

We only found out Megan was being bullied because she came home from school with bruises one day. When I asked her about them, she kept shrugging her shoulders and saying everything was okay.

I didn't believe her though, and when her father and I sat down and talked to her that evening, it all came out. She said that the other children were always laughing at her but she wouldn't say why. She said she didn't even mind, she was used to it, but now that one of the girls had started hitting her she felt very frightened going into school. I was horrified, especially when we realised it had been going on for two years, since she started in the juniors. Of course I phoned the school the next morning and made an appointment to see her teacher immediately.

Don't get me wrong, we didn't want to cause trouble or anything, but the teacher looked like she'd only just left school herself. She said she was glad we'd made an appointment to see her because she felt Megan had a few 'attitude problems'. I told her the only problem Megan had was the other children in the class calling her names and hitting her. In my day, I said, there was proper punishment for this sort of thing, and what was the school going to do about it, but she just got very defensive. She said although Megan was generally a well behaved child who worked hard in class, she wasn't very friendly to the other children. She said whenever another child asked to borrow anything, Megan would refuse, and that she would never speak to any of the other children. At break times, and at dinner time she sat on her own in the corner of the playground. The teacher went on to say that Megan even made excuses to get out of doing P.E. and games. Right at the end she suggested we sit down and talk to our daughter about making friends. She said that it was quite normal for children to name call and that Megan needed to learn to deal with it, especially with us being 'more mature' parents!

I was very upset. It felt as though she was blaming us for Megan being bullied and at the same time saying it was completely normal. I said I didn't care if we were ninety, the school should do something about it. I also said that I couldn't understand the things she was saying because Megan has lots of friends at home. We live in a cul-de-sac, and she's always outside playing with the local children. I said I wouldn't want to lend things to people who were horrible to me either. In the end it got quite heated and we left without anything being sorted out.

Once I'd calmed down a bit, I tried to see things from the teacher's point of view. Children can be so mean, and she was right, Megan did have to learn to cope with names, but at the same time, I still felt as though she was talking about someone else's child. Anyway, we sat down that evening and asked Megan why she thought people were being nasty to her. We were shocked at how mature her answer was. She said they were just nasty children who called everyone names. She said lots of people got picked on in her school and that the teachers just ignored it. Then she got quite upset and asked if she could change schools.

The only reason we put Megan in that school in the first place was because it has a better reputation than our local primary, but in the end, the local one turned out to be much better. They made Megan feel really welcome when we went to look around, and the teachers seemed very nice. They even have an anti-bullying policy, and a Year 6 mentor scheme that means the children always have someone to talk to if they have any problems, but so far, Megan hasn't had any problems at all. At the last parents' evening her teacher said she's settled in really well and has lots of friends. Megan says it's the best thing she could have done and has even started getting involved in the after-school athletics club!

Angry? Avoid Violence!

Tom's never been one for fighting but I'd always thought he could stand up for himself, which is why, when he came home covered in bruises and his nose bleeding for the umpteenth time in a month, I went mad.

I couldn't believe that he'd let someone do that to him. **'Didn't you hit them back?'** I shouted, but he just started crying. I told him if he was crying like that at school it was no wonder he got a hiding off the other lads. I told him to get himself back into school the next day and beat the living daylights of the lad who'd done it, otherwise he deserved everything he got. I know it was harsh, but that's the way my dad dealt with it and I didn't know any other way.

The next day he came home in an even worse state. I was furious. **'Didn't you fight back?'** I asked him. **'What are you, a girl?'** And of course he was just sobbing his heart out, and his mother started having a go at me. Things were just getting completely out of hand, but then I heard Tom screaming at both of us to stop. He said he'd tried to fight back but they were too strong for him, that it was all his fault because I was right, he just a girl. As soon as I realised it was a gang of lads who'd got him, and not just one, I felt terrible. I told him not to worry, that I'd get this sorted out.

The next day I parked up in the lane outside of the school and waited. I saw Tom come out of the gates and walk towards the car but he didn't see me because he too busy looking back over his shoulder. There was a gang of about six or seven lads following him and shouting all sorts, but I was ready. I jumped out the car just as one of them grabbed Tom's shoulder. I had a cricket bat with me, and I gave one of them a whack across the back of the head with it. I didn't hit him very hard, just enough to leave him a reminder, but he went down like a sack of spuds. I went after the others but they took off running like the cowards they are. Tom was terrified, I know

that now, but the lad I hit was okay because he was getting up. Effing and blinding at me, he was, so I told him he better stay away from my son or next time I'd kill him stone dead.

Years ago that would have been the end of it, but the next thing I gets this summons to go to court for assault. I couldn't believe it the cheek of it. I just saw red. The missus said I should have gone to the school but it would have been a waste of time so I went straight round to the lad's house, to have a word with his father instead. Sort it out like adults.

I couldn't believe the lad's father though. Here's me going round to sort it out like an adult and tell him what his precious son's been up to, but when he answered the door, he had a can of Special Brew in one hand and a base-ball bat in the other.

So here we are, six months later and I'm still on remand waiting to be sentenced for assault and damage to property, when all the lad's father got was a caution. The missus and me are only just on speaking terms and Tom just won't go back to school. Now his mother's being threatened with prison if she doesn't make him go. The whole thing's a nightmare. I just don't know what's going happen.



What's Behind the Behaviour

When I think back, I can see that he showed all the signs, but it just didn't register. I mean, it's teenagers, isn't it? All that moody behaviour, giving me the silent treatment every time I asked what was wrong. I kept thinking, is this my son, my lovely boy who was an angel only months ago? Now he was fighting all the time with his little brother, punching him in the arms and legs, leaving massive bruises. And the things he said to him! I felt like I was shouting all the time and getting nowhere. It was terrible.

I think the worst thing was when I caught him taking money out of my purse. Scott's always been such a good kid. I couldn't believe he'd starting stealing from me. I was convinced he was taking drugs. I started going through his room as soon as he'd left for school in the morning, looking for any evidence I could find, but there was nothing, just ripped up school books with crude graffiti all over them.

Thinking about it now, I should have made him talk to me, gone to the school or something. Anything. That's what makes me feel so awful now, that I just cried myself to sleep with worry and didn't tell anyone because to be honest, I just felt so helpless. I felt like I was losing my own son, that I just didn't know him anymore.

I think I blamed myself because I'd brought him up on my own. I kept thinking that if I had a man around it might be different. His brother was getting more and more frightened of him, and if the truth be told, so was I. When he started staying out late and drinking, in a way I was relieved, because at least he was leaving his brother alone.

Eventually the school got on to me because he'd been truanting. I went in to see the head of year 9 and she was nice enough. She was concerned but she didn't have any more of a clue than I did. She said she couldn't

understand why there'd been such a change in his behaviour and was everything alright at home! She said Scott's grades had slipped to rock bottom and that he was aggressive in class, picking on the younger boys and pushing the girls around. She said the last straw was when he'd come to school stinking of alcohol and that if he didn't sort himself out, the school would have to take serious action. I didn't know what to say. In the end she suspended him for a fortnight and made an appointment for us both to see an Educational Psychologist.

Scott was really upset about being suspended. It was as though he finally realised how bad things had got. He said he'd sort himself out, that he knew things couldn't carry on the way they were. I felt so relieved. I could see a little bit of the old Scott. I thought, now we're getting somewhere.

It still took a while to get to the bottom of things. Some lad in year 11 had started following him home and pushing him around. Then he'd started asking for money and threatened to get his little brother and me if he didn't do what this lad told him. Scott said he felt too ashamed and scared to tell anyone, and he was so angry about it that he'd started taking it out on other people. It broke my heart to think that all the while I was accusing him of being on drugs, or being a bully and a horror, he was just a victim himself. This lad had nearly ruined his life. Luckily, once we knew about it we were able to sort things out. The lad was taken out of school once the teachers found out that he'd been taking money off a lot of kids.

It has taken time for Scott to get over this, but knowing he wasn't alone and didn't have to be frightened anymore has really helped. He's getting on with his brother again and his grades have started to improve. He's even started to make friends again.

Learning about each other

We came to England because it is not safe in Somalia. We were in a refugee camp in Kenya but it was very hard. I had eight children but the babies all starved to death, my two daughters disappeared, and the eldest boy was stolen by the militia. My husband was killed when our village was attacked, and now Mobi is the only one I have left.

I was very pleased that Mobi could go to school here because he is a bright boy and now he will be able to learn his lessons well, and to speak English properly so that he will be able to get a good job when he is older, and to support his family. He was very excited when he first saw the school because he had never been before. There were lots of books and colourful paintings, but the best thing of all, he said, was that there were lots of children for him to play with. I was very happy, thinking that all our troubles were over now, and that we could start our lives again.

I became worried when I went to pick him up from school one day and another boy was calling him a 'dirty African'. Mobi said he didn't mind the names because he got to read lots of books and his teacher was very kind to him, but I still felt worried. I asked Mobi if he had any friends and he shook his head. I was very sad for him then and wondered what I could do to help.

My English is not very good, and I was frightened to talk to the teacher but Mobi said she was kind so I went to see her after school the next day. She said that Mobi was very quiet and didn't make friends easily. She said he was a good boy in class though, so I was relieved. When I told her about the boy in the school yard, she was very angry but said that she didn't think speaking to the boy's parents would help and that maybe Mobi could make more of an effort to fit in.

I felt very helpless, and thought that we should just be happy to have food in our bellies, and no one shooting at us in the night, but then I made friends with a nice lady in the playground and she said I should speak to the Headmistress, and that she could come with me if I liked.

The Headmistress was very helpful. She said she would like to do a whole school assembly, to teach the children about what other places in the world were like, and she asked me if I would come to speak to the children, to tell them what it was like in Somalia. She said that things were changing and that the school would have lots of children like Mobi, and that it was important the children understood what it was like to be a refugee.

The assembly was very good even though I felt very nervous. I didn't tell them too much about the really awful things, but lots of children were very interested to know what life is like in Somalia, and they were very sad when they found out how hungry we were, and how Mobi has lost all his brothers and sisters.

Mobi has a lot of friends now. He still gets called a few names, but he doesn't mind because he has other children to play with. The school has started something called an 'anti-bullying policy' too, which means that children can go and talk to someone if they are being called names, and in assemblies the children are taught how to understand each other more. Some of the other parents have even said thank you to me because their children had been bullied too, so I am very grateful.



Bullying

you **can** help your child

parents' stories

YOUNG *Voice*

The national charity that makes
young people's views count