



Independent, locally owned and operated!

www.lamorindaweekly.com 925-377-0977

Published December 8th, 2010

The New Bullies Among Us

By Jean Follmer

There have always been and will always be bullies. Long dismissed as "kids will be kids," a mere glance at recent news indicates the national thought on bullying is maturing. Bullying practices have become crueler and resulting suicides are getting national attention. A number of character development programs are present in our schools and operate with varying degrees of success. The newest challenge is cyberbullying.

"I think it's been pretty effective - we've seen good results; we've seen improvement," said Sharon Pincus, Moraga School District Director of Pupil Services, about the Safe Schools Ambassador Program at Joaquin Moraga Intermediate School (JMIS). The results of the latest Healthy Kids survey indicate that JMIS still has a significant problem with bullying - 40% of 7th graders reported that they have been harassed at school. (The percentages are 29% in Lafayette and 31% in Orinda.)

"We take bullying incredibly seriously. Every principal goes into each classroom three or four times a year to talk about it. We hold annual assemblies like Day of Respect at Stanley and then bring the students together to talk in small groups," said Rachel Zinn, Lafayette School District Director of Curriculum and Instruction.

Cyberbullying comes into play at the middle school level. "Students are not to be using electronic devices during school hours," said Lisa Bissell, Orinda Union School District Director of Curriculum and Instruction. However, the District can't prevent access to social networks like Facebook after hours. All three districts allow for anonymous reporting of cyberbullying even if it takes place outside of school hours.

"Cyberbullying has increased and our high schools are taking different measures to address it. Data suggests that kids are on-line at least 1 1/2 hours per day so cyberbullying is perhaps a more accessible way to bully," said Dr. John Nickerson, Acalanes Union High School District Assistant Superintendent of Education Services. Nickerson added that cyberbullying seems to peak in middle school because it appears to be most common with incoming freshman. The high schools have Diversity Committees and older students let the incoming freshman know: "We don't do that here; this is high school and that's not cool," said Nickerson.

Stanley Middle School Principal David Schrag agrees that middle school is the birthplace of cyberbullying. He says it's much more common amongst 8th graders than it is amongst 6th graders. Most incoming 6th graders have just gotten their first cell phones and Schrag said they're so engrossed in the early stages of texting that they haven't progressed to social networking sites like Facebook.

"The bullying and making inappropriate choices is much more common in the older grades," says Schrag. He says there is a strong correlation between middle school cyber-bullies and middle school students who have siblings in high school. Many of those middle school students are "Facebook Friends" with high school students so are part of a more advanced online culture.

Due to the Child Online Protection Act of 1998, kids are not legally allowed to use Facebook or other social networking sites until the age of 13.

"The Child Protection Act was intended to protect children under 13 from objectionable content and predators; kid-on-kid harassment was not contemplated at the time," since social media sites like Facebook weren't around yet, said Annie Fox, a nationally renowned Bay Area author, lecturer and blogger.

Fox recently launched a new anti-bullying campaign called "Cruel's Not Cool!" Even though 13 is the minimum legal age to use social networking sites like Facebook, Fox said it's not a magical age. "Sixth and 7th graders have no business using Facebook and 8th graders have to be monitored (by parents)," she stated, adding that unlike adults, kids have a hard time ignoring online criticisms, "They can't just disengage - then it escalates due to a lack of self-control."

Kids often don't tell their parents or another adult they've been bullied on-line. "Kids who are targeted by friends are ashamed. They are afraid if they tell their parents (about the bullying), they will take away their computers and phone," she noted.

Schrag agrees that parents need to monitor the on-line activities of their kids more closely. He said a lot of parents aren't comfortable using the technology so don't know how to adequately monitor their children.

The Lafayette School District recognizes a strong need for parent education in this area and brings in regular speakers. "Last year we brought in Dr. Richard Freed who spoke on Losing our Children to the Internet, Video Games and Texting and this spring we are bringing in Larry Magid to address this subject," said Lori Brueckner, Lafayette School District Parent Education co-chair.

So, who are these cyberbullies? Often, they're children of adult bullies. "They are the kids who are picked on by parents or are exposed to an abusive marriage. They're also children who are over-indulged at home or are at the center of the marriage. They are the kids of 'Velcro-parents' who constantly send texts to their kids throughout the day," said Fox.

Like Nickerson, Fox said technology has made it easier to bully others. Why? "You don't have to see their face; you just type it, hit send and drop your bomb," describes Fox. It's so much easier to be mean to other people when you're not there to see the hurt in their eyes, to see them cry or to know they don't want to go to school tomorrow because of you.

"It's not a technology issue, it's a parenting issue. It's a permanent electronic footprint (these kids are leaving)," continued Fox. If we're not careful, she said, we'll lose our ability to relate to each other emotionally. If we're buried

in our screens as our primary source of communication, our species will unlearn the meaning of facial expressions. "Does this look like a happy face? Do I look happy right now?" will be lost on us, said Fox. For more information on Annie Fox and Cruel's Not Cool!, visit www.anniefox.com.

Reach the reporter at: jean@lamorindaweekly.com

Copyright © Lamorinda Weekly, Moraga CA