

Fighting Back Against Bullying

According to surveys done by the U.S. Justice Department, 15 percent of children in the United States were bullied over the past year. That means that in South Jersey public schools alone, more than 205,000 students were victimized by their peers. By Melissa Auman Greiner

To the kids who encounter the teasing, shoving or gossip, bullying is a disease they don't always know how to fight. It can result in a phobia of going to school, falling grades and more serious, life-changing effects like anxiety, depression, suicide or Columbine-inspired violence.

Just four years ago, there was an aborted attack at Winslow Township High School, in which several misfit Goths who had been victimized by members of the lacrosse team planned to kill 25 students, teachers and other people in the area on the anniversary of the Columbine massacre. High schools in the Oaklyn area and Cherry Hill have also had similar scares. With bullying at the core of so many of these violent plans, it's imperative to educate and empower the area's children on how to protect themselves from being victims or creating victims—and area experts are dedicated to helping parents and teachers do just that.

The root of the problem

According to Richard Selznick, director of the Cooper Learning Center at Cooper University Hospital's Department of Pediatrics and author of *The Shut-Down Learner*, bullying at its core occurs due to natural social groupings within classrooms. We have all watched the films where the jocks and cheerleaders are on one side and the academics are on the other. While a host of 1980s movies used the situation as a plot for humor, Selznick says that in reality, these groupings are what create the aggressor and the victim.

"In probably every group dynamic, there is going to be a lead," he says. "There's going to be someone who is more aggressive, and there's always going to be a person perceived to be weaker or at the bottom. There's a type of transaction that takes place." Selznick believes that weaker children exhibit traits on which aggressors feed—anything from good grades to a slighter frame to a quieter personality.

Lynne Smith, a guidance counselor at Voorhees Middle School, sees this interaction nearly every day. "Middle school is where it's at its worst," she says. "Kids are trying to find out who they are and where they fit in. They sense they can have power over some other kids." The number of bullying incidents tends to go down in high school, she says, but by that time they tend to be of a more serious nature.



While she spends her days in the trenches, Smith believes that bullying should never be considered just a part of the school experience. "It's a by-product of kids who don't know how to work through adolescent issues," she says.

Be proactive, avoid punishment

As most bullying occurs within the halls of school, many believe the education system should be responsible for keeping conflicts in check. However, since each school district has its own rules and policies on bullying, and each school may even have its own manner of enforcing those "standard" rules, children in South Jersey may be experiencing a wide variety of approaches.

Smith says that many schools claim they have a "no-tolerance" policy when it comes to bullying, and while it sounds like the toughest stance, she says it's actually not very effective. "It doesn't allow for individual situations," she says.

At Voorhees Middle School, health and social studies classes include talks on peaceful conflict resolution; assemblies encourage children not to be a bystander if they witness someone being bullied; peer mediators help students work out minor disputes before they become serious conflicts.

"The more we can encourage children to be tolerant and empathetic, the less bullying that will occur," says Smith.

At one Burlington County elementary school, they are starting that process early on. "We have a whole week where we talk to the kids about how not to be a bully," says a first-grade teacher there who prefers to battle bullying behind the scenes and wants to remain anonymous. "We have a whole unit on friendship that stresses what you need to do to be a good friend. We read lots of books and talk about how you can deal with bullies."

For her first graders, she suggests *Stand Tall Molly Lou Melon* by Patti Lovell and *Recess Queen* by Alexis O'Neill to parents looking for an age-appropriate read on how to deal with sticky situations on the playground. (See the sidebar on page 23 for more reading recommendations.)

If children do get out of hand, their classmates usually report that someone is "being mean," and she says the incident is dealt with immediately. "As things come up through the year, we talk [to the kids] about it. We say, 'You knew what you were supposed to do. But what did you do?'"

Selznick also promotes the idea of mediation, where both children share their side of the story and a middle ground is reached. "There is a point you can reach where they can shake hands and they can move for-

ward and realize, 'I don't have to like this kid, but I can get over it.'"

Beyond this, Selznick thinks the victims of bullying need to be protected. "Aren't we feeding into their innocence, then? Maybe. Maybe not," he counters. "Some kids just truly can't handle the interactions that are going on. They aren't helpless, but they do need help. They just lack the skills at that time to manage the situation."

While working with these types of children, Selznick says that asking the child to stand up for him or herself many times doesn't work; it may even exacerbate the issue. "No amount of trying to toughen them up or having them try to handle it on their own seemed to help from my point of view," he says of students he has worked closely with. "But there are things that you can try to do with the child to coach them. You don't want [the child] to hand it to the more aggressive kids. Things like acting silly or looking for attention. They need to shore up their reserves and not give the other kids stuff to work with."

Sometimes, though, aggressors don't need fodder to work with. Selznick worked with a local student who was having a tough time on the bus. Thirteen years old, he would be taunted and teased each morning. "I asked the parents, 'Why aren't you driving the kid to school?' He couldn't handle the bus," he says. "Even though I spent time helping him with his skills, the kids were picking up on something, anything."

In some area schools, your child's daily bus ride is videotaped, so if your child is having problems on the bus you can ask to see the footage to determine exactly what's going on and the action that should be taken.



Digital damage

Technology has not only made us better communicators; it's made us easier targets. Cell phones, digital video devices and social media sites are crawling with kids, and thus the newest front line: cyber-bullying. It's particularly prevalent among local high school students, who are armed with cell phones and the Internet while trying to assert their independence from authority figures—a loaded combination.

Richard Querry is the cofounder, executive director, CEO and president of the Institute for Responsible Online and Cell-Phone Communication (IROCC) based in Mount Laurel. The organization may have been started only in 2009, but it is already helping to address this new issue with gusto.

"It's really about an overall mindset of digital technology," says Querry. "The faster the network, the faster you can alter a life."

IROCC visits schools and youth groups and teaches kids just how

much power a keyboard can wield. By showing them how much damage they can do not only to fellow students but also to themselves, Guerry hopes they will respect digital devices and continue to use them responsibly.

"I tell them that what you do is real and permanent," says Guerry, who actually demonstrates during his presentations how he can easily find people's texts, e-mails and other online entries. Guerry wants kids to know that if they are being victimized online, the best advice is to simply walk away. "The individual being cyber-bullied has the ability to leave it be, while the person doing the bullying is leaving a footprint. They are the victim of their own actions," he says. "[When they send a hurtful message], every bully leaves a trace of who they are at that moment. You can't erase what happens on the Internet."

Once bullies are aware of the trail of evidence they're leaving, Guerry says he's found that students are more likely to stop than deal with the potential consequences of their taunting being discovered by the wrong people.

Statewide issues and reform

While bullying seems to occur most everywhere, New Jersey has begun to take steps to help its school districts better approach the problem. In fact, it was one of the first states to enact an anti-bullying law.

Stuart Green spent 2009 running the New Jersey Coalition for Bullying Awareness and Prevention, which put together a report for the state on bullying in New Jersey schools and suggestions for its alleviation. Proposed measures include introducing a state law that holds schools accountable for bullying that occurs off-campus and the creation of a bullying prevention fund.

As a result of the report, the Department of Education laid out in writing the steps parents of bullied children can take in a legal capacity. According to guidelines provided by the American Civil Liberties Union of New Jersey, parents should report all cases of harassment in writing to their child's teacher, principal or other school officials. Any instances involving physical or sexual abuse should also be reported to the police. If action is not taken, parents are then directed to file a complaint with the New Jersey Division on Civil Rights before considering a lawsuit. "That kind of clarity [in the law] has never existed before," says Green.

Green's greatest hope, though, is that funding will be allocated for what he calls technical assistance centers. Three would be set up across the state, including one for the South Jersey region, and would be dedicated to educating both teachers and parents about bullying conflict resolution. Centers would be run by ad hoc advisory groups made of experts from the area. "You really need some structure that looks at the efforts in the state and looks for the strengths and weaknesses," says Green.

What's a parent to do?

These larger groups are taking a stance, but in the end, experts believe the most progress can be made at home. Smith says parents should keep their eyes open for any changes in behavior. "[Children who are being bullied] may be usually open and talkative, but now that child is quieter. There may be changes in sleep patterns or eating. They may be reluctant to go to school."

If you suspect an issue, talking to your child is the only way to truly find out what's going on, Smith says. "Encourage your child to open up," she says. "Of course, that's not going to happen if [the parents] haven't fostered that relationship all along."

Selznick says parents should use the school as a neutral ground instead of trying to fix the issue themselves by confronting the aggressive child or the parents. "I think this approach would be fraught with danger for a variety of different reasons," he says. "The potential for there to be very bad communication between the parents is considerable. I would prefer going through the school if it is happening there."

He advises parents to approach the issue calmly, taking a tip from schools and using mediation. "Parents make a mistake by going to the schools too often very upset," he says. "Try a non-hostile way, work as partners. Say, 'We have a problem; this is what I'd like to do.'"

Serious actions for a serious topic

While most local cases of bullying may seem simple and even innocent—a push on the playground or an unwelcome nickname in the school halls—each instance can be the tipping point for a student. Young children who are bullied consistently start to have changes in their grades and health, but children in high school in particular are more private. They don't want their parents involved and may be more quiet about their distress.

"They try to handle things beyond their grasp, and by not telling parents or authority figures... before they know it, the problem has spiraled out of control," says Guerry. "We've seen a few suicides in the past year, where cyber-bullying may have been a factor."

Green says that nearly all children fear being bullied at some point and that that pressure greatly affects their school experience. "It affects the way kids learn," he says. "If you wanted kids' test scores to go up like a rocket tomorrow, you'd find a way to address [bullying]."

Green hopes that parents and schools will find a way to work together and begin to cure this disease. "This is a very serious and under-addressed problem, even 10 years after Columbine," he says. "Parents are reaching out for help. It needs to change."

If you would like more information on bullying and tips on discussing it with your child, visit the Coalition's website at NJBullying.org. ♦



Every parent's worst fear is that his or her child will be the odd one out who gets bullied and tormented at school. But what happens if it's your child who's causing the trouble? Daniel Hart, a professor at Rutgers University in the Center for Children and Childhood Studies, offers age-by-age tips for how to nip aggressive behavior in the bud.

"Preschoolers often have difficulty resolving conflict, and so kids in that age range probably need help imagining other strategies to negotiate social conflicts. For example, you might ask your child, 'How else could you have handled that situation?' or 'Do you think you could have taken turns?'"

In elementary school, bullies need help recognizing the extent of harm that they can cause to others. In cases like this, Hart recommends that parents connect themselves to the peers their child is bullying by saying things like, "I would be very, very hurt and upset if someone treated me like that."

Still, Hart warns the real danger with bullying is that it's often ignored or pushed aside by parents who fail to be more vigilant. When kids are older, there's no doubt that it's more difficult to teach them new behaviors. From early on, "There should be punishments and clear standards," says Hart. "No bullying in the family. No bullying in the neighborhood or at school." Bullying can be prevented, or at least reduced, but it is a social phenomenon as well as a reflection of an individual kid.

—Jeffrey Michael Smith

Other Recommended Reading

All available at Amazon.com

FOR 4 AND UP

Blue Lou and the Bullyfish

By Stephanie Arasim Portnoy with music by Andrea Green Feigenbaum
Adapted from the story "The Rainbow Sea" by Andrea Green Feigenbaum



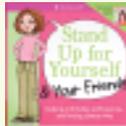
This musical storybook with a message, written by Suburban Family's own editor-in-chief, is also a stage play that has been performed throughout schools and theatres in South Jersey. The story teaches practical ways for young children to handle peer pressure and bullying, and comes with a musical CD featuring Broadway star John Tartaglia (*Johnny and the Sprites*, *Avenue Q*).

FOR GIRLS, AGES 9-12

Stand Up for Yourself and Your Friends: Dealing with Bullies and Bossiness and Finding a Better Way

By Patti Kelley Criswell and Angela Martini

This book, from the creators of American Girl dolls, helps girls learn how to spot bullying and speak up for themselves. Quizzes and role-playing scenarios give readers lots of ideas for dealing with bullies, including clever comebacks and ways to ask adults for help.



FOR BOYS, AGES 9-12

Just Kidding

By Tracy Ludwig
Adam Gustavson (Illustrator)



Created as a companion to the book *My Secret Bully*, Ludwig uses this new book to show how hurtful it can be to mask mean comments by saying, "Just kidding." This book explains to tween boys, in particular, how easy it can be to cross over from good-natured teasing to mean-spirited bullying.

FOR PARENTS

Queen Bees and Wannabes: Helping Your Daughter Survive Cliques, Gossip, Boyfriends and the New Realities of Girl World
By Rosalind Wiseman

The inspiration behind the hit film *Mean Girls*, this guide lets parents have a peek inside the world that teenage girls have to navigate on a daily basis. It's a great read for both parent and child to learn how to better handle the social jungle of high school.—J.M.S.



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