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## Bullying in Schools: What Can Be Done?

By Melissa Breazile-Ensz

As long as there have been people, there have probably been bullies. Some adults see playground or lunchroom aggression as a rite of passage. That’s the breaks, say those who take the toughen-up approach. It’s just part of growing up.

Increasingly, though, with bullying rising to attention locally and nationally, experts say it is an issue that must be addressed.

But what, exactly, is bullying? Susan Swearer, Ph.D., an assistant professor of school psychology and licensed psychologist at University of Nebraska-Lincoln, describes bullying as “repeated, unprovoked harassment of another individual in which that individual has difficulty defending him or herself.”

Examples? Punching, shoving and other physical acts; spreading rumors, online and off; excluding others; mean teasing; and encouraging some peers to “gang up” on others.

Sue Evanich, Ph.D., director of administrative services for Westside Community Schools and chairwoman of the anti-bullying committee, also noted the power-play aspect.

“Bullying is typically a student trying to exert control or authority over another student,” she said.

The “control” can lead to dire circumstances, as seen in recent incidents in and outside of Omaha. In June, a 16-year-old girl died after being jumped by another teen girl outside a south Omaha restaurant. In February, a Millard North boy was beaten and videotaped by classmates while an estimated 20 additional students watched. And in August, a Plattsmouth high school boy was sexually assaulted in the locker room.

Bullying isn’t just gaining attention from real-life tragedies. It has also caught the eye of popular culture. Although movies such as “*Mean Girls*” and books such as “*Odd Girl Out*” suggest that girls engage in a certain type of aggression, Swearer believes it’s impor-

tant not to stereotype according to gender or behavior.

“The take-home point is, adults in school systems need to be aware that relational aggression can be just as damaging as physical aggression,” Swearer said.

Whether “relational” — like the exclusion, backstabbing and intimidation often attributed to girls in popular media — or physical, bullying has immediate and lasting effects, regardless of gender.

### Bringing bullying to the surface

Even to astute adults, bullying can sometimes slip under the radar. Children may be less than forthcoming to their parents about what’s happening at school. Teachers can’t police every nook and cranny of the building.

In *Queen Bees & Wannabes: Helping Your Daughter Survive Cliques, Gossip, Boyfriends & Other Realities of Adolescence*, author Rosalind Wiseman describes the air of secrecy parents notice around their teen daughters. Girls may not be willing to tell adults about a bullying problem. Why?

“Because she probably assumes that if she snitches things will get even worse; adults won’t take teasing seriously; and she should be able to take care of her own problems,” Wiseman writes.

Westside Community Schools has tried to unearth the facts about bullying in its buildings by conducting surveys. The anonymous questionnaires went out in the fall to students, staff and parents. The committee is still analyzing the data but hopes to use the findings to establish district-wide consistency in prevention and response.

“The first step is certainly to collect anonymous data, to find out what the kids are saying about bullying. It happens at the kid-level and staff may not be aware of it,” Swearer said.

Before figuring out solutions, adults are charged with identifying what’s going on — which is where those surveys come in handy. But simply being

observant can help, too, especially early on. Adults might notice that their young child is teasing or poking playmates, or taking toys. An observant grownup will pay attention to the other child’s reaction. Is the playmate becoming uncomfortable? Are the friends on an equal playing field, or is one definitely on some sort of power trip?

If it’s the latter, it may be time for intervention.

### Taking root ... and branching out

But how has this happened? Whether a child is the bully or the bully’s target, parents might wonder how little Jenny ended up here. There are a lot of theories.

Cristina Matukewicz, membership services manager with the Great Plains Girl Scout Council, said her agency’s findings are in line with those of other researchers.

“First of all, there is a cultural disenfranchisement of the girls and their families, and the community where they live,” she said.

For example, children may come from low-income, single-parent households. They may be exposed to violence in the home. Because they don’t feel they belong in mainstream culture, Matukewicz said, they might join gangs or other groups prone to bullying. Another problem she cited, for girls in particular, is a seemingly built-in low self-esteem at about middle school age. Their bodies are changing. Plus, they’re feeling the pressure of how society wants them to act and look.

“The group they trust the most are their peers, and that’s the group that probably isn’t going to give them the best options,” she said.

The negative effects apply to bullies, the victims and the “bully-victims” — those who are caught in a cycle of being bullied and then bullying others.

According to experts, kids involved in bullying tend to have increased levels of depression and anxiety, and chronic victimization can lead to low self-confi-

dence and social and relationship problems.

“The problem is, the bullying issue is the precursor to the gang and violence issue,” Matukewicz said.

According to Swearer, one out of four male bullies at age 8 were criminally convicted by the time they reached age 30.

In April, a 19-year-old metro-area woman was raped and kidnapped by a mixed-gender group of teenagers and 20-somethings. The attackers confined her at a Bellevue home, but she escaped after being taken to Council Bluffs.

According to *The Reader*, at least one of her attackers had a history of bullying. Ashley “Baby D” McColligan — so named for the bully in the movie *Friday* — had, in the months prior to the Bellevue incident, beat another girl with a coat hanger, dragged her around by the hair, punched her and ordered her to walk naked in front of others.

School shooters, like those involved in the 1999 Columbine tragedy, have commonly been identified as bully targets. Just last March, Malcolm teen Joshua Magee, described as a victim of bullying as well as a manic depressive, was charged with attempted first-degree murder after being discovered with explosives in his car in the school parking lot.

### Hope for the future

There is good news. Swearer said that, depending on the study, school-wide interventions have shown 30 to 50 percent reductions in bullying.

It doesn’t happen overnight, but there are some programs that can help. She suggests integrating anti-bullying messages into the classroom, drama skits, art, workshops, empathy training, setting up an advisory group, making policy and posting anti-bullying pledges.

The Girl Scouts’ In the School Day program operates during school hours since some students won’t come to after-school activities. Leaders will go to class or show up during lunch, and although