

# IF THE CLAW FITS: A BULLY STORY

By Jaime Franchi

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I stood up to a 10-year-old kid the other morning before I even had my first cup of coffee. Let me qualify that—I stood up to *someone else's* 10-year-old kid that morning. Although I have a hard time reconciling mama bear mentality with a minivan-driving suburbanite, I've found that sometimes, the claw fits. I'll give you context.

We've all been made aware of the bullying epidemic on school playgrounds. What had been almost a rite of passage in the previous generations' experience has heightened in intensity and viciousness. Social media has brought a whole new dimension to what had previously been a 2-D problem. Now it's even more in your face, following kids from classrooms and playgrounds home to their outside lives.

My 9-year-old isn't smart-phone savvy yet. He is Twitter-less. But you and I know that this relative innocence has an expiration date. I've got to prepare him to live in a world where the Internet exists, even as he is still more content with Legos than X-Boxes.

Cut to the 10-year-old I threatened. My son had been upset the night before, telling us about the continued torment at the hands of this child. Not really physical, but more of an ongoing campaign to malign my kid, to get others to ostracize him. The latest incident had all the boys playing handball erupt into chants of "Boo!" whenever my son touched the ball.

It would almost be easier if there were simple old-fashioned physicality going on. A call to the principal and it would be monitored and taken care of. But this was something more vaporous. And more insidious. You can force children to keep their hands to themselves, but you can't make kids be kind to one another. Or to like each other.

And life is never easy for the tattletale.

Mary Calamia, a clinical social worker who works with children, confronts the issue of bullying with many of her patients. And while she cautions that there is no blanket answer to deal with bullying once and for all, they all must be dealt with. "Each situation has to be judged on its own merit, but each situation needs to be addressed."

How it is addressed varies depending on each individual situation. Sometimes the right thing is for the parent to step in. Sometimes, if it's safe, the child will feel more empowered by standing up for him or herself. There are times when all of the victims of one particular bully

band together in solidarity and rise above the abuse with safety in numbers.

"As we know, bullies are not born," Helen LaLouis, of Billy the Anti-Bullying Foundation, tells *Milieu*. "They are made."

She counsels others to remain as empathetic as possible in a bullying situation, to recognize the human element behind the abuser and to get educated about the best ways to handle each situation from a young age, so that bullying situations could be nipped in the bud as early as possible.

Helen has introduced Billy The Bull—a symbol of a boxing kangaroo—to accompany her educational program designed for children.

"What we're trying to do is to bring this awareness forward," she explains. "He's portrayed as a symbol of safety. We're all familiar with 'S.O.S.' This is a little different than the traditional means of 'help.' Ultimately what we'd like to do is have Billy go to schools, speak to the children.

"Bring this in early in life is going to enable these children to be aware as they go through school," she continues. "They'll know how to approach these situations rather than acting out in a negative way or even, in a worse-case scenario, with their lives."

She has introduced Billy the Bull stickers for display on the backs of cars for kids who need help. Just as Tot Finder stickers alert firemen to children's bedrooms in the case of fire; these stickers will let kids know that there are adults who have made the commitment to help in a bullying situation.

Sometimes that help takes the form of a concerned mom. Like me on the morning I spied that 10-year-old in the midst of a group of his friends in front of the school. Something took over me. I rolled down my car window and called to him.

He looked behind both shoulders.

"Who me?" his eyebrows asked me.

Oh, yes, kiddo. You.

He swaggered to my car. The confident step of his walk, built on the backs of picked-upon



kids that came before my own, solidified my goal. I was going to take this kid down.

What came out of my mouth was something that took me by complete surprise. I hadn't planned what to say, I just knew I had to take this opportunity offered to me on the blacktop of the elementary school driveway. Something akin to a possession by a Bruce Willis-type character took over my body, and I—I just got out of the way.

"I heard you've been picking on my son," I announced, in Bruce's strong voice. "This stops now."

He protested. Of course he did. He was already formulating tattletale backlash even as his elbow was draped casually in my car.

"A lot of people don't know this," I told him, "but my friends? They are the aides in this school. They are the teachers. The principal eats dinners at my house," I lied.

His tiny Adam's apple made a small movement.

"Everything that happens in this school gets back to me. Everything," I reiterated, wiggling my eyebrows for effect. Oh this Intel came from higher up than my own kid. *Sure it did.*

"Now they tell me that you haven't been acting very nicely. That's going to change right this minute. See this?"

I showed him the face of my iPhone, where his mother's contact information sat. (Thank you soccer roster.)

"If I hear that you are bullying my son for another minute, I'm going to call your mother."

He finally spoke. "I'm sorry," he said, quietly.

I made him say it again. "What?"

He looked up. "I'm sorry," he repeated, louder this time.

"Don't apologize to me," I said. "Go say you're sorry to my son. I'll watch from here."

He shuffled away from my car to where my kid stood at the front of the school doors, waiting for the day to start. That 10-year-old turned to look at me, checking to see if I was still watching. I gestured with my two fingers from my eyes to his. *I see everything*, I telecommunicated.

Swaggerless, he walked to my kid and offered his hand. Maybe too eagerly, my child shook it.

He had a good day that day.

And when the social media days come, I'll deal with it. I started following Bruce Willis on Twitter, just in case, for when the day comes when I need to channel him. ✱