



Bullying – A growing public health issue

By Rich Bayer, Ph.D.

Many of you have read about the recent, tragic event in Florida in which a 12-year-old girl committed suicide after being bullied by two other girls aged 12 and 14.

According to reports in mid-October from national media sources, the victim, Rebecca Sedwick, had been verbally, physically and cyber bullied by the other two girls throughout 2012 and 2013. Rebecca's parents had even moved her to a different school during this time but the cyber bullying continued until the day Rebecca took her own life.

Ironically, October is National Bullying Prevention Month.

Although Rebecca's case is extreme and with dire results, bullying among children, especially teenagers, is not uncommon.

Statistics show that bullying is generally on the rise. This is due mainly to the increase in cases of cyber bullying over the past ten years.

CNN reports that 3.2 million students are bullied each year. The statistics show that bullying behaviors begin to appear in grade school, are most prevalent in middle school, and begin to decline in high school.

Identifying the Problem

“Bullying,” is defined by the US Center of Mental Health Services as, “repeated acts of physical, emotional, or social behavior that are intentional, controlling, and hurtful.”

Here are some common signs that a child is the victim of bullying:

- Becoming withdrawn socially
- Showing fear when it's time to go to school
- Increasing signs of depression
- Decline in school performance
- Speaking with fear of another child
- Noticeable decline in self-esteem
- Signs of physical altercations, such as bruises, scrapes or other marks

Typically, acts of bullying occur in places where children are frequently present but adult supervision is either absent or inadequate. Certain school settings meet these criteria. As teachers cannot be everywhere, bullying commonly takes place on playgrounds or in hallways or bathrooms, and usually during school breaks. The acts themselves include

hitting, pushing, and kicking, as well as indirect behaviors such as threatening, name-calling, or exclusion.

Now, with the advent of cyber bullying, the playing field has changed significantly. Children can use texting or social media to post mean and hurtful messages. These may include words as well as images that can stigmatize the victim.

In all cases of bullying, the victim suffers some kind of emotional pain and occasionally physical pain caused by the attacker or attackers.

How We Can Help the Victim

The best option a victim can use to help decrease bullying is to tell an adult about it. This could be a family member or teacher.

But unfortunately, 58% of children who have been victims say they have not reported to an adult, and are reluctant to do so because they think it will not do any good.

So, as a parent or teacher, it helps to ask questions. If you see any of the signs of bullying mentioned above, take a few moments to talk with the child. And hear them out. Listen carefully, in an open, non-judgmental way.

Let the child know you're on their side and also that the bullying is not their fault. Sometimes children become convinced that it's their fault, reasoning they're not good enough in some way.

If you're the parent or friend of a child that has been bullied, go with him or her to school authorities and report the details of all bullying incidents. Ask school officials and teachers to be actively involved in stopping the bullying behavior.

Recommend that the child avoid the bully as much as possible, in school and online. If texting is involved, a new phone number for the child may help.

Because self-esteem is usually at stake, we need to work with our children to help them enhance some of their talents and positive traits. For example, you can help them find something they're good at and encourage more activity in that area. Recommend that they join groups of students of the same age who have similar interests (music, sports, or hobbies).

Also encourage your child to make a friend and perhaps invite the friend over. This will reduce social isolation and help to develop positive peer interaction.

National surveys indicate that a high percentage of teachers don't see bullying as a problem and infrequently intervene. Thankfully, this is not the case in Maryland and Cecil County where an anti-bullying curriculum has been offered. Called Positive

Behavioral Intervention Supports program, this helps students develop positive goals and improve respect for themselves and others.

Bullying itself has a broad impact. Not only does it victimize individual targets, it also negatively impacts the entire school or social group by creating a climate of “fearful distraction.” Children can become over-vigilant; trying to avoid bullying situations or to avoid acting in ways they think might elicit bullying. This interferes with learning, both academic and social. Experts from the Johns Hopkins Center for the Prevention of Youth Violence report that bullying is as much a public health problem as an individual problem, due to the negative effects on the overall school climate.

But what about the bully? People who bully are often victims themselves of some kind of emotional trauma or aggression and can benefit from positive interventions that will help them to change their behavior, including mental health counseling.

In a future column, I will discuss what to do about the bully. As acts of bullying increase, the number of bullies also increases and these individuals need help as much as the victims.

Rich Bayer, Ph.D., is the CEO of Upper Bay Counseling and Support Services, Inc. and a practicing psychologist.

###