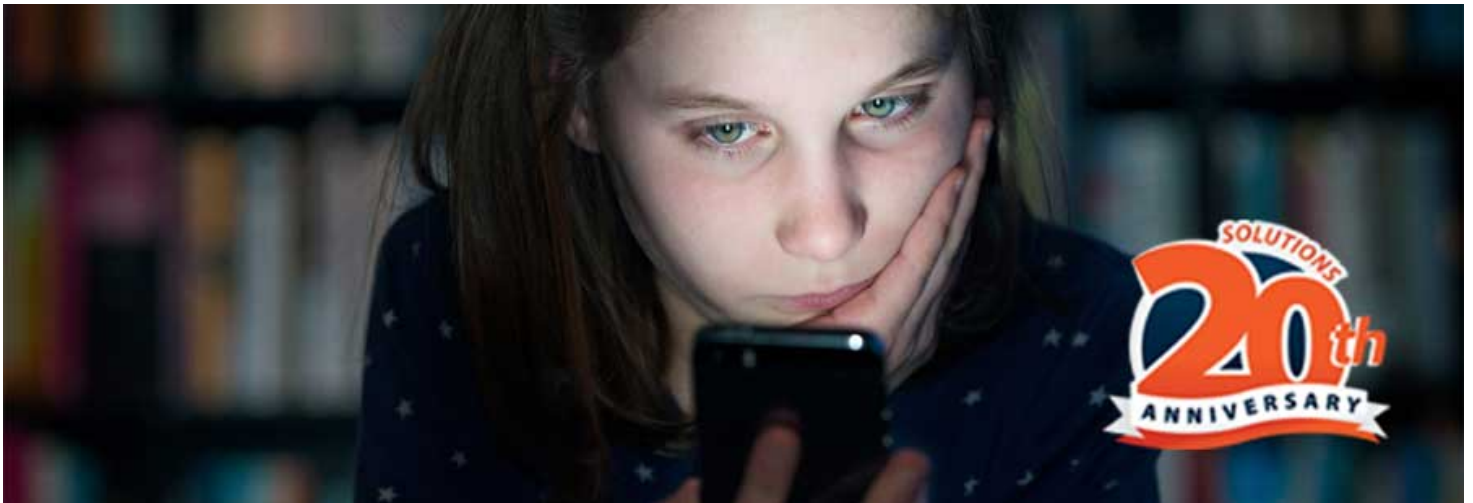




Adventist Risk Management, Inc.



The Bully-Free Zone

📅 October 13, 2015

Bullying continues to be a challenge to children and teenagers in schools and churches. In 2010, Steven Blackburn, former CFO at Adventist Risk Management prepared the article, “The Bully-Free Zone” to address the challenges educators face to maintain a bully-free environment. Solutions invited Blackburn to re-address this important topic based on his frontline experience as the CFO for the Greater Collegedale School System in Collegedale, Tennessee.

2010— In 2009, Phoebe Prince, 15, entered school after her family moved from their native Ireland to the relatively affluent community of South Hadley, Massachusetts. Drawn quickly and briefly into a romance with a senior, Phoebe drew the resentment of some of her female classmates. Over several months, they allegedly made her school life miserable, bumping her in the hallways, sending her threatening text messages, and calling her demeaning and vulgar names.

It only took a semester to break this innocent freshman. On Thursday, January 14, Phoebe was hounded in the library, the cafeteria, and the hallways. On her way home, while walking the few blocks to her family's apartment, one of Phoebe's tormenters threw a can of Red Bull at her from the window of a passing car.

Later that afternoon, Phoebe's younger sister found her in the stairwell, hanging from the scarf she'd given Phoebe for Christmas. Unimaginable? Hardly.

Take the case of Alexis Pilkington, 17, of West Islip, New York, who committed suicide on March 21, after enduring cruel online postings that horrifically continued even after her death. And Jon Carmichael, 13, of Joshua, Texas, who hanged himself in the family barn on March 28 after being bullied by classmates for being too small ... too small at age thirteen.

The list goes on and on. Estimates show one-third of all students experience some form of bullying each year. Add to that another third that bully others, not to mention those that witness bullying, and you begin to understand the depth of the problem children face on a daily basis.

It has also become one of the fastest growing school safety issues. Bullying is not a new phenomenon. Instead, society's expectations have changed so much. Bullying is no longer accepted as a normal part of childhood, or an environment that helps "toughen up children." Today, parents and educators are grappling with how to recognize and control this dangerous situation.

There are several defining characteristics of bullying. First, it is an intentional act, not an accident. Second, it almost always involves repeat occurrences. It is rarely random or singular. Finally, it must involve a power differential. A fight between two kids of equal power is not bullying. Bullying is a fight where one child has some advantage or power over the other.

Physical: hitting, kicking, pushing, punching, theft, property damage
Verbal: teasing, mocking, name-calling, humiliation, intimidation
Social: gossip, rumor spreading, alienation or exclusion from the group
Cyber: using the Internet, email or text messaging to threaten, hurt or embarrass

While the first three characteristics of bullying have probably been around since the beginning of time, it is the fourth type of bullying, cyber-bullying that has elevated this problem to its most threatening level, and is the most difficult to combat.

Children, and especially high school students, have embraced the Internet and social networks in phenomenal numbers. Over 80 percent of students that enter kindergarten have already become accustomed to using a computer, and by the fourth grade, 56 percent are Internet savvy. By the time students reach high school, an astounding 97 percent use the computer for school and social connectivity.

Fifty years ago, bullying tended to be personal, face-to-face, and limited to the school playground or other public arenas. Cyber-bullying has allowed this age-old problem to reach into the home, operate 24/7, and in some cases with relative anonymity. In one study, 17 percent of 6-11 year olds reported that someone had said threatening or embarrassing things about them through emails, texts, instant messaging, or chat rooms. By the time students reached the teenage years that number had climbed to 36 percent. Ironically, over half of the students couldn't identify who was even responsible for the event.

As school administrators, it is imperative to recognize the signs of bullying in the classroom. Not only do we have a moral imperative to provide a safe and nurturing environment, but also ignoring the problem has become downright expensive. Lawsuits have increasingly leveled charges against schools for negligence, failure to protect, and tolerating a "pervasively hostile educational environment." Juries faced with horrific stories of physical and mental abuse, sometimes dating back decades, are frequently sending the message to schools that turning a blind eye to the problem is simply not acceptable anymore.

Perpetrators themselves are facing consequences unheard of just a few years ago. Forty-one states have some type of anti-bullying laws on the books, making this age-old activity a criminal behavior. In the Phoebe Prince case mentioned previously, six students are facing felony charges from statutory rape to stalking and civil rights violations. Three others were charged as juveniles. It underscores the seriousness of the issue ... no one is going to wink at bullying any longer.

Experts agree that there are a variety of ways to tell if a student is being bullied. Symptoms include:

- Depression, anxiety, or sadness
- Aggression
- Low self-esteem
- Deficits in peer relations

As well, changes in the following are often signals that bullying has begun to affect the student:

- Academic issues
- Substance abuse
- Numerous lost belongings
- Frequent injuries or damaged clothes/property
- Spending time primarily with younger students
- Avoiding recess or the playground
- Getting to school very early or staying very late
- Increased complaints of illness (headaches, stomachaches, etc.)

Of course recognizing symptoms in students is only a part of the solution. Good schools will have already attempted to minimize the issue altogether with proactive initiatives to address the problem. Strong statements and "zero-tolerance" policies are relatively easy to approve, but rarely effective in solving the problem. Rather, educational programs that promote a healthy social climate have been found to work much better than wellintended, but ultimately meaningless words.

Some suggestions for promoting a healthy social climate in your school include:

1. Create an environment where communication between faculty and students is the norm. When students feel comfortable talking to teachers about their classroom and peers before a bullying event, they'll be more likely to ask for adult involvement after it has begun.
2. Spend time with students in the cafeteria and at recess. Research shows that 67 percent of bullying occurs when adults are not present. If the school doesn't have the resources to properly supervise these environments, implement a volunteer program to supplement the staff.
3. Be a good example of kindness in classroom and school leadership. Kids learn a lot about power relationships by watching their teachers and administrators. Any time a teacher speaks to another in a mean or abusive way, it teaches students that bullying is okay.
4. Teach healthy anti-bullying habits early. Coach students on both what not to do (hitting, teasing, gossiping) and what to do (kindness, empathy, fair play). Teaching students when to walk away from a situation; to say "NO" firmly; and when to get adults involved are skills that will reduce the victimization that is always a part of bullying. Remember, repetition helps. This should not be a one-time event, but a persistent part of their educational experience.

5. Establish anti-bullying rules. Students should understand that bullying is not a normal part of the school environment, and it is not to normal bully, be bullied, or stand by and just watch other kids being bullied. Consequences should be appropriate and consistently applied.
6. Implement an anonymous online and text-based reporting service. No one knows better what is happening at school than the students themselves. If you provide a bridge that starts with anonymous communication, students feel an empowerment that helps resolve problems before they become catastrophic.

While the face of bullying has most certainly changed over the years, the impact it has on students has not. The issues have evolved, and technology, with its intrusion in almost every aspect of our lives, has accelerated the need for immediate solutions. There is no greater responsibility than that of caring for and protecting children. As school administrators that mandate becomes more challenging each day. By taking the steps necessary to minimize bullying in your school, you will have taken an important step in preparing healthy students for their successful future.

2015 UPDATE From the Author

2015—Today’s American teenagers have been connected to the Internet since their youngest days, with over 90 percent routinely connecting online. Almost 75 percent of 13 to 17-year olds have personal social networking accounts, a change from 59 percent in 2011. A recent study stated 95 percent of social media-using teens witnessed cruel behavior on social networking sites and have watched others ignore the mean behavior. While society has seen an overall reduction in violent crimes committed, bullying statistics continue to rise.

With so much talk about bullying, there are indications that students themselves are speaking out. In fact among the teenagers who reported witnessing people ignoring bullying online, over 80 percent stated they had defended those being attacked though not as frequently as they should have. This attentiveness from the very heart of the at-risk age group gives hope for the future and safety of our children.

So where do we go from here? First of all, remember to take it seriously. This is not just playground antics under the banner “what doesn’t kill me makes me stronger.” These children are not emerging from the gauntlet of bullying stronger. Many are crushed, permanently scarred, and in the worst examples taking their own lives to avoid the pain that isn’t being controlled.

Second, allow no tolerance for it no matter where you see it. In your own children, your classroom, Pathfinder club or Sabbath school class, keep a watchful eye and take on the problem aggressively. We live in a society that glorifies the crass, the ugly, and the sensational. We can’t necessarily control what society throws at us, but we can start with our sphere of influence and ourselves today.

Are we raising a generation that defends the defenseless? Will they stand up for the underdog and befriend the friendless?



By: Steven Blackburn
CHIEF FINANCIAL OFFICER
Greater Collegedale School System

This material is fact based general information provided by Adventist Risk Management[®], Inc. and should not, under any circumstances, be modified or changed without prior permission. It should not be considered specific legal advice regarding a particular matter or subject. Please consult your local attorney or risk manager if you would like to discuss how a local jurisdiction handles specific circumstances you may be facing.