: Right. I guess I take a little bit of a different approach, because when you're in sixth grade – sixth, seventh, and eighth grades, that was how long it happened for – but I also think that when you're that age and you're that young, I don't think it's always that easy to think of a comment. And when it's you against everybody else, it's very easy for someone to tell you to fight back, but when you're that girl, or that boy even, it's really hard. I also don't think that the responsibility should have been placed on me, because I think that makes the victim feel even worse, because first I'm going to school and being taunted for something I didn't do and for something I can't help, which is the way I look, which nobody deserves. But then you have people telling you basically that you should change who you are and learn how to fight back. But honestly, I don't really feel that should be placed on

students, because it makes it more difficult. It's almost as if they're saying, on one hand, it's not your fault, but then they're saying, "We're going to teach you how to become more self-confident and become stronger to fight back." So it's almost as if it's a contradiction. I read about this a lot, and it places a lot of pressure on the student who is trying to go to school to learn, because when I was going to school it wasn't really about education, it was about who's going to be absent today or who's going to do this to me today or what class will be cancelled.

JEANNE BLAKE: But clearly – you're 26 now?

LISA: I'm 26.

JEANNE BLAKE: Okay. And this started when you were in your early teens, and you are clearly a much more confident young woman than you were at 16 years old.

LISA: Right.

JEANNE BLAKE: So you have acquired some of those skills along the way, right?

LISA: I've acquired skills, but at the same time I think when you're that age, I just don't think so much responsibility should be placed on you having to learn how to cope with bullying in a setting where you're supposed to be able to learn. When you're getting bullied, basically you're not going to school to learn. You're going to school to learn how to cope and think, Who's going to bother me today?

JEANNE BLAKE: What do you think it would have felt like if you had been able to say something like Dr. Rauch suggests, though?

LISA: There were very few times when I did try saying something, but it never really worked because there was always somebody else around the corner. But I honestly don't know how I would have felt. Sometimes I feel that to do that is just stooping to the same level, to start taunting somebody else. Sometimes I feel like I'm doing exactly what they're doing. I'm saying I don't like bullying, but then here I am almost turning into the bully.

JEANNE BLAKE: What about that, Dr. Rauch? She's taking exception with your advice.

DR. RAUCH: Absolutely. I think, actually, we're not so far apart in what we think. I certainly don't think it should ever be the child's responsibility alone. I think it's the responsibility of the school, but actually I also think it's a responsibility parent to parent. You asked me what would I do if it were my own daughter. Another thing is, I would be on the telephone to other parents and saying, "Look, this is what's going on. I need support from you at home to change this as well as at the school." So I think it needs to occur in multiple arenas. Where you want a child to be when they're finishing the sixth grade is, emotionally you want them to have a sense that their own best effort makes things happen. So I would want the teachers and the parents to be creating an environment in which every child can thrive, but then I'd also want the child to feel like they had some tools on their belt, some skills that allowed them to stand up for him or herself, and I think what's nice about Lisa's description of herself now is she knows what's okay for her and what's not, and that would, I hope, be the same dialogue that you would have with a younger teen who wouldn't have as much self-awareness for some of the same issues.

JEANNE BLAKE: Girls are more likely than boys to reach out for support, but a Stanford University poll showed that still only 50% of girls, if they're feeling sad, will reach for support. What's going on? Lisa said she felt so ashamed of who she was that she didn't want to even talk to her parents. Can you elaborate on that just a bit?

DR. RAUCH: I think there are a couple of things that are important to recognize about that piece of data. One is that what often happens when boys are in distress is that they have the kinds of externalizing behaviors that are observed by others so that people intervene, because more often boys will be aggressive, not 100%, and I don't want to stereotype by gender. It's a child-by-child issue. Girls are more likely, when they're in distress, to internalize, so that while it's troubling to them, the people around them may not know just how sad or just how troubled they feel. I think another very important issue is that if the environment doesn't recognize that the trauma that the child is enduring is serious and they don't validate, then that's enormously isolating. The data on children who have a parent who died, those children do better because the environment around them recognizes that that's a terrible trauma. Children who endure painful traumas that the environment doesn't recognize, those children actually are much more likely to become depressed and suicidal.

JEANNE BLAKE: And that's exactly what happened.

LISA: Right.

JEANNE BLAKE: Can you talk about that to me?

LISA: Yes. After sixth, seventh, and eighth grade I had become a changed person in that I wasn't someone who was fairly outgoing and friendly and pretty much happy with herself, but somebody who felt ugly, alone, isolated. I became very shy in that I thought that no one was validating my situation. When I was in school and going through this, nobody was helping me, nobody was trying to do anything about it, so that was very difficult for me. It makes you feel that you're overreacting. I was thinking, What did I do wrong? In reality, I did nothing wrong. But at the time I just hated who I was, and we moved to a new town and I went to a new school for my senior year, and I always thought that it would get better, because I attributed those feelings of low self-esteem and insecurity to the fact that I was in a town in which I pretty much hated everybody and didn't want to be around, so I figured that moving would solve everything. But the minute I started school in my senior year I was the same person, even though I had plastic surgery and I was a different person. I still felt like that same lonely person inside. I had a situation in a class in which we were mimicking a trial and we all had to get depositions, and it was my turn to get deposed. I had to sit in front of the class. And you have to remember that I was basically someone who was mute. I wouldn't talk to anybody. I was very, very shy. If you even called on me, my face got red. The deposition felt very real and the student who was deposing me would make a very good lawyer. After that happened, everyone was laughing and I thought I heard someone saying, "She was smoked." Even though almost every student had to go through this, for me it felt like it was happening all over again, because here I was with no friends, I was very lonely and depressed and insecure, and I just felt that the bullying was going to happen all over again. So I just decided that if people are like this I don't want to be alive. I drove home and I took every pill that I could find and I tried to kill myself. I just was driving home and saying, "Nobody is ever going to hurt you again. Nobody is ever going to treat you like this."

JEANNE BLAKE: And your father came in and found you.

LISA: And my father came in and found me, and I went to the hospital. Being bullied, I think, made me very disillusioned about people, because I just didn't understand them.

JEANNE BLAKE: You mentioned that you did have cosmetic surgery and you had your nose made smaller with the hope that that would change how you felt on the inside.

LISA: Yes, especially at that time when looks are ... I think when you're in school looks are very important, what you wear, what you look like, that's very, very important. I figured if I could be

pretty, then I could be popular and people would like me, and not only would people like me but I would like myself. That was very important to me, because I really thought that getting plastic surgery would just change my personality. I thought it would be fine.

JEANNE BLAKE: And it didn't help.

LISA: And it didn't do a thing. It seems like I got worse actually, because I still felt like that same person on the inside.

JEANNE BLAKE: Dr. Rauch, if only it were so simple, right?

DR. RAUCH: Yes. I mean, I think in some ways the plastic surgery was something that Lisa held out as a hope, and switching schools was a hope. I'm sure the people around her didn't recognize how hard it would be for her when those two things that she had held out as the hopes for making her feel better inside, when she actually got a chance to live them and found that she was still scarred inside from the feelings that she carried with her from an earlier time.

JEANNE BLAKE: If she had come to you before she had her nose operated on, what kinds of things would you have said to her? And I'm wondering if it would have made a difference if you had explored that. I'm sure that your mother didn't take lightly this request by you, and did you talk with a counselor? We'll come back, Dr. Rauch, to hear what you would have said. I'm going out of order.

LISA: I never spoke with a counselor, but I never talked about how bad the bullying was then. I mean, I would talk about it and I would cry, but at the same time I isolated myself a lot. I would come home from school and basically just go off by myself. So I don't think they realized at that time.

JEANNE BLAKE: Well, why did your mother think that you wanted to have your nose fixed?

LISA: I actually did want to have my nose fixed. It was actually very big, and it wasn't about elective surgery where I just decided I wanted to look better. It was very much the fact that it took up half my face and I have a very, very small face, so even before I got teased I knew I could get plastic surgery if I wanted to in the future. And my parents supported me on it, because I think they saw the pain I was going through. I also thought it would stop people teasing me. That was something I didn't mention, but in my paper that I wrote I call it my decision made out of pain, because I probably would have gotten the plastic surgery when I was 16 but instead I got it done when I was 14. So I got it done

partly to stop the people harassing me. It wasn't only that I thought I was going to feel better. I was doing the plastic surgery to make all this harassment go away, because there's no way I was going to go into ninth grade and put up with this anymore.

JEANNE BLAKE: Dr. Rauch, I actually remember when I was a TV reporter getting a call from a woman whose daughter wanted breast implants. I think she was 17, maybe 18, maybe 16 ... it must have been 17 or 18. My gut reaction was, how much are they and buy her a car instead, give it a year or two or three and tell her to wait until she's 21 and see how she feels. And do you know, about three or four years later the breast implant silicone scare surfaced, and this woman contacted me and told me that she had indeed done something else for her daughter. I don't really remember if she bought her a car or something flip like that, and that the daughter was really glad that she hadn't had it done, didn't feel the need any longer. And I'm not saying that Lisa wouldn't have, if her nose truly did take up half of her face, and the pictures that we've shown do show that it was prominent, but my point is, are there times when it is okay to go ahead? If you're a parent and you've got a child who wants something done cosmetically, is it always best to wait? What kinds of conversations do you have with that child to get to the core of what's going on?

DR. RAUCH: I think it's a big question, hard to do justice to in such a short period of time. But I think there is a dialogue. Certainly there's more plastic surgery being done on adolescents now than ever before.

JEANNE BLAKE: Than probably should be.

DR. RAUCH: Possibly. I think what you were pointing out about the 16-year-old that you were giving the example of is that adolescence is a time of transition, and what seems powerfully important in one moment may or may not two or three or four years later. And I think the tattoos that we see adolescents getting now, and how frequently they regret them, in my experience, later on, I think speaks to this. So things that are not easy to undo are problematic. I think you asked a question earlier about what would I have said to Lisa had I met with her before the surgery. I think what I would have wanted to do was to separate the issue of having the surgery from how she felt inside about herself, because my worry would be that her expectation of what the surgery would do would be so high that the disappointment would be so great. I think doing a piece of preparation that yes, the surgery may help you partially, but there's a piece of internal work that needs to be done. And Lisa's example of being deposed in her mock trial class and being retraumatized at that moment speaks to the damage that had been done earlier and the piece of work that needed to occur to address that.

JEANNE BLAKE: We're almost out of time, believe it or not. I don't want to end the program without talking about the reason that you're speaking out is to help other young people, and you do speak in schools, and you're trying to carry your message to others who might face a similar situation.

LISA: Yes. I've spoken in schools and I've been in some newspaper articles. I'm trying to, instead of sitting back and watching them, try to raise awareness by doing this, by telling my own story, and maybe it will make other people talk about what happened to them. Because I think teaching people compassion and empathy is very important, being able to put yourself in somebody else's shoes.

JEANNE BLAKE: That's true. And hopefully young people who might think about teasing someone would hear your words and make a decision not to.

LISA: Right.

JEANNE BLAKE: Because so often, as Dr. Rauch points out, it really is they who are feeling so insecure.

LISA: And I think now, too, that anyone who bullies somebody does not feel good about themselves, because to bring someone down like that ... But I also think it starts with the parents teaching their kids that it's not okay to make fun of somebody and how much that can hurt them. And also to teach their children tolerance, that you should not make fun of somebody for the way they dress and look.

JEANNE BLAKE: Or anything.

LISA: Right.

JEANNE BLAKE: And on that very important and positive message, we will end this program. Thanks so much. Lisa, thank you for sharing your story, and I'm glad you're speaking out. I hope that you will help other people, and I wish that you had been around when I was 12 feet tall in the seventh grade. Dr. Rauch, as always, thanks a lot. And we want to thank you for joining us on this edition of *About Health TV*. I'll see you next time.

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