

Empower bystanders to stop bullying, says professor

August 12 2015, by Tyra Haag

It's back-to-school time for many kids across the country—but for students who are subject to bullying, school can be a daunting place to spend eight hours a day. One UT expert suggests empowering bystanders to help put a stop to the destructive behavior.

Social work Professor David Dupper has conducted extensive research on the topic and recently released the book "School Bullying: New Perspectives on a Growing Problem."

"Kids just don't know what to do sometimes when they witness bullying, so we must teach them," said Dupper. "Bullying is an abuse of power. You have a more powerful person who takes advantage of someone they know cannot or will not fight back."

Chronic bullying and emotional bullying can leave lasting scars such as damaged self-esteem, [post-traumatic stress disorder](#), and depression. But Dupper is hopeful the trend can be reversed.

"Look at the culture of smoking," said Dupper. "We changed the way that we view smoking in our society. It's the same right now with bullying. We must change the culture of bullying. As adults we have to admit it's a problem, take action, and engrave into the minds of our students that we will have their back if they come to us for help."

So who tends to get bullied the most?

"Bullies tend to pick on kids who are considered different, either by their weight, the way they dress, their religious beliefs, or their sexual orientation," said Dupper. "Most bullying occurs out of the view of adults—in bathrooms, hallways or between classes—about 90 percent of the time, which is why it's critical to empower bystanders on what to do."

But Dupper says the problem is that bystanders are initially scared and will not do anything for fear of being the next victim. Oftentimes they join in on the bullying out of this fear because they haven't been empowered with the tools to stop it.

"Students must know that if they intervene, an adult will have their back," said Dupper. "Many times kids think adults won't do anything, but we have to change that mindset. The main message is to let kids know they will be protected if they come forward. Research shows that when you do this, you'll see a significant reduction in bullying."

Dupper goes on to explain there are varying levels of bullying intervention—posters, sayings, class meetings, educational literature on what bullying is—but the whole school has to be on board to move the needle, and that includes lunch workers, bus drivers, and administrative support.

"You have to have a principal who says bullying will not be tolerated in this school," said Dupper. "That belief must come from the top to be the most effective. If adults don't stop it, that gives bullies a green light to continue."

Part of the challenge, though—especially for parents—is to understand that healthy competition is different from bullying.

"Teasing, or healthy competition, is part of growing up," said Dupper.

"But this gets difficult when parents see everything as bullying. Then real bullying gets lost. At its core, bullying is the intent to do harm to someone else."

Bullying peaks in middle school and rates of incidents usually double. Schools are bigger, and kids are going through puberty as well as other behavioral changes. Most physical bullying comes from boys, whereas emotional bullying generally comes from girls.

"As a parent, if you have a loner kid, bullies see this and can easily go after them," said Dupper. "Parents need to sit down with their kids, explain what bullying is, and let them know they must tell them if they are being victimized. Schools and teachers must also do more to engage these students, give them support, and help them fit in. Kids will talk more with someone who is willing to listen."

Dupper suggests regular staff trainings, ongoing class discussions, empathy training, student surveys, and positioning adults in high-frequency [bullying](#) locations within school buildings to minimize incidents.

"You can't learn if you're scared," said Dupper. "A lot of kids miss school if they're afraid. We must protect these [kids](#) by empowering [bystanders](#) to seek help from an adult. That's what will turn this trend around."

Provided by University of Tennessee at Knoxville

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