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Bullying is more insidious than ever—yet programs may not be doing enough to combat it

written by Lacy Boggs / illustration by Stephanie Mott

I was bullied as a kid.

At the time, I didn't think of myself as the victim of a bully because no one ever hit me or threatened to hit me. He never shoved me into lockers; he never even touched me. He made fun of me, teased me, called me names and made cruel remarks. His verbal abuse bruised my self-esteem—but not once did I consider my adolescent foe a bully.

Turns out I was wrong.

Bullying is not just swirlies and wedgies, black eyes and swollen lips. One of the biggest misnomers—and likely one reason bullying continues to grow despite increased awareness and classroom anti-bullying programs—is that bullying is not purely physical. In fact, according to experts, one reason these programs continue to fail is because of this lack of understanding.

Colorado law defines bullying as, “Any written or verbal expression, or physical act or gesture, or a pattern thereof, that is intended to cause distress upon one or more students.” Verbal maltreatment is the most prevalent form of bullying, according to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. It's a far cry from the Leave it to Beaver days when you knew you had a bully problem only when you came home with a shiner.

In fact, intentionally shunning someone or socially excluding him or her is also considered a form of bullying. After the attack on Columbine High School in 1999, anti-bullying programs swept into classrooms across the state and around the country, based in part on the theory that gunmen Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold killed 12 of their classmates and a teacher because they had been bullied. While that assumption is now being questioned, the legacy of that terrible incident remains with anti-bullying efforts integrated into curriculums across the state and the region.

Yet while there are more programs in place now than ever before, and more dollars are being spent to combat the problem, studies show that between 15 and 25 percent of students nationwide report being bullied with some frequency.

“Imagine if we had a 25 percent contraction rate for the swine flu,” said Corinne Gregory, founder and president of the Social Smarts classroom program. “The entire country would be up in arms demanding a vaccine and cure. Yet 25 percent of our kids are statistically at risk from bullying... I'm continually surprised that there isn't a larger public outcry about this problem.”

Truly, the state and individual districts have invested heavily in combating bullying in schools. But the dollars being funneled into these programs don't seem to be buying results, especially when you look at the number of students who still report being bullied—or that they themselves are engaging in bullying behaviors. According to a 2008 Colorado Trust study of 75 schools that implemented bullying prevention programs, a third of students surveyed admitted to physically abusing others, while more than half—57 percent—reported verbally abusing other students.

I spoke with several local parents of teens and tweens who had faced bullying problems in the last year, on the condition of anonymity. Their stories were all similar: discovering there was a problem, usually by accident or coincidence; wrestling with the best course of action; trying to give their children the tools to solve the problem on their own; and eventually, going to school administrators for help and intervention.

“We didn’t know exactly who to turn to,” one parent confessed. “The school told us that they were doing anti-bullying programs, but we didn’t know what they’d talked about or who to go to at the school.”

Some parents expressed a real disappointment with the reaction and inaction of school administrators when confronted with instances of bullying, even at prestigious private schools. One parent took the initiative to involve the parents of the other students, one of whom was shocked to learn what her student was doing online, and who vowed to keep better track.

Sometimes the problem was solved with school support—other times not. But one thing was clear: Even schools claiming to be committed to anti-bullying efforts were still seeing these problems taking place with alarming regularity.

So where is the disconnect happening?

Gregory believes the problem is endemic to society at large: a lack of empathy and understanding, an inability to put oneself in another’s shoes.

“Too many of our young people are coming in to the school system lacking social skills to be successful in school. If they don’t have another way to receive those social skills, it degrades over time,” she said.

In her opinion, this lack of basic “pro social” skills is the key to myriad problems in schools, including everything from bullying to teacher retention and test scores.

Many local districts’ anti-bullying programs focus very discretely and specifically on bullying as a problem separate from other problems in the school. While a program may try to teach kids how to react appropriately when confronted by a bully, it does little to try to prevent the bullying from happening in the first place. “We need to teach kids that there is a certain level of conduct that we expect all the time: doing math, playing on the playground, in the lunchroom,” Gregory said. It’s a tall order, requiring a hard look at the overall culture of the school, but the rewards are priceless. According to Gregory, the way you know when a bullying program has worked, is when “the kids won’t stand for it. We can be the greatest adults in the world, but the kids themselves are the ones who have to understand.”

Bullying “is a symptom more than it is a disease unto itself. We have to address it as a symptom of a larger problem,” she said. Indeed, researchers from the University of Chicago recently released a study in which they used functional magnetic resonance imaging to compare the brain activity of boys diagnosed with aggressive conduct disorder to those who showed no unusual signs of aggression. The results were striking, suggesting major differences in the ways the brains of children prone to bullying process information. Other research suggests that bullies are less likely to finish school or hold down a job.

It seems clear from this research that the children being bullied are not the only victims—the bullies themselves are likely the victims of physical or emotional trauma related to another part of their

lives.

“You have to ask yourself what kind of home situation were they raised in?” Gregory explained. “Very often that is the impetus for how they act out. If you connect with these kids, you’ll find out a lot about what motivates them and where they come from.”

Bullying cannot be viewed as an isolated problem, either for an individual child or for a school, but as an interconnected symptom of greater problems.

“Don’t fold over,” Gregory said, encouraging parents and teachers to take a stand and ensure schools are doing everything possible to treat the root causes of bullying, rather than the end results. “So many times it seems people hope that the problem will magically disappear because they don’t know how to deal with it. Enough people have to put their foot down until a collective voice is heard.

“Nobody notices that there’s an elephant in the room,” she continued, “until somebody calls attention to it.”

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