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Bullying: The "New" Social Disease

By Kathy Hersh

Ms. Hersh is co-chair of the Miami Dade Community Task Force for Bullying Prevention and a consultant to the Miami Dade Public School System.

Once upon a time, every classroom had its bully – usually a boy who was chubby, a loner, with self-esteem so low he had to put down other kids in order to get noticed and feel powerful.

In today's classrooms, the bully is more likely to be the "popular" kid who dictates who's "in" and who's left "out," using manipulation, intimidation, and verbal abuse. It's just as likely to be a girl as a boy. Bullies attempt to isolate the targeted child by making fun of the way she dresses, walks and talks, or anything that makes her "stand out" from the "norm." She might be harassed with cell phone calls, text messages, and posted messages in Internet chat rooms. In fact, "cyberbullying" has become one of the most common forms of harassment and the hardest to do anything about since most of it takes place outside of school hours.

With increased pressure to compete in overcrowded schools for good grades, class rank, and eventual acceptance at a "good" college, aggressiveness is reinforced by the "winner take all" mentality that has filtered down from the adult world.

Over 160,000 children stay home from school each day because they are avoiding bullies and being harassed. For many children, crossing the threshold into school every day is like entering a social minefield. Bullying is a major cause of absences and if unchecked can lead to depression and even suicide.

If you're thinking bullying is no big deal, take a lesson from Debbie Johnston, whose son Jeffrey committed suicide last year after being harassed on the Internet for three years by a schoolmate.

Since Jeff's death, Ms. Johnston, a middle school teacher, has become a leader in state and national efforts to pass legislation which would mandate protection and bullying prevention programs in school and on the Internet.

Ms. Johnston lobbied hard in Tallahassee for passage of The Jeffrey Johnston "Stand Up For All Students" Act. So did Equality Florida, an organization which advocates for sexual minorities. So did the Miami Dade Student Government Association and the Community Task Force for Bullying Prevention, a group of parents, grandparents, students, educators and safe school specialists. The bill made it through four state sub-committees but failed to be introduced to the full assembly in time for passage.

"Sadly, we remain one of the 22 states without laws to protect our students, not because the law failed to pass, but because it was not deemed as important as other issues such as choosing a state dessert," says Debbie Johnston, who is raising funds to take a group called Students for Safer Schools to Washington D.C. to promote national legislation.

The Task Force did have considerable impact locally with the school board and administration. After hosting a series of workshops on the problem, the Task Force issued a summary of student complaints and suggestions. Students said they would be more willing to report problems of abusive behavior if kept confidential and if teachers actually acted on the information. But most teachers, they reported, just ignored their complaints and did nothing. Many teachers said they needed specific training in order to intervene effectively.

School board member Dr. Martin Karp began meeting with the Task Force and initiated the development of a district wide bullying prevention curriculum plan to teach school staff how to intervene effectively. 'The district-wide plan includes a process for schools to address violence and promote the re-culturing of the environment to create a safe and supportive community for all students and staff,' says Deborah Montilla, Administrative Director in the Division of Student Services.

Last spring, the Division of Student Services organized workshops for over six hundred administrators and counselors educating them on the topic of violence. The training resulted in creating draft feeder pattern bullying and violence prevention plans which will be updated and implemented at schools this year. The plan promotes schools creating on-site committees to work on reducing and preventing incidents. Parents with questions or concerns regarding bullying and the prevention program may contact the counselor at their child's school.

NO ONE IS UNAFFECTED BY BULLYING

Advice from Diane Landsberg, Executive Director of The Non-Violence Project USA, a non-profit organization which has been working in the MDCPS school system for a decade, teaching conflict resolution and pro-social leadership skills to all grade levels:

"All parents have a responsibility to help resolve this problem. Your child is in one of three groups – either he's a target, the bully, or an "innocent" bystander. If we can eliminate the "bystander" category, we will have come a long way towards eliminating bullying behavior. Why? Because bullies get a power surge when they have an audience. So the more kids who watch and say nothing or do nothing, the more powerful the bully feels. If students stood up for one another, and were backed up by the school staff, bullying would cease to be the problem it

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is. We hope the new bullying prevention curriculum and staff training will cause a huge change in the social environment for kids. But it will still take the cooperation and involvement of parents if it is to succeed."

Signs:

Targets often:
 Fear going to school
 Avoid riding the bus
 Avoid eating lunch in the cafeteria
 Come home with bruises, scratches, torn clothes or missing property
 Seem depressed or worried
 Deny anything's wrong when asked

If your child is being targeted, don't blame the child for being victimized and don't encourage him to fight back. Bullying is serious and can escalate quickly into a potentially harmful situation. Instead, coach your child to avoid bullies if possible, always travel in two's, avoid isolating situations, always report abusive behavior to a responsible adult, and to let you, the parent, know what is going on.

You have recourse. Bullying is not supposedly to be tolerated in MDCPS schools. If the school does not have a strict code and enforced consequences, you have a right to report any attack or threats to the police.

Bullies often:

Act aggressively towards younger children and pets
 Brag about committing violence
 Threaten and tease excessively
 Curse and talk tough
 Have been previously targeted by bullies

Bullying is learned behavior. Parents are often the first teachers. If you think your child is bullying other children, talk it over with him. Tell him you don't approve of being mean to others. Then take a look at your own parenting style:

Do you scold your child in front of others?
 Do you take away privileges without warning?
 Do you physically punish your child for wrong doing?
 Do you yell and call your child names?
 Do you use ridicule and humiliation to control your child's behavior?

Bystanders often:

Focus on "fitting in," wearing the "right" clothes
 Worry constantly about how they are perceived by others.
 Avoid being the focus of attention in the classroom

If you think your child has witnessed bullying, encourage him or her to talk about what happened. If she seems afraid to talk, reassure her that you will protect her confidentiality but insist that for her own safety you need to know what is going on at school. Teach your child to intervene safely by reporting to an adult what is going on. If your child is a friend of the person targeted and feels secure enough, he or she should stand next to the person being bullied and tell the bully to stop. This tells the bully that the intended victim has allies.

The Bully Vaccine

You can immunize your child against anti-social behavior by reading and talking about books with pro-social themes. The Task Force for Bullying Prevention held a workshop for parents and educators on bullying prevention through literacy, given by Cathryn Berger Kaye, a nationally renowned expert on the subject.

Here are some of the books she recommends:

For early readers:

Hey Little Ant, by Phillip and Hannah Hoose; a boy who likes to stomp insects learns to see the world from an ant's point of view.
 Don't Laugh At Me, by Steve Seskin and Allen Shamblin; The lyrics to a song (CD available) about kids who are teased or left out because of being "different."

I, Miss Franklin P. Shuckles, by Ulana Snihura; to stay popular at school a girl shuns a friend but learns the importance of true friendship and kindness.

For pre-teens and early teens

The Misfits, by James Howe; on the reading lists of most middle schools Define "Normal," by Julie Anne Peters
 Geography Club, by Brent Hartinger

For young adults

On the Fringe, edited by Donald R. Gallo; short stories about non-conformity, hate, and self-acceptance. Useful for group discussions.
 Shadow of the Dragon, by Sherry Gartland; hate crimes affect a Vietnamese immigrant family.

Other recommended reading:

The Boy Who Looked Like Lincoln, by Mike Reiss, a humorous look at learning to accept differences and turning them into assets. (Picture book and young readers)

Hoot, by Carl Hiaassen; a newcomer learns to overcome being bullied and finds a purpose after befriending an outsider. 6-12 grade.

Self-help for kids:

The Kid's Guidebook: Great Advice to Help Kids Cope, by Tova Navarra

Boundaries: A Guide for Teens, by Val J. Peier and Tom Dowd

Bullies Are a Pain in the Brain, by Trevor Romain

Self-help for parents:

The Bully, the Bullied, and the Bystander: From Preschool to High School – How Parents and Teachers Can Help Break the Cycle of Violence. By Barbara Coloroso

Bullies and Victims: Helping Your Child Through the Schoolyard Battlefield, by Suellen Fried and Paula Fried

Girl Wars: 12 Strategies That Will End Female Bullying, by Cheryl Dellasega and Charisse Nixon.

For educators:

No Room for Bullies: From the Classroom to Cyberspace, Teaching Respect, Stopping Abuse, and Rewarding Kindness, editors, Jose Bolton, Sr. and Stan Graeve.





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