

Creating a Bully Free Environment

By Allie Hoch

Bullying has become a more prominent issue in today's society. It not only makes the school environment unsafe for the bully victims, it also seriously affects the victim's ability to learn. According to the Stand for Silence Campaign, 60% of fourth through eighth grade students are experiencing bullying.

Media and access to technology is responsible for the increase in bullying over the past several years. Bullying has evolved over time. It is less frequently physical and has transformed to cyber bullying, which creates an emotionally abusive environment for the victims. Children use their smart phones, social media, and applications to spread rumors and torture their peers. There are now applications such as Yik Yak and Ask FM, in which provide children space to post anonymously and create chat rooms to virtually attack other children. While bullying is not the intent of these applications, it has become a very common outlet of such behavior. Children are able to use technology to hide behind their words and actions, making the process feel less severe to those bullying. The victim is affected almost more so by cyber bullying because there is no easy way to escape such environment. Home used to be a safe space for victims to run to, but bullying no longer stops at school. This becomes a challenge because there are few physical indicators of cyber bullying, and parents struggle to understand the behavioral changes they see in their child.

When students are aware their peers are targeting them, they feel less safe at school. We have see children avoiding school, quitting sports teams, abusing drugs, and even hurting themselves as a result of bullying. Educators are responsible for keeping students safe and creating a healthy environment for all students. While it may be difficult to become aware of these online cases of bullying, there are a variety of other signs to look out for in the classroom. Indicators of bullying include acting out, signs of depression, exclusive behavior, unexplainable injuries, frequent absences, performance change in school, and low self-esteem. Creating a zero tolerance classroom policy and communicating with the administration about incidents of bullying early on can help prevent any situation from becoming worse.

School administrations and faculty need to be consistent and hold students to high expectations, so there is little room for students to bully other students. While this may decrease the amount of bullying, it is likely to still occur on some level. In such cases, it is important to investigate the situations, provide consequences and support, as well as inform the parents of the behavior. Unfortunately, some parents may not care to get involved, in which case, it is important to notify all of the teachers and remain in contact with the parents, to better support and protect the student being bullied. The school administration needs to continue to follow up with the victim to ensure he or she is feeling safe and the situation is under control.

When I was in eighth grade, I was bullied by a group of girls I once believed were my friends. It was first most evident through social media. These girls were friendly in person, but spread rumors and said incredibly hurtful things via MySpace and Facebook. It quickly escalated as the girls began to exclude me at school, spread rumors further, and verbally torture me in person. This was a very difficult time for both my mom and I, as neither of us knew how to handle the situation. Neither my teachers nor the administration were aware of the bullying, and it wasn't until my mom informed the administration that they got involved. Once the administration was made aware of the bullying, they called the eight girls involved and me to the office to meet with a bullying professional for several hours. The girls who committed the majority of the bullying were suspended. I was incredibly fortunate my mom was involved and that the school was willing, ready, and able to move forward with the issue. My situation was very unique, as there are not many schools who are able to provide bully victims the resources I received.

It is our responsibility as educators to ensure school is a safe place for students to learn and grow. While bullying may not be completely avoidable, we can work together to keep our students safe and create a bully free environment.