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With Start Of School Year, Parents Should Be Aware Of Signs Of Bullying

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DURHAM, N.H. -- With the start of the school year, many children nationwide will find going to school this fall to be one of the most unpleasant experiences of their young lives -- nearly 30 percent of U.S. school children will be bullied or bully other children this year.

According to Melissa Holt, research scientist with the University of New Hampshire Crimes Against Children Research Center, bullying is a major problem facing the United States that tends to peak in middle school and decline throughout high school. "A child who stops engaging as much academically, is missing school (saying he/she doesn't feel well), and appears withdrawn/depressed might be a victim of bullying," Holt says.

Students who are bullied are repeatedly victimized over an extended period of time. The bullying, which can be perpetrated by one or more students, can be physical or verbal. Whereas boys are more likely to be involved in physical bullying, girls are at higher risk for relational bullying (gossip and rumor-spreading). Both sexes can be victims of "derogatory speculation" regarding sexual orientation.

"Our current research is showing that both victims and bullies are often involved in other forms of victimization outside the school, such as within the family and community. This is an important piece to consider when designing and implementing prevention programs, or in individual counseling with youth," Holt says.

Certain students are more susceptible to becoming victims of bullying. Students who are obese, enrolled in remedial education, have developmental disabilities, and are insecure and anxious are more at risk. In general boys experience more physical bullying victimization, and girls are more likely to be targets of indirect victimization, such as being excluded by social groups.

Often these victims experience adverse psychological effects and poor school adjustment. They are more lonely and depressed, tend to avoid going to school and have thoughts of suicide.

"For some youth there are long-term effects from their involvement in bullying episodes either as victims or bullies," Holt says. Researchers have found that by age 23, individuals who had been chronically victimized in their youth had lower self-esteem and were more depressed

than those who had not been victimized. Similarly, long-term outcomes for bullies also can be serious; compared to their peers, bullies are more likely to be convicted of crimes in adulthood. In addition, a study conducted in the United States revealed that youth identified as bullies in school had a 1-in-4 chance of having a criminal record by age 30.

"Bullying affects the entire school, and not just the students involved in the particular acts. Thus it is necessary that everyone become knowledgeable about bullying and work to dispel the climate of fear and intimidation," Holt says. She offers the following suggestions for dealing with bullying:

For Students

- Tell someone – school staff, parents, other trusted adults – about the bullying. Often children are afraid to talk to an adult because they fear retaliation or being viewed as a tattler.
- Take a friend, or group of friends, along when speaking to a trusted adult. This approach creates a community of support and provides a model for how to address these issues.
- If students feel comfortable and safe, speak up when a peer is being bullied.
- Treat peers with respect.

For Parents

- Model respectful interactions.
- Talk with your child and create a space in which they feel safe to discuss their fears.
- Be aware of warning signs of bullying and talk to your child about what is going on.
- Know your children's friends.
- Take time to connect with your children.
- If your child is being bullied, alert school officials and help your child get assistance. NEVER tell your child to ignore the bullying as this can increase the seriousness of the problem.
- Expect the bullying to stop. By setting a high standard, parents are demanding that change and consequences occur. They are also empowering the child to take action and shed the victim role.

For Teachers/School Staff

- Create a school climate that does not tolerate bullying.
- Oftentimes instances of bullying include a large audience of students and teachers. Include bystanders in discussions about bullying and how to better intervene the next time.

- Target interventions on peer groups since those who bully often have peers that encourage bullying.
- Respond quickly to bullying episodes. Most importantly, let students involved in the bullying episode and bystanders know that you do not condone this type of behavior.
- Develop classroom activities that include all students.
- Increase adult supervision at times that bullying occurs most frequently, such as at recess and during lunch.
- Obtain training in how to recognize and respond to bullying.
- Integrate materials into the curriculum that address bullying.
- Model respectful interactions.
- Conduct student survey to determine the types and extent of bullying within the school and use findings to inform bullying prevention and intervention programs.
- Engage bullied students in designing policies to address bullying.

If a parent suspects his or her child is bullying other students, Holt says it is critical that parents of bullies be clear that they do not support the behavior. Not only should they contact the school, but they should enforce rules regarding behavior and get their child involved with positive social activities.

“Every child has unique strengths and qualities. Although it’s easy to see the bully as ‘all bad,’ bullies too have contributions to make. Helping a bully recognize their potential for positive contributions and learning how to use their power in healthy and meaningful ways, such as focusing energy on hobbies or causes, will alleviate bullying problems and the long-term consequences associated with bullying,” she says.