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The Charlotte Observer

Posted on Tue, Oct. 15, 2002

Disarming the bullies

As harassment in the schoolyard emerges as a major public health issue, statewide forum seeks solutions

ERIC FRAZIER
 Staff Writer

Jason Barrios is a bright, articulate eighth-grader -- the type of kid who isn't afraid to voice his opinion or stand up for himself.

But even he sometimes finds himself targeted by bullies. Like last term on the school bus, when one antagonist snapped a rubber band at him, hitting him in the eye and forcing the driver to stop.

Jason's sick of it.

"I've been trying to ignore them," he said, "but it doesn't work."

He's stuck with the same problem facing millions of children. More than 16 percent of children reported being bullied by others during one school year alone, according to a survey released last year by the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development.

In a world where some kids who once suffered in silence are lashing back with classroom gunfire, educators and researchers are increasingly seeing bullying as a key early warning sign of future violence. Once considered a minor problem of "kids being kids," it is emerging as a major public health issue.

That will be one of the themes of a statewide symposium in Greensboro on Nov. 15. The conference, "Bullying: Stop the Bully Without Becoming One," is sponsored by the N.C. Medical Society Alliance, a group dedicated to improving public health.

Organizers say they expect the conference will draw 300 people, and they hope it spawns anti-bullying projects across the state.

"We see bullying as a very definite violent behavior that's increasing and definitely needs to be addressed," said Beth Wise, executive

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director of the alliance.

Teresa DuFine, a member of the alliance's Mecklenburg chapter, said that during her days as a nurse specializing in mental health treatment, she saw abusive spouses using the same tactics employed by schoolyard bullies.

Suffering in silence

Just in sheer numbers, bullying is a big problem. According to the survey released last year -- the first nationwide research on bullying -- about 1.6 million children in grades six through 10 are bullied at least once a week.

The researchers surveyed more than 15,000 students and found that 29 percent of the students had been involved in some aspect of bullying -- either as a target, perpetrator or both.

The study's authors also found bullies were more likely to be involved in other problem behaviors, such as smoking and drinking alcohol, and did more poorly in schoolwork. They concluded bullies are more likely to engage in criminal behavior later in life, and those who were bullied as children are more likely to suffer from depression and low self-esteem well into adulthood.

"Being bullied is not just an unpleasant rite of passage through childhood," Duane Alexander, director of the national institute, said at the time.

SuEllen Fried agrees. She is past president of the National Committee to Prevent Child Abuse and author of "Bullies and Victims: Helping Your Child Through the Schoolyard Battlefield." She travels the country speaking to children about the need to stop bullying and will be the key speaker in Greensboro.

"I believe bullying is a form of child abuse," she said. "No child deserves to be abused, whether (the abuser) is 10 or 12 or 52."

She blames the problem on what she sees as the increasing levels of violence in the media and harried parents who don't put in enough time with their children. Ready access to guns, she added, often leads to deadly school shootings.

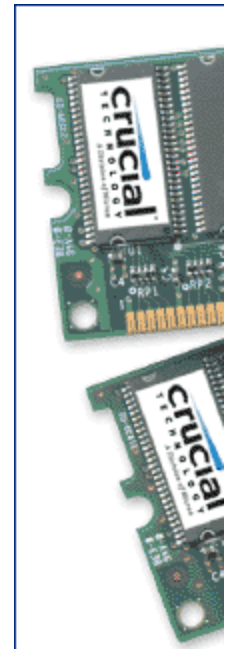
She believes the national emphasis on bullying is overdue.

"There are millions of children suffering in silence, and the pain is enormous," she said. "There is a level of mean-spiritedness in this country, and it is filtering and soaking into these children."

No one realizes that more acutely than kids such as Jason Barrios.

A student at Jay Robinson Middle School in Charlotte, he says he tells his teachers when others provoke him. But usually, he said, nothing much happens.

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"They just tell them not to do it again," he said. "They don't put them in detention."

Looking for solutions

His principal, Maureen Furr, said the school takes teasing seriously, and the results of disciplinary actions are shared only with the parents of the child being disciplined.

"The reality is something probably does happen," she said, "but the victim, having reported it, is out of the picture."

Jason's mom, Debbie Barrios, is frustrated. She doesn't want him to resort to smacking his antagonizers, but she doesn't want him to be victimized either. She wants to help him, but she knows he doesn't want his mom protecting him from other kids, either.

"I try and I try, but it's hard to tell him to just ignore it," she said. "It's a hard situation. It does make you feel bad for (your kid), because you don't know what to do for them."

Organizers of the Greensboro conference say they hope to provide answers for parents like her.

"We're not looking for someone to tell us there is a problem. We know there is a problem," said Wise, the alliance director. "We're looking for techniques and solutions for managing the problem."

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