Braintree Patch

Parent Talk: What Works in Bullying Prevention

Braintree has seen new bullying regulations and presentations recently, and now a former town resident and college professor weighs in.

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Last year Braintree Public Schools tweaked an existing bullying plan to submit as part of statewide legislation. Already this year, the high school has hosted two bullying seminars, one on the developmental affects of abuse and the other a more general information session for teachers and parents.

Now, in this space today, Braintree Patch is welcoming input on the subject and will take the first step with words from a college professor with related experience. William G. Nicoll, Ph.D., is a product of the Braintree school system (K-12) and is now a professor of counseling in Florida Atlantic University’s College of Education.

He is also actively engaged in providing training and consulting services to schools, parents and mental health professionals on issues related to children, schools and families throughout North and South America, Asia, Africa and Europe.

This week we will start with an off-the-beaten-path introduction to the issue by Nicoll, followed next week by effective strategies. Please feel free to weigh in by commenting below.

Bullying Prevention: What Works? What Doesn’t?

Bullying has gained widespread attention as an increasingly serious problem in our communities. Defined as a form of low to high level interpersonal violence (aka abuse) against another individual, it can take many different forms, from physical aggression to threats, teasing, harassment, intimidation or neglect and social exclusion.

The most recent national survey indicated that during the period from 6th to 10th grade, approximately 44 percent of students had engaged in some form of bullying behavior and 41 percent had been the target of bullying. In addition, with the new social media technologies, cyber bullying has taken the potential for harm to levels heretofore never imagined. Indeed, bullying is now considered to be the most common form of interpersonal violence in our society.

So what is to be done to stop and prevent such behavior? Many programs and policies have emerged over the past few years to meet the new, growing ‘market demand’ for help from parents and schools. Many, if not most, remind one of H.L. Mencken’s famous quote, “For every complex problem there is a simple, straightforward solution; that is wrong!”

Research evidence indicates that the most common form of “solutions” which do not work are: a) anti-bullying policies in the school and workplace and b) zero tolerance approaches to identifying the bullies and punishing or expelling them. These methods have failed to provide any significant, long term reductions in bullying behaviors. The social dynamics underlying bullying are far reaching and complex and thus require far more extensive intervention strategies.
Bullying is not a problem, per se. Rather, bullying must be understood as the symptom of a much broader and deeper underlying problem. Attempts to focus solely on bullying behaviors via anti-bullying policies in school policy manuals have no impact on behavior; particularly when they are then neither enforced by, nor congruent with, the very behaviors of those responsible for implementing the policy.

Bullying is a learned behavior! When parents, teachers, school administrators, supervisors, managers, and recreational sports coaches engage in bullying tactics, thereby modeling bullying behavior, we cannot act innocent and surprised when our children model these very same behaviors; we often inadvertently teach bullying behavior. Bullying behaviors occur not only among youth but in the home, in the community and in the workplace.

Solutions that focus on identifying, punishing or excluding bullies also have been shown not to work. Indeed, all we need do to understand this is look at the infamous “war on drugs.” Arresting drug dealers on the street corners did nothing to resolve the increasing problem of illegal drug use. The night after a drug dealer is placed under arrest, a new dealer steps in to take his place. The bullying problem is similar; both problems are far more systemic than to ever be resolved by simple zero tolerance policies and punitive reactions.

**Prevention, Not Cure, As the Key!**

During the 1940s and 50s, the biggest concern most parents considered as threatening the well being of their children was the disease of polio. Indeed, in Braintree many parents would not let their children swim during summer at Sunset Lake fearing contaminated water and exposure to carriers would increase their child’s risk of contracting polio. During that time, Sunset Lake was often referred to as “polio pond.” But shielding our children from polio was not the answer, nor was it even realistic. And today, we still have never found a cure for polio. The solution was in prevention via inoculating our children with Dr. Salk’s vaccine.

We need to take a similar approach to bullying. The simple fact is that we cannot protect or prevent our children from being exposed to bullying. By ages 10 to 11, our children are exposed on a daily basis to every social problem or social ill in our society from bullying to drugs, alcohol, violence, crime, sexual harassment and so forth. What is needed, therefore, is a social vaccine. We need to inoculate our children against bullying and being bullied. This requires a much more complex approach to the problem.