

The News-Gazette.com

Parents learn how to nip bullying in the bud

By Amy F. Reiter

Friday February 20, 2009

URBANA – Bullies sound big and bad, mean and rotten.

They don't usually conjure up the kid who won't share at the preschool playgroup.

Although not sharing might not equal bullying, the behaviors taught and learned even among the youngest children has an effect on how they treat each other growing up, said Dorothy Espelage, an Oprah-approved bullying expert and University of Illinois educational psychology professor.

The professor talked to about 40 parents from elementary schools around Urbana in a meeting that also marked the first time all the elementary PTAs were working together.

"It's not that we have a huge bullying problem," said Angie Henderson, Yankee Ridge Elementary School PTA co-president. For her, combating bullying is about learning "if there's a way to nip things before there's a problem."

Though bullying hasn't been a big problem at Leal Elementary School, according to Becky Mead, the school's PTA president, the issue of bullying is "something that comes up at every PTA," she said. "I think everybody could be better. I think everybody could learn more."

Espelage packed years of research on bullies into an hourlong talk. She told parents that they cannot be complacent and wait until there's a problem, but to talk with their children about what friendship means, about what a friend is – so they'll be able to recognize when someone isn't being one.

To that end, adults also need to be present, to listen and model a good relationship.

"Everything you say, they hang on to," Espelage said. "They're watching everything you do. Everything."

Parents of preschoolers should work with their children on skills such as sharing and joining a group. As they get older, Espelage said, talk with them about the consequences of actions, about how to talk through problems.

"As your child is developing, there are certain things that parents can do to buffer them," Espelage said. "Really, we need to intervene early on."

From her research, she said she has found that about 40 percent of the school population consists either of bullies or victims of bullies – or bullies who have also been bullied. When a parent spots bullying, Espelage said, they should document the incident, the date and the time. Doing so, she said, can help in getting school staff to listen and do something. But don't leave it up to the school to teach good behavior.

Christy Burisek, the mother of two children at Prairie Elementary School and a third yet to go, was struck by the idea of "teaching – no matter what the age – what a real friendship should look like," she said. "You just assume they would know."

For her, learning how to combat bullying is "preventative," she said, and helps her prepare to talk with her children about the subject.

"My older child has had questions about this," she said.

Espelage said youths who are bullied often stop talking about it and blame themselves for what's happening. A parent needs to keep pushing the conversation, she said.

"Don't let them end with 'fine,'" she said.

On the Web

Anti-bullying sites recommended by Dorothy Espelage:

Health Resources and Services Administration's Stop Bullying Now campaign: www.stopbullyingnow.hrsa.gov

National Mental Health Information Center: <http://tinyurl.com/brddzq>

Find this article at:

http://www.news-gazette.com/news/2009/02/20/parents_learn_how_to_nip_bullying_in_the_bud

Comments

The News-Gazette.com

The East Central Illinois Online News and Advertising Source

Contents of this site are © Copyright 2009 The News-Gazette, Inc. All rights reserved.