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Parents play important role in reducing the impact of bullying

Awareness of bullying has increased dramatically in the 40 years since a Swedish psychologist, Dan Olweus, became the first to study childhood bullying.

Because of Olweus' work, today's parents are much more sensitive to the signs and effects of bullying on their children. But parents may not know how their own behavior can affect bullying, says University of Wisconsin-Extension digital parenting education specialist Anne Clarkson.

"Bullying is repeated or aggressive behavior against a child who may have hard time defending him- or herself, but not all unkind behavior is bullying," says Clarkson. "In fact, teasing and jockeying for status are actually a normal part of childhood and adolescence, teaching young people important relationship skills for later life."

Parents play important role

Clarkson says that parents can play an important role in minimizing both unkind behavior and the likelihood of bullying when they teach and model positive relationship skills for their children.

Conversation is the first step to prevent bullying, says Becky Mather, education coordinator for the Wisconsin Child Abuse and Neglect Prevention Board. "Parents who talk with their children for as little as 15 minutes a day increase the probability that the child will come to them for help and advice."

When parents talk directly about bullying, teens feel supported and learn strategies for responding to bullying—also increasing their ability to stand up for others, says Mather. Ideas for how to start such conversations are available from the U.S. Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration's free app KnowBullying (<http://store.samhsa.gov/apps/knowbullying/>).

"Parents also help prevent bullying when they model tolerance and inclusion of a variety of people and personalities," Mather says. "A parent who actively shows his or her teen how to get along with others and deal with disagreements in a respectful, assertive way models important relationship skills."

Mather says parents can help their teens be more inclusive and understanding by encouraging a child to think about another person's perspective, especially when a peer is acting inappropriately or being annoying. Parents should avoid using derogatory language and teach their children that it is never OK to use terms that mock or demean others.

Technology as a source of bullying

Finally, parents can structure environments to head off bullying before it takes place. One common source of bullying is technology, says Clarkson. “No young person should have 24-hour unlimited access to smart phones, texting, computers, or other digital media. Parents can establish household rules where teens and children are required to use computers and tablets in common areas of the house where parents can monitor their screens so they know what teens are seeing and sending.”

Clarkson says parents should also monitor children’s texts, apps and computer history for evidence of bullying. Youth who experience cyber-bullying are frequently embarrassed and do not tell their parents about it. In fact, teens often continue to use media even when they experience cyber bullying and would be better off disengaging. By the same token, a parent whose teen is the perpetrator of online harassment is equally likely to be in the dark about a child’s bad behavior.

“A parent concerned that her or his child is the victim of bullying should contact the child’s school or officials at other sites where harassment takes place, or, if necessary, contact the police,” says Mather. Parents of victims should not contact parents of bullies directly. The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services publishes resources about bullying [<http://www.stopbullying.gov/>].

Adults can help children increase their awareness of bullying so they can avoid contributing to it and recognize bullying when they see it. Young people also benefit when they understand how to address bullying behavior assertively and safely (Link to SAMHSA video <https://youtu.be/WwD0Zgk8jGA>).

Children look to their parents and caregivers for advice on tough choices and peer pressure. Parents who talk about and model how to advocate appropriately and safely for vulnerable individuals help prevent bullying.

To learn more about bullying and other issues related to families, contact Lori Baltrusis, Family Living Educator at Sawyer County UW Extension. Lori.baltrusis@ces.uwex.edu

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