

Saturday-Sunday, August 7-8, 2010

O P I N I O N

8/24/2010 LJHHS
Item # 12
Briefing 2010-BO158
Handout

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This is what bullying looks like

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Each day, 160,000 K-12 students in the U.S. stay home from school because they're afraid of being bullied. Millions go to school in survival mode, afraid of being targeted for having the "wrong" look or body size, the "wrong" skin color or religion, for being too smart or too slow. If all the students bullied in the past 10 days of school linked arms, they'd form a human chain of pain that circled the globe.

For centuries, adults insisted that bullying toughened children and prepared them for life. Most people now see bullying as a toxic cycle of violence, violation and humiliation that often leads to more violence.

Fortunately, Vermont has a strong anti-bullying law. John Halligan's son Ryan took his own life after being bullied for years. After the bill was passed in 2004, Halligan said, "No Vermont child should ever again be driven to self-inflicted harm and even death, to cope with the self-doubt and pain caused by bullying."

Whether it consists of physical attacks or verbal assaults, bullying includes:

— Power over their targets: This power is very visible when bullies are stronger, older, or more popular. It is less so when the power difference is rooted in verbal or social skills. Either way, bullying is fueled by unequal power relations and is best understood through this lens.

— Intimidating others: Bullying rarely occurs once. Targets must live with the fear that it will happen again. They know how fast taunts can lead to punches. This explains the terror that seemingly innocent teasing or harmless pranks can generate.

— Humiliating others: Bullying is about a public loss of control and status. Most students read about the incident or see pictures of it. Cyberbullying is the fastest growing form of bullying in the world. Cell phones and computers are the most dangerous weapons of mass destruction for children.

— Dominating others: This is no harmless joke or innocent mistake. Deeply influenced by our culture, bullies think it's cool to be cruel. Bullies meet their need for status, safety, pleasure and potency at the expense of others. As a middle school student said, "When people bully me it makes them feel big and

makes me feel small."

Putting others in their place: Consciously or not, bullies enforce a pecking order based on appearance, gender, sexual orientation, race, religion, social class and ability. Bullying is a ritual display of superiority and inferiority: targets are branded as losers, treated with contempt, and shunned.

It is important to note that bullying is not caused by deviant individuals. Our society teaches lessons that bullies learn well: Do what it takes to get what you want. Be the "hammer," not the "nail." Those with power can (ab)use others and often do. Cruelty trumps compassion.

Though rarely discussed, educators are bullied by administrators, colleagues and parents. Some educators bully students. Bullying also thrives in workplaces and places of worship, in boardrooms and bedrooms.

Bullying teaches destructive lessons. When no one speaks up or challenges bullying, targets and bystanders learn that dominance is acceptable, that onlookers and authorities will pay no heed to or support it. Bullying fuels widespread cynicism and helplessness. It conditions us to look at others through narrowed eyes.

Starting at a very young age, bullies learn that they can hurt and abuse others with impunity. This formative lesson has predictable results: bullies are far more likely to engage in dating abuse, domestic violence toward partners and children, and criminal activities.

Just as bullying is intimately connected to power inequities in our society, it provides an important window to change these dynamics. Everyone can challenge bullying.

Parents, educators, school staff and administrators are in a privileged position to lead this effort. We influence what children believe and who they become. Bystanding is not acceptable.

Our job is to help children identify obstacles to their and others' humanity; to know that change can occur and that we and they can help make it happen. Preventing bullying is a good place to begin.

Rob lives in East Dummerston and gives talks and workshops on bullying. He will offer a workshop at Antioch mid-August and at the Learning Collaborative in the Fall. You can reach him at RobKoegel@aol.com.