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GETTING TOUGH ON BULLYING

Behavior that was once dismissed as “kids being kids” is now recognized as bullying. And as mounting research shows the negative effects on both the bully and the victim, mental health professionals, schools, parents and even, kids themselves are coming up with new ways to combat this threatening behavior. “Bullying shouldn’t be considered as normal part of growing up. Adults need to take it seriously and try to understand why kids are involved on either end of bullying,” said Richard Gallagher, director of the Parenting Institute at the New York University Child Study Center. “Any form of verbal or physical behavior that is controlling or threatening is bullying,” he said.

According to the federal government’s Stop Bullying Now Web Site, bullying includes:

- Any act that physically hurts someone, such as punching, kicking or shoving.
- Excluding people from a group.
- Teasing people or telling bad rumors about them.
- Using someone’s computer user name and posting lies or rumors.
- Sending hurtful instant messages, e-mails or text messages.
- Posting mean pictures, lies or rumors about someone on a Web site, such as Facebook or MySpace.

One of the biggest problems that adults encounter with bullying is silence; it’s difficult to get accurate estimates of how pervasive the problem is, because children just often don’t report it, usually because of fear.

Consequences of bullying can affect both the bullies and the victims. Victims may suffer a loss of self-esteem, and they may miss school, because they’re afraid of being bullied. Ironically, bullies probably suffer worse long-term consequences, as they’re more likely to use drugs or end up in jail in the future. “There needs to be a **community-based change approach**,” Tarshis said, president and medical director of the Bay Area Children’s Association in Cupertino, Calif. “It has to start with the school district, the principals, the teachers, and support staff. When kids come in with complaints, they can’t be ignored; you also have to involve parents, and you need the innocent bystanders to intervene and let other kids know that this behavior is not okay.”

Many school systems are now taking a **zero-tolerance approach** to bullying, and the most effective programs are ones that are designed to help both victims and bullies. Kids bullying kids may need anger-management training, or they may need further help because of something that’s happening at home. Victims may need help in learning to be more assertive, and they may need additional help to recover from intense bullying.

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