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Confronting the bully: When despair becomes tragedy

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One of the biggest conversations in our nation today is about bullying.

These days, bullying is more than just the schoolyard squabbles remembered by an older generation. It's becoming more intense and it's happening all over – including our own backyard.

In Crystal Lake, senior Nick Romita has a rare blood disorder that stunted his growth and made his bones brittle. Bullying has sent him to the emergency room.

In Johnsbury, a young student with severe hemophilia has been punched and hit by peers. The blows can be life-threatening.

Violence resulting from bullying is gaining more attention as an increasing number of young people are taking their lives after being harassed, tormented, humiliated and intimidated by their peers.

Missouri mother Tina Meier, mother of 13-year-old Megan Meier, told a McHenry audience last year how her daughter hanged herself after being cyberbullied by the mother of a classmate.

Three teenage boys – one in Houston, another in Greensburg, Ind., and the third in Tehachapi, Calif. – committed suicide within a matter of weeks in 2010, all after being bullied.

And then there's Scott Walz. Months away from his Johnsbury High School graduation, Walz committed suicide after being subjected to years of bullying.

These stories are not unique. In a four-part series starting today, the Northwest Herald will bring bullying into the local conversation.

SFIbWhat is bullying?

Researchers define bullying as a repeated pattern of aggressive behavior that involves an imbalance of power and purposefully inflicts hardship or harm on those who are bullied. Leading bullying research indicates there are serious and long-term consequences to this form

of torment, such as increased depression, substance abuse, aggressive impulses and school truancy.

“When I was growing up, I got bullied and it was a rite of passage, but we didn’t have the degrees of violence that we have now,” said Cjay Harmer, a peer intervention specialist with Pioneer Center for Human Services, which is based in McHenry. “I think we’re just noticing it more now because we choose to look at it.”

Bullying started gaining national attention after two Columbine High School students in Littleton, Colo., shot 13 classmates before turning their guns on themselves. The shooters were believed to have been bullied.

“Columbine was the thing that broke our backs, and everybody started saying this is something we really need to pay attention to,” Harmer said. “It was too bad that all those students at Columbine had to be martyrs for the cause. It took all those deaths for people to pay attention.”

Anti-bullying efforts are gaining momentum with high-profile documentaries such as “Finding Kind” and “Bully.” More celebrities are admitting that they, too, were bullied. But when does bullying become more than kids being kids?

It’s a fine line between harmless teasing and bullying, said Judy Freedman, the Glenview author of “Easing the Teasing,” a book and program that many schools across the country have adopted.

There is teasing when no one’s feelings are hurt, in a sort of affectionate or harmless way, such as laughing with somebody, Freedman explained. But there also is cruel and hurtful ridicule, such as insults, name-calling and embarrassing someone.

As bullying moves along what Freedman calls a continuum, it becomes more aggressive. There’s exclusion, or the “you can’t play with us, or you can’t sit here” mentality, known in psychology circles as relational aggression.

“Kids typically use relationships rather than their fists,” Freedman said, explaining that it often is referred to as “mean girl” behavior. She acknowledged that boys, too, can exhibit such behavior.

Relational aggression is more subtle, such as gossiping, glares and stares. Moving along the continuum, hostile teasing becomes more abusive. It becomes bullying when the behavior is intimidating, threatening or abusive, and typically is verbal, but it also can be physical, Freedman said. Bullying is repeated, persistent and characterized by a power imbalance.

“A lot of these kids acting in these aggressive ways feel pretty darn good about themselves,” Freedman said. “They can be the smart kids, cool or popular kids that are just getting pleasure out of this. That is very scary.”

The Internet and social media websites ushered in a whole new arena for torment – cyberbullying – and challenged society’s conventional ideas about bullying.

“What used to happen in the schoolyard or cafeteria can go global in a few seconds,” Freedman said.

Hank Nuwer, a professor at Franklin College in Indiana, wrote several books about hazing.

“It’s a whole different kind of bullying today than people were used to 20, 30 years ago,” Nuwer said. “It’s the ganged-up type of behavior. People can not only [bully] you in the halls, but also online. Students feel like they have a [constant] target on them.”

SFIbAre we overreacting?

With bullying suddenly thrust into the national dialogue, some are asking – is society overreacting? Is normal child behavior being mislabeled as bullying?

“We as a community, as a society, I think what we need to do is really understand that there are differences in bullying so we don’t drown out that particular term,” Harmer said. “Because it is a serious issue. Saying everything we’re doing is bullying won’t have the effectiveness that it needs to have.”

And in a society where everyone gets a participation trophy, are children simply getting weaker?

“I’m talking about young children specifically, I see that they have weaker coping skills now than they did 15 or 20 years ago,” Freedman said. “They don’t get a lot of experience to cope with [things] that are not going their way. They may have more meltdowns if things don’t go their way.

“Some of this has to do with parents rescuing kids very quickly and not letting them work things out themselves,” Freedman said. “As parents, we don’t want our kids to have heartache or pain. We want to kiss it and make it better.”

But the statistics don’t lie.

An alarming 39 percent of middle school administrators and 20 percent of elementary and high school administrators reported that bullying took place on a daily or weekly basis, according to a student survey by the National Center for Education Statistics. Nineteen percent of middle schools and 18 percent of high schools reported daily or weekly problems with cyberbullying, either at a school or away from school, the study found.

As the incidents of bullying get more serious and commonplace, school administrators often are charged with finding ways to curtail them.

“I don’t think there’s ever going to be a time that bullying is not going to be around,” Harmer said. “... But I think we can make it harder for bullies to be bullies.”