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Cooperative Adult Intervention Can Halt Bullying

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LUBBOCK – It is a situation that every parent dreads. Your child is being bullied, or worse yet, your child may be the bully. What to do?

“Children who are targeted by bullies, and those who act out as bullies, need the intervention and guidance of caring adults,” said Sara Anderson, part-time family counselor and parent educator with the Lubbock Independent School District. “Bullying has become a huge problem in our society and we need to do everything we can to get a handle on it.”

Anderson was one of 29 featured speakers at the 2003 Building Strong Families: Tools for Success parenting conference held Nov. 6 in Lubbock. This annual event is sponsored annually by Texas Cooperative Extension, Lubbock County, and the Partners for Parenting Coalition of Lubbock. Attendance this year was well over 750.

“Bullying is physical, verbal, emotional or sexual abuse. There is an intent to harm. The intensity and duration of bullying usually escalates. The bully typically derives some power from the situation. Children who are different from their peers, those who stand out in some way, are typically the victims,” Anderson said. “They are vulnerable and they lack peer support. And many times they do not report what happens to them because they are afraid of the consequences.”

Bullying can occur at any age, but it is most common among junior high school children. Twelve states now have some form of anti-bullying legislation on their books, the counselor added.

“We typically picture ‘the bully’ as a boy in our mind’s eye, but girls also engage in bullying...especially emotional bullying. Negative peer pressure to conform to the will of the group, excluding or rejecting those who don’t conform, spreading gossip, and forming little cliques that single out an individual are subtle forms of emotional bullying,” Anderson said.

Whether male or female bullies typically: enjoy targeting others; feel a need for power over others; may exhibit impulsive or reactionary behavior; are defiant and contrary; lack empathy for others; have a grandiose opinion of themselves; and often exhibit overly aggressive behavior.

Studies show bullies often come from environments that expose them to violent behavior; where weapons are readily accessible; and where there is parental or peer pressure to confront others. That is why bullies often wind up with a criminal record and a history of substance abuse later in life, she said.

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“When we encounter bullying, we need to help both the bully and his/her victim. We have to let the bully know this kind of behavior won’t be tolerated, and we have to teach them respectful behavior towards others by example,” Anderson noted. “We have to teach the victim how to stand up for themselves, how to maintain their self esteem and how to blend with the group so they will have some peer support-rapport.”

“We also have to teach children who passively observe bullying as bystanders that speaking out is OKAY. They must know that seeking adult help doesn’t make them a ‘tattle-tail.’ They should learn that bullying often evaporates when we speak out against it.”

Parents should recognize that almost all children experience occasional peer cruelty. At the same time, they should be alert for the telltale signs of peer abuse such as torn clothing, cuts and scrapes, shyness or withdrawal, and loss of money or possessions.

“Don’t overreact when your child encounters a bully. It is better to work through this situation with teachers and school counselors than to teach your child to fight or to confront the bully’s parents,” she said.

Anderson offered parents these tips as a means of bully prevention:

- Teach your children that cruelty is not acceptable, at home or anywhere else
- Teach your children how to get along with others, encourage mutual respect
- Teach your children to respect themselves and to protect themselves in all situations

Other speakers at this year’s conference addressed infant behavior and communication; parenting children with special needs; drug awareness and prevention; living with grief; sex education; positive play; teaching/sharing spiritual values; and positive/practical fatherhood. Many conference sessions are offered in a bilingual or Spanish format, noted Linda Lynch Evans, Extension family and consumer science agent in Lubbock County since 1979. She helped found the parenting coalition in 1989.

This year’s conference sponsors include: Region 17 Education Service Center; Texas Cooperative Extension, Lubbock County; City of Lubbock; Lubbock Lions Club; Lubbock Independent School District; National Center for Parenthood Enrichment; LISD Council PTA; Family Outreach Center of Lubbock; Texas Department of Health, Region 1; Catholic Family Services; Texas Tech University (TTU) Health Science Center (HSC) and its School of Nursing; the Junior League of Lubbock; and the Managed Care Center for Addictive & Other Disorders. Co-sponsors include the Covenant Health System and the Community Health Center of Lubbock. The First Church of the Nazarene in Lubbock hosts this event in its ample facilities.

More information on this event is available from Linda Lynch Evans, at (806) 767-1190.