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Bullying is an everyday problem

Emily Sohn

By *Emily Sohn*

Colorful posters line the halls of Anwatin Middle School in Minneapolis. Scattered among announcements and artwork, these student-made signs all carry this message: "Be Kind. Respect Others. Stop Harassment. Keep Anwatin a Bully-Free Zone."

Bullying is a problem at Anwatin, but it's not just Anwatin's problem. In schools around the world, kids make life miserable for other kids. Middle school, in particular, is a time when bullying gets out of control.

"As you start to change with puberty and all that stuff, it's a lot of work," says Shameela, who was a sixth-grader at Anwatin last year. "This is when you learn how to take responsibility, how to act older and more mature. Then, you gotta deal with rumors and everything. People have nothing else to do. It's a lot of drama."

As Shameela and her classmates tell it, bullying can really wear a person down. Victims often feel bad about themselves. They can get anxious and sad. Some start abusing alcohol and drugs, experts say. Many skip school to avoid being teased all the time. Happiness slips away.

"It makes people hurt inside," says Marcus, 12, who was also a sixth grader at Anwatin last year. "You get stress. Soon, you're not doing your schoolwork because it's getting so bad. You used to be on top of your grades. Now you're not."

Scientists don't know whether bullying happens more now than it used to. But bullying is starting at younger and younger ages, says Dorothy Espelage, an educational psychologist and bullying researcher at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. Teachers deal with bullies in preschool. Parents see them at play dates.

As kids get older, websites such as Facebook and MySpace make it easy to spread rumors and hurt people. And bad endings are becoming more common. Earlier this year, a 15-year-old Massachusetts girl committed suicide after months of constant teasing, much of it online, by other kids.



Posters and signs at Anwatin Middle School are tools for keeping the daily atmosphere positive.

Photo by E. Sohn



The good news is that experts are trying to help. They are going into schools and talking to kids. They are trying to figure out what makes some people bully. And they are testing out ways to make bullying stop. Kids who are bullied may feel like nobody cares. But scientists now know that bullying is a big problem. And these researchers want to help.

"It's impossible to open the newspaper or look at the Internet recently without seeing some story" about bullying, says Susan Swearer, a psychologist and bullying researcher at the University of Nebraska—Lincoln. "We have to create a culture where it's not cool to do."

Rumor mill out of control

As a fifth-grader, Mikey had plenty of friends in his small elementary school. Last year, he became one of 275 students in his class at Irving Middle School in Lincoln, Neb. Every day, the sixth-grader walked past hundreds of people he didn't know. Discussing his school life last spring, he said that kids were spreading rumors that he was racist.

Just at the surface. For the first 50 days of the BP spill, responders focused on surface oil, like that hitting the beach here in the Grand Isle area of Louisiana. But large amounts of oil haven't surfaced.

Photo by E. Sohn

again.

Maybe you've been a victim: Without warning, a group of kids starts calling you embarrassing names or making fun of the way you talk. Maybe you've been a bully — telling a classmate that he can't sit with you and your friends at lunch and then laughing as he walks away.

Even if you're always nice to others and have never been teased, you've probably seen a bully be mean to somebody else. If you just stood there or walked away, you're a part of the problem, too. Bystanders who don't help, Espelage says, only make the situation worse.

"There needs to be serious conversations among middle school and high school students about how they are contributing to how people are being treated," she says. "What are the real barriers to helping someone out?"

Kids have trouble answering that question. Again and again, middle-school students tell Espelage that bullying begins with a misunderstanding. Rumors fly. Within days, no one remembers how it all started. The truth disappears. Gossip takes over.

Shameela remembers when her best friend turned on her in the third grade.

"I supposedly said stuff about her," she says. "At recess, her and her friends would gang up on me about all the drama that had supposedly happened. I started getting scared. I went home and cried. She was supposed to be my real friend."

Power of words

When you think about a bully, you may picture someone hitting or pushing, or throwing things. Often, though, a bully's only weapon is words. Up to half of the time, Espelage has found, kids tease others about being gay. Whether the description is true or not, the teasing is unkind. That kind of negative talk is called homophobia.

By the seventh grade, homophobic bullying can turn into sexual harassment. This is much more dangerous. It can hurt people deeply and even physically.

Bullies also tend to use language that is racist or otherwise offensive.

Another recent study found that obese kids are more likely to be bullied. The study looked at kids in the third through sixth grades. That's something that teachers and parents need to watch out for, say the study's authors.

While bullies come in all shapes and sizes, studies suggest a few patterns. For example, bullying usually begins with just one ringleader, maybe two. Those leaders are the people who hold the group together. Ringleaders tend to be popular, athletic and attractive. That doesn't necessarily mean that other kids actually like them. It just means that these bullies have good social skills. And they have the power to get good kids to do bad things.

Deep inside, Espelage says, top bullies often hold in a lot of anger. Perhaps their parents fight a lot. Or maybe their siblings beat them up all the time. As these troubled kids hit puberty, they might just feel angry at the world. Bullying can make them feel better, at least for a little while.

"People have been shoving me around and shooting hornets at me," said Mikey, now a seventh grader at Irving. Hornets are folded-up pieces of paper that kids fling with rubber bands.

"They're saying, 'Leave. Don't get near me. You're racist,'" he said. "I'm mad because I really can't stop any of it. If I try to talk to them, they'll be mean. They'll say, 'Don't talk to me.'"

As frustrating as Mikey's days were, his experience is pretty typical.

Researchers define bullying as aggressive behavior that happens again and



"You get stress. Soon, you're not doing you're schoolwork because it's getting so bad. You used to be on top of your grades. Now you're not." Marcus, Anwatin Middle School

Photo by E. Sohn

It's easy for a ringleader to gather a posse because most middle-school students want to feel like they belong to a group. Most students also want to protect themselves from getting attacked. Once a bully has a group of followers, he or she makes life miserable for others, often for no reason at all.

"When there's a new girl that thinks she can come in and run the school, she says, 'I created you, and I can un-create you,'" Marcus explains. "She says, 'I own that table. Those are my friends.'"



Students make posters for the halls of Anwatin Middle School to help spread the message that bullying is not cool.

Photo by E. Sohn

Anatomy of a bully

Some experts think bullying comes naturally to humans. For our ancestors, they argue, being able to control others was a useful strategy for survival. By acting tough, some people would earn a higher rank than others. These leaders would take responsibility for the group. Everyone else would respect the leaders and do as they were told. When each member of the group knew where he or she belonged, society would run smoothly.

Monkeys and apes, humans' closest relatives, still organize their societies this way. But for modern people, the behavior can backfire. Teenage bullies don't take care of their classmates, like top-ranked apes do. Instead, their meanness simply causes trouble.

Bullying hurts people. To stop it, schools usually call an assembly and tell kids to be nice. That strategy, Espelage says, simply does not work. "We have not moved the needle on bullying at all," she says.

Instead, some of the newest anti-bullying programs try to reach kids early in life. The goal is to teach kids how to stop the behavior before it even starts. The best programs, Espelage says, happen often. Kids might have anti-bullying lessons once a week from elementary school through high school. These programs use books and videos to teach kids about how to deal with their feelings. Kids put on plays. And they write in journals.

The idea is to make kids really think about what happens at school every day and to work hard to change it. With enough practice and the right kinds of tools, kids might actually learn to make life better for other kids.

As students do their part to battle bullying, experts say, adults have to get involved, too. Parents need to talk to their kids about what it means to be a good person. Schools need to act quickly with serious punishments. Consequences are the best way to take power away from bullies.

"Go tell an adult or teacher really fast," Mikey says.

That's what he did, and things soon began to get better for him. He also thought about why his attackers were behaving that way. By developing compassion, he was able to feel better about himself.

"It's not really your fault," he said. "The person bullying you has a problem at home or something and doesn't know how to deal with it. They just bully to make them feel good about themselves."

Mikey might be on to something, experts say.

"Most kids say to us that they will never tell a teacher or parent because it won't change anything," Swearer says. "They have to trust that an adult is going to be able to help. They can't do it by themselves. It's too big of a problem."



Photo by E. Sohn

<http://www.sciencenewsforkids.org/articles/20100922/Feature1.asp>

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