

## Getting Tough on Bullying

FRIDAY, Nov. 21 (HealthDay News) -- Behavior that was once dismissed as "kids being kids" is now recognized as bullying. And as mounting research shows the negative effects on both the bully and the victim, mental-health professionals, schools, parents and even kids themselves are coming up with new ways to combat this threatening behavior.

"Bullying shouldn't be considered a normal part of growing up. Adults need to take it seriously and try to understand why kids are involved on either end of bullying," said Richard Gallagher, director of the Parenting Institute at the New York University Child Study Center. "Any form of verbal or physical behavior that is controlling or threatening is bullying."

According to the federal government's Stop Bullying Now Web site, bullying includes:

- Any act that physically hurts someone, such as punching, kicking or shoving.
- Excluding people from a group.
- Teasing people or spreading bad rumors about them.
- Using someone's computer user name and posting lies or rumors.
- Sending hurtful instant messages, e-mails or text messages.
- Posting mean pictures, lies or rumors about someone on a Web site, such as Facebook or MySpace.

One of the biggest problems that adults encounter with bullying is silence. It's difficult to get accurate estimates of how pervasive the problem is, because children just often don't report it, usually because of fear.

To get a better idea of the extent of bullying, Dr. Thomas Tarshis, president and medical director of the Bay Area Children's Association in Cupertino, Calif., and his colleague, Dr. Lynne Huffman, designed a 22-question survey that kids could take quickly and confidentially. Gallagher said the survey "would likely lead to better reporting from kids, because it may be easier to provide the info in the survey rather than in an interview."

When the researchers administered the survey to a group of 175 third- and fourth-graders in an Arizona school, they found that almost 60 percent of the children reported participating in at least one bullying behavior, and 90 percent of the youngsters reported being on the receiving end -- victimization -- of at least one bullying behavior.

Consequences of bullying can affect both the bullies and the victims, Tarshis said. Victims may suffer a loss of self-esteem, and they may miss school, because they're afraid of being bullied.

Ironically, Tarshis added, "Bullies probably suffer worse long-term consequences, as they're more likely to use drugs or end up in jail in the future." But, he said, as more and more research is highlighting these long-term effects, the mindset of "toughing it out" is slowly starting to change.

"There needs to be a community-based change approach," Tarshis said. "It has to start with the school district, the principals, the teachers and support staff. When kids come in with complaints, they can't be ignored. You also have to involve parents, and you need the innocent bystanders to intervene and let other kids know that this behavior is not OK.

"Bullying used to give kids some sort of status at school, but a bully shouldn't receive special status, but should be ostracized for bullying behavior. The entire culture of the school has to change," he said.

Gallagher said many school systems are now taking a zero-tolerance approach to bullying, and the most effective programs are ones that are designed to help both victims and bullies.

"Kids bullying other kids may need anger-management training, or they may need further help because of something that's happening at home. Victims may need help in learning to be more assertive, and they may need additional help to recover from intense bullying," he said.