

# Students send a message to bullies: Don't be cruel The Boston Globe

## Peer pressure, education are part of program

By Irene Sege, Globe Staff, 1/12/2004

MARLBOROUGH -- Nineteen students crowd into their middle school's library conference room, boys well into their growth spurts and others barely begun, one girl in braces and pigtails, another in braces and eye shadow. Whether they jostle to be heard or nod from the sidelines, they are, by virtue of youth and culture, experts on the subject under discussion, which is bullying.

As seventh-grader Vahid Sharifi says, "We all witness bullying every day."

They are peer leaders, part of a larger group of 32 boys and girls ages 11-13 being trained to teach their classmates not to tease or taunt, purveyors of the messages "Don't be a bully" and "Be kind," proclaimed in cut-out construction-paper letters on the bulletin board in the school's front lobby. They have been bullies or bullied or bystanders -- or all of the above.

"In fifth grade I harassed so many people I had to go to the office every day," says Tyler Grasty, who's in sixth grade now. "I loved it because I knew I wouldn't get bullied if I bullied someone else. I loved yelling at people so they would be scared of me and never, like, do anything."

"I have been bullied. People have discriminated [against] me for what I wear, and I hate them for it. They talk about me behind my back," says Elizabeth Baker, who wears a black T-shirt and black pants and carries a cloth shoulder bag that has an image of a skull on it. "Sometimes I'll go home, and I cry because it bothers me. It hurts."

Their effort, developed by the Cambridge-based Educators for Social Responsibility, dovetails, coincidentally, with a \$3.4 million anti-bullying campaign the federal government is preparing to launch early this year. The Department of Health and Human Services is keeping the program under wraps until then, but experts involved in the planning expect it to include public service announcements and a website.

Research suggests how widespread bullying is. In a national survey of almost 16,000 students in grades 6 through 10, 11 percent reported being bullied regularly, 13 percent admitted to regularly bullying their peers, and 6 percent called themselves both bully and target. The numbers, published in the Journal of the American Medical Association in 2001, were highest among middle schoolers, with almost a quarter of sixth graders saying they were frequently bullied and a quarter of eighth graders describing themselves as bullies.

In middle school, says Marlborough sixth-grader Aleesha Griffin, "it gets more complex and more serious than name-calling. People know more swear words, more inappropriate things."

In Massachusetts, initial results of a 2003 survey of 14 schools by the Wellesley Centers for Women indicate 14 percent of children in grades 3 through 8 are afraid of being bullied regularly.

"The majority of students are bystanders in bullying incidents, " says Nancy Mullin-Rindler, director of the Wellesley Centers' Project on Teasing and Bullying. "They are the ones who really set the climate in school that says bullying is or isn't OK. If they're not responding, they're normalizing it. If they are involved, they can have a dramatic impact on reducing bullying. It's really important for adults to be involved in a systematic way because bullying is not one of those things that disappears on its own."

Marlborough Middle School, home to 800 students in sixth and seventh grade, is one of three in the area to participate in the ESR program. In addition to training youngsters to become allies, not bystanders, and to lead classes for their peers, ESR teaches parents and faculty how to recognize and combat bullying.

"It empowers kids to say no," says principal Sara Lane.

"What we want to make a majority response is kids will say, 'Cut that out,' " says ESR's Sherrie Gammage.

The program joins other efforts, including curricula on both bullying and sexual harassment developed by the Wellesley Centers, aimed at stopping childhood cruelty. Research suggests intervention can reduce bullying by as much as 50 percent.

"I think it will stop some people," says sixth-grader Tyler Hendrix, "but not the kids

whose whole life is bullying."

The Marlborough peer leaders offer a litany of bullying scenarios they have witnessed or experienced. At this age of changing bodies and changing psyches, gender is the frequent subtext.

"Girls make fun of people for how they dress and how they look," says Paul O'Malley. "Boys make fun of them without knowing them. Like if they're fat. If they're small. Their social level or their academic level. If they're poor."

"I get teased because I'm short," says Harrison DoAmaral. "A kid in my class says, 'Do you want to be shorter? I'll pound you into the ground.'"

"Boys call big girls 'beasts.' "

"People harass me because I'm an immigrant," says Ana Lima, a native of Brazil.

"I bullied all the new kids," says Rochelle Rodriguez. "I was teasing them. I was calling them names. It wasn't swears. It was just making fun of their clothes. How they don't match. And they're not in style."

"I get called 'gay' all the time. You hear it so often you just blow it off. It's a fun diss, just to joke around," says Mike Connors. "People say it to keep their image up. It's a lot less serious than calling people a ho. If you call someone a ho you probably mean it. Calling someone gay is automatic. It's like a new word. You just use it."

Nan Stein, a senior researcher at the Wellesley Centers, sees in these middle-school barbs the precursor to sexual harassment. "Boys are persecuted for not rising to certain levels of masculinity," she says. "One of the ways they can prove they're not gay is to sexually harass girls."

Then there's the behind-the-back teasing and rumor-mongering spread by whispers and, in the computer age, by e-mail and instant messaging. "I feel uncomfortable when I see people whispering," says DoAmaral. "I think they might be whispering about me."

"People make up a name and spread it by IM-ing. Other people find out and start spreading it around the school," says Rodriguez. "There's a rumor going on about me right now," she adds. "You ignore it the first few days. Then it gets on your nerves."

The best strategy, the middle schoolers say, is to not let it show if the teasing hurts.

"I laugh at it sometimes. Try to make them feel bad," says DoAmaral. "It makes me want to cry sometimes."

"If I told them it bothered me, they'd be, 'Oh, you're a baby' and stuff, and spread it around the school," says Ashley LaBossiere. "I don't think you should have to take it because they shouldn't be doing it in the first place, but sometimes you're forced to."

"You have to have really good self-esteem" says Chelsea Ryan. "If you don't, you really take it seriously."

"I don't have good self-esteem," murmurs Baker. "I take it out on my mom. I yell at her a lot. She knows it's because I'm being bullied at school."

Now these peer leaders are learning to say "no" to bullying: not to intervene in fights, but to tell the combatants to stop instead of egging them on. "If somebody's sitting alone and people are making fun of them, we learned to go sit with them," says Rodriguez.

It is not an easy process.

"There was this new girl and these boys were making fun of her, saying she eats squirrels and that she smokes and that her mom is 20-something and her grandmother is 32," Rodriguez says. "And they said she looked like a pepperoni pizza because of zits. I told them to stop, and they kept on doing it. I told them again, and they stopped. It felt good. After that I've done it a couple of more times."

Next month the peer leaders take their message to classrooms.

"I'm scared people are going to make fun of me even more," says Baker. "But it feels good that we're trying to do something."

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