

Stop the bullying - Three-day conference puts the problem under a microscope

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When Dennis Maloney was a student at Denali Elementary School, he remembers bullying as a regular part of growing up. The bigger kids picked on the smaller ones. The mean ones picked on the weak ones. It was as if some sort of natural selection was happening on the playground and in the hallways and cafeteria.

Even then, Maloney said, it made him sick.

"I was one of the guys who stood up to the bullies, who told them it was not OK to pick on the others," Maloney said.

That message is represented this week at "Violence Prevention Under the Midnight Sun," a three-day conference in Anchorage that explores how to reduce bullying and violence in schools. Forty-plus years later, Maloney, an Anchorage attorney, said he has seen bullying from the perspective of a parent who watched his autistic son be bullied and as a professional who recently represented the family of a boy who tried to commit suicide after alleged unchecked and relentless bullying.

Maloney has spent more than \$30,000 and more than six months planning the nationally recognized anti-bullying conference, which began Sunday and ends Tuesday with lectures by world-renowned anti-bullying experts, workshops for professionals in the classroom and even a public forum for victims and bullies both evenings.

"I don't ever want to see another situation like (the Anchorage case) again," Maloney said. "It is too sad."

WHY DOES IT HAPPEN?

Bullying is nothing new.

A nationwide study, published in 2001 in the Journal of the American Medical Association, found that nearly 30 percent of a sample of sixth- through 10th-graders reported involvement in bullying, either as the victim, aggressor or both. In one of the most recent studies, completed in March by the organization Kids Health, a survey of 1,200 children from 9 to 13 years old, showed that 40 percent of them admitted to bullying at one time or another, mostly to gain attention or seem more "cool."

Local statistics are similar. The Anchorage School District conducts a yearly student, staff and parent survey called Profile of Performance. For the 2002-03 school year, about 19,000 of the district's 50,000-plus students responded. Of those who responded, 13 percent felt they were not safe at school.

So how does a school district deal with bullying and why do cases such as the one Maloney had, in which a 13-year-old tried to hang himself because the bullying was so bad, still happen in districts across the country?

Those questions are debated every day, and if the answer was easy it would have been dealt with long ago.

"Kids reflect what goes on in the culture, what they see," said Michael Kerosky, supervisor of Safe and Drug Free Schools, a federally funded grant program within the Anchorage School District. "I think it's bigger than parenting issues because as soon as (children) are exposed to the culture, they're learning all sorts of other behaviors that may or may not be acceptable."

Likewise, Kerosky said, teachers and administrators bring their own experiences with them that shape how they respond to bullying. Those who were bullied as children often carry those insecurities with them into their professional life. Those who were more assertive may not be as intimidated by what they see in their classrooms.

Experts at this week's bullying prevention conference have suggestions on the issue. They, too, agree that bullying is a convoluted problem that will not just go away with a simple zero-tolerance policy. The key, they say, is changing our culture's mind-set. Bullies, we've been told, are simply part of the school environment, something we should deal with and move on. But, just as corporal punishment once was thought to be acceptable, attitudes about bullying are beginning to change.

"Just because bullying is a traditional rite of passage does not mean that it has to continue," said University of Illinois professor Dorothy Espelage, one of the country's foremost experts on bullying and author of "Bullying in American Schools: A Social-Ecological Perspective on Prevention and Intervention" and one of the guest speakers at this week's conference. "We cannot afford to continue to ignore or write off these behaviors. There are serious consequences for the victims of these behaviors."

WHAT TO DO

The first thing experts will say is that bullying happens everywhere and that the Anchorage School District is no exception. As Espelage said last fall when in Anchorage for a conference-planning session: "Show me a school system that does not have a bullying problem, and I will move there in a minute."

Yet there are ways to make it less of a problem, experts also contend. At the top of their list is the need for school districts to be consistent with their anti-bullying efforts and to track their progress. John Hoover, a researcher at St. Cloud (Minn.) State University and one of the presenters at the conference, said school districts are spinning their wheels if they continue to offer programs here and there and without proof that they work. What's needed, Hoover said, is a "systemwide approach in place that measures pre- and post-indicators of violence." Such a uniform program would be more consistent, less costly and easier to manage, he predicted.

At first glance, the Anchorage School District looks like a classic case of programs run amok. There are some 20 plans aimed at making children less violent, teaching them coping skills, encouraging interactive problem solving and countless other tactics. There's one program that teaches families to resolve conflict peaceably at home with the theory that this will teach children to become better classmates at school -- complete with some 90 books on the subject that parents can use as a resource.

There's another called Kelso's Choice that gives students decision-making skills that help them assess how to respond to conflict. A third is called Aggressors, Victims and Bystanders that teaches middle-schoolers the skills needed to stop bullying when they see it. In fact, Kerosky said, bullying prevention is the focal point of his job.

Nonetheless, Kerosky said, every program has a place in the district's overall goal to reduce violence in schools. In fact, he said, the school district is one step ahead of what experts say is needed to reduce violence. These programs focus on respect and acceptance, attributes that take time to seep in but that he hopes will stop bullying before it begins. Most are funded through Safe and Drug Free Schools; some are paid for out of the district's general fund. Each program is used at varying levels and at the discretion of each school's administrators. District spokesman Roger Fiedler said schools are required to submit yearly plans showing what harassment and violence-prevention efforts are being made.

"If you can get respect to be the common denominator, you don't have to worry about bullying because it doesn't happen," Kerosky said. "I take issue with the claim that there must be just one name and that everyone use it. We're going one step upstream from that and attacking bullying before it even starts."

SEND THE RIGHT MESSAGE

Six years ago, Karen Lauer moved her son from his neighborhood school to Polaris K-12, one of the district's optional schools. At his old school, Klatt Elementary, there was a program called Resolving Conflict Creatively. It's one of the district's longest-standing and most heavily funded programs, providing training in such topics as bias awareness, resolving conflicts and mediation. More than 40 schools in the Anchorage School District use components of Resolving Conflict Creatively, and Safe and Drug Free Schools has provided nearly \$37,000 for it.

Before long, the Polaris students began to tease Lauer's son, "probably for being a new kid and all those things bullies hone in on," she said.

But Lauer had been trained through Resolving Conflict Creatively, and she had just the solution to her son's problems. The real challenge was getting him to follow through on them, she said. Lauer told her son to send the bullies "I" messages, simple statements to the bullies about the effect their teasing has. They are to be said with conviction, standing tall and confident, which is a huge thing to ask of a child who feels downtrodden.

"You're supposed to say things like 'I feel upset when you call me a name because I don't like it' or 'It hurts my feelings when you do that,'" she said.

After several weeks of the taunting, Lauer said she begged her son to just give the I messages a chance. "I even ended up offering him \$5 for using I messages," she said.

Finally, he did it, Lauer said.

"He came home and said, 'That felt like \$5,000 Mom, not \$5. It was the hardest thing I've ever done, but it worked,'" she said.

Today, Lauer's son is doing fine, in fact, he is now good friends with his original tormenter.

"It really was incredible," she said. "We nipped it early. That's the thing, a lot of times you try to fix the bad guy, and lots of times the bad guy can't be fixed. You can only control what you are in charge of."

Lauer's case shows that the district programs are working, at least at that school, Kerosky said. He said the framework of all the Anchorage School District's programs are, in fact, based on proven methods, primarily those of Norwegian researcher Dan Olweus,

considered by many to be the No. 1 expert on bullying-prevention issues. Both Espelage and Hoover espouse Olweus' bullying-prevention ideas as the most effective.

"We have not brought Olweus in to do the training on a school-to-school basis, but we use his content from his book," Kerosky said. Kerosky has been to Olweus' training seminars and said the Resolving Conflict Creatively Program -- the same method that worked for Lauer and her son -- complements Olweus' work.

NO CURE-ALL

Tracking the programs' successes is where the experts and the Anchorage School District diverge, Kerosky said. He agrees that record-keeping sounds great in theory. But he's working in the real world, where tight budgets and constant school-funding cuts make it near impossible to keep up with programs, much less create some sort of scientific tracking program.

"If you want hard-core science outcomes, researchers are going to say it has to be districtwide because it's the only way it can measure," Kerosky said. "But that doesn't take into account what schools can do on their own levels."

Just this year, Kerosky said, he came up with a crude and cost-free form of evaluating the district's anti-bullying programs that includes student surveys that can help identify where bullying is happening, when and how often. It only requires a few minutes to fill out and is put through electronic bubble scanners the district already owns. It's a step in the right direction, he said, but not a cure-all.

"The fact of the matter is we are not given money in the general fund to set up this elaborate system," Kerosky said. "Like I've said before, it's not that we don't know what to do, it's a matter of having the resources to make it happen." Even Espelage and Hoover acknowledge that most school districts survive on ever-tightening budgets, but they say that's no excuse.

"You must take social action," Espelage said. Parents and teachers must keep speaking out" to let school districts know bullying prevention programs are not the place to make fiscal cuts.

While Kerosky works on long-term plans to stop bullying before it starts, the sad fact remains that children who have not had enough training in treating their peers with respect are bullying right now. There are victims being pushed around every day, and it doesn't necessarily stop during summer break. School Superintendent Carol Comeau said she reiterates almost weekly to all district administrators the importance of taking bullying issues seriously. She also mirrors Espelage's urgings:

"The most important thing, if the parent feels they can't get any change or they feel that the school is not listening to them, is to call my office or one of the elementary or high school education directors. It is important that they not just be angry, that they need to call us so something can be done."

Furthermore, Comeau said, parents can contact the municipal ombudsman if they'd prefer a neutral source.

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Event is open to the public

Anchorage is hosting a series of anti-bullying lectures, workshops and public forums that began Sunday and end Tuesday. "Bye-Bye Bullies: Violence Prevention Under the Midnight Sun" features nine experts in violence prevention.

A one-time fee of \$10 gains admittance to all lectures and today's luncheon with Dorothy Espelage on "Bullying and Peers: What Friends Teach Us." Tickets at Tickets.com, are at all Carrs Tix locations and by calling 1-800-478-7328.

Advance registration for workshops is \$170, includes all lectures and the luncheon. Register in advance at www.bye-byebullies.com. Register at the door for \$200. Lodging is \$45 per night per person at University of Alaska Anchorage. Reserve at 751-7273, or visit www.uaa.alaska.edu/conferences.

Public forums for victims and bullies will be 6 to 8 p.m. today and Tuesday at Egan Center. After the conference, the public is invited to join Abused Women's Aid in Crisis for a showing of "Wrestling With Manhood: Boys, Bullying and Battering" at 7:30 p.m. Tuesday at the Bear's Tooth Theater. Information, call 258-7077.

SCHEDULE

TODAY

Discovery Theater, Alaska Center for the Performing Arts:

* 8-9:15 a.m. -- Keynote address: "Bullies, Victims and Bystanders: What's To be Done With Them? Teacher and Parent Steps to Manage the Problems" by Andy Horne, Ph.D.

* 9:30-10:45 a.m. -- Keynote address: "Bullying and Victimization at School: A Closer Look at the Gifted Learner" by Susan Swearer, Ph.D.

Egan Center:

* 11 a.m.-1 p.m. -- Keynote address: "Bullying and Peers: What Friends Teach Us," by Dorothy Espelage, Ph.D. Lunch provided.

* 1:2-15 p.m. -- "The Peaceful Schools Project: A Randomized Trial of an Intervention To Prevent Bullying and Improve Academic Performance in U.S. Elementary Schools" by Stuart Twemlow, M.D., Room 1. "The Provocative Victim" by Marlene Snyder, Ph.D. Room 2

* 2:30-3:45 p.m. -- "Developing a School Climate Survey" by Shelley Hymel, Ph.D., Room 1. "Bullying and Special Education," by John Hoover, Ph.D., Room 2.

* 4:5-15 p.m. -- "Developing a School Climate Survey," by Dorothy Espelage, Room 1. "Bullying and Special Education," by John Hoover, Room 2.

TUESDAY

Discovery Theater, Alaska Center for the Performing Arts:

* 8:9-15 a.m. -- Keynote address: "Child Psychiatric Testimony as an Agent of Social Change" by Gilbert Kliman, M.D.

* 9:30-10:45 a.m. -- Keynote address: "Bullying and Peer Harassment: Human Nature or Part of Growing Up?" by Shelley Hymel.

* 11 a.m.-12:15 p.m. -- Keynote address: "Boys Will be Boys, But What About Girls?" by Nicki Crick, Ph.D.

Egan Center:

* 1:30-5:15 p.m. -- Keynote address and workshop "We Can Stop the Bullying!" by Marlene Snyder, Room 1

* 1:30-2:45 p.m. -- "A Program for Reducing Bullying and Victimization in Our Schools" by Andy Horne, Room 2

* 3:4-15 p.m. -- "Target Bullying: Ecologically-based Prevention and Intervention for Schools" by Susan Swearer, Room 2

* 4:5-15 p.m. -- "The Science of Relational Aggression: Do We Know Enough to Intervene?" by Nicki Crick, Room 2

• Caption: ERIK HILL / Anchorage Daily News Bullying is a concern for Michael Kerosky, supervisor of Safe and Drug Free Schools for the Anchorage School District. "Kids reflect what goes on in the culture, what they see," he said. Dorothy Espelage and John Hoover will speak and conduct workshops on school violence at an anti-bullying conference today and Tuesday at the Alaska Center for the Performing Arts and the Egan Center. Photo by Evan R. Steinhauser Anchorage Daily News Anchorage attorney Dennis Maloney represented the family of a 14-year-old Anchorage boy who attempted suicide because of the bullying he endured at school. Mahoney spent more than \$30,000 planning this week's conference. Dorothy Espelage and John Hoover will speak and conduct workshops on school violence at an anti-bullying conference today and Tuesday at the Alaska Center for the Performing Arts and the Egan Center.

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