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Bullies: A schoolyard scourge and how to counter it

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It's easy to forget how hard it is to be 13, and Jim Shoemake found that he had done just that as he started his first year at Sylvan Middle School in Citrus Heights last fall.

"I was really astounded with how ... cruel kids can be to one another, and some of them didn't even realize it," said Shoemake, who is principal at Sylvan after switching to the middle school last year after working in high schools.

Shoemake said his school started a "major push" in its bully-prevention programs last year, and by the spring semester he noticed a changing attitude.

A similar attitude adjustment might benefit the rest of the country: According to the National Youth and Violence Prevention Resource Center, almost 30 percent of students in the United States have either been bullied or been bullies.

As schools begin a new year, experts offer advice for children and their parents.

What kids can do

1. Know your rights.

Find out your school's policy on bullying and harassment and know exactly what constitutes bullying. "A lot of people think of bullying as beating people up ... but a lot of bullying now is verbal," said Courtney Macavinta, co-author of "Respect: A Girl's Guide to Getting Respect and Dealing When Your Line Is Crossed."

2. Stand up for yourself.

Before calling in the authorities, try solving it yourself by talking it out. "They don't have to put it in an adult way, they can put it in their own way," Macavinta said. It may be scary, but it often works.

3. Document each incident.

If the problem persists, take down the four W's: who, what, where and when. This will serve as evidence for the next step. "After documenting, we really do encourage teens to report it," Macavinta said.

4. Tell someone.

As is the case with many forms of abuse, kids often keep the bullying a secret. "The fear is, 'If I tell someone, it's just going to get worse,' " Principal Jim Shoemake said. "Ninety-nine percent of the problems disappear when we get involved." Silence benefits only the bully, agrees author Derek Randel, who wrote the e-book "The Shameful Epidemic."

5. Build strong friendships.

Sticking with a group can provide protection, support and a sense of belonging. "Some kids that are teased long to be a part of the group that's teasing them," said Bob Brady, a psychologist and author of "Youth Risk and Resilience Inventory." Instead, Brady suggests, they should be seeking supportive friendships.

Facts about bullies

- Thirteen percent of students in grades six through 10 have bullied others, 11 percent have been targeted by bullies, and 6 percent have both bullied and been bullied themselves.
- Boys are more likely to be involved in physical aggression, such as hitting or pushing. Girls usually engage in more subtle and indirect forms of bullying, such as gossip and rumors.
- Male bullies target both boys and girls, but female bullies usually pick on other girls.
- Bullies tend to be confident, have high self-esteem and make friends easily.
- Children who are targeted by bullies usually are anxious, insecure and cautious. They often have low self-esteem and rarely defend themselves.
- One study found that 60 percent of bullies in grades eight and nine had at least one criminal conviction by age 24.
- When a school makes a commitment to end bullying, it can be reduced by as much as 50 percent.
- An extremely permissive or excessively harsh style of parenting can cause a child to be a bully.

Source: National Youth Violence Prevention Resource Center, www.safeyouth.org

Steps parents can take

- 1. Teach your child self-respect:** Tell her to carry herself confidently - instruct her to walk with her shoulders back, her head held high. "The weaker you feel about yourself, the more vulnerable you're going to be to (bullying)," said Courtney Macavinta, author of "Respect: A Girl's Guide to Getting Respect and Dealing When Your Line Is Crossed." Enroll your child in a self-defense or martial arts course, suggests Derek Randel, author of "The Shameful Epidemic."
- 2. Grow a funny bone:** A safe, nonconfrontational way to solve a bullying problem is to employ a sense of humor. Help your child think of one-liners to use when he's being teased. It could be something as simple as, "Thanks for sharing," and walking away, Randel said.
- 3. Listen up:** Ask your child questions, and listen carefully to the answers. Never ignore or belittle a child's report of bullying. Experts agree that one of the biggest problems in this issue is that after finally working up the nerve to tell their parents the problem, children's complaints are often ignored.
- 4. Remember, the bully's just a kid, too:** Keep in mind that both children in this situation need help. "A lot of (parents) want blood right away ... and that's so unhelpful," said Jim Shoemake, principal of Sylvan Middle School in Citrus Heights. "The kid that's doing the teasing needs just as much attention."
- 5. Get involved at the school:** Look for ways to participate in the school's bullying prevention program, which can help change students' attitudes toward bullying. "Some of these kids that were our biggest bullies are now the biggest advocates for anti-bullying," Shoemake said of the impact the bullying-prevention program "Be Bold" has made at Sylvan. If your child doesn't attend a school with such a program, ask the administration or school district to get one started.

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