

Bullying prevention a catalyst for dialogue

What were your childhood experiences with bullying? Your involvement might have been as a victim, a bully, a bystander, or perhaps a combination of the three.

What support and resources were available for you? Decades later, as a parent, you hope the difficulties you experienced in childhood will escape your own child's life. Your bullying experiences might be a painful memory, but you know your responsibility to care for your child's well-being.

How can you positively support bully prevention for your child at school, in your neighborhood, in your home, and through social media, online gaming and texts? Pacer's National Bullying Prevention Center reports, "... every day thousands of young people experience bullying from their peers." This is not the world we want for our youth. Victims of bullying often suffer in silence.

They assume a proud posture that everything is fine while internally their world is falling apart.

Rejection, harsh words, repeated hurtful acts, or the ever-shifting friend groups can have a longterm negative impact on a child.

October is National Bullying Prevention Month. This annual campaign is a catalyst for promoting dialogue in our communities among educators, parents, and students about their roles in addressing and preventing bullying and recognizing that kindness matters.

We are grateful for this spotlight on creating positive change.

So how do we unite to keep our youth safe from bullying? To fight bullying, we begin by recognizing that the opposite of bullying is kindness and that other people's feelings matter.

We ask parents to make kindness a priority. Regularly check in with your children and talk to them about being kind and inclusive. Help your children value and expand their circles of concern to people who are different from them.

Ask them if they have ever reached out to a friendless student on the playground; if they can share an example of kindness that they witnessed; or if they did something kind today. Help them recognize they don't have to be friends with everyone, but that they need to value and treat everyone with compassion and respect.

And in addition to building empathy, help your children understand that resilience is a strength.

It is not only important to learn how to navigate through one's own rough times, but also to help others navigate through theirs.

Since 1974, Network of Victim Assistance (NOVA) has worked to support, counsel and empower victims of sexual assault and other serious crimes in Bucks County. NOVA works to prevent and eliminate violence in society through advocacy, training, community education and prevention programs and offers bullying prevention programs to Bucks County students (K-12), parents, and community members.

NOVA's bully prevention programs work to expand participants' circle of concern, promote empathy and the value of being an "upstander" versus a passive bystander. Bystanders who learn how to safely become upstanders can create real change. Upstanders see bullying behavior and will intervene on behalf of someone who needs it.

A high school student who participated in a NOVA "Encourage Upstander" program recently stated "I look clearly at how I act to others even if I don't know them. I make sure I am kind to them because I don't know how they feel."

We recognize that allowing unhealthy relationships to go unchecked compromises student performance, damages mental and physical health, and perpetuates a cycle that can lead to even greater forms of violence. NOVA's prevention programs play an important role in the healthy development of youth, support the reduction of childhood stress, provide safe environments for children, and promote youth resilience.

An Ethiopian proverb says it best, "When spider webs unite, they can tie up a lion." Let us all work together with a commitment to being caring individuals and instilling in our youth the paramount value of kindness.

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