



Harris County Hospital District

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NEWS RELEASE

Sticks and Stones Can Break Your Bones, but Names Can Hurt, as Well

HOUSTON (Aug. 28, 2006) – When the school year starts, parents quickly shift their focus from family vacations and summer camp to the hustle and bustle that lies ahead. They worry about homework, parent-teacher conferences, and safe after-school activities. But how many worry about their child’s well-being *while* they’re in school?

Research shows that roughly one in three elementary and middle school students are involved in bullying, either as bullies, victims of bullying, or both, according to John Sargent, M.D., director of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry at Ben Taub General Hospital and professor of psychiatry and pediatrics at Baylor College of Medicine.

“Bullying involves one person trying to harm another, usually someone they view as weak or vulnerable,” said Sargent. “It’s a very common problem, and it warrants awareness, both at home and at school.”

The problem is so widespread that new and existing patients of the hospital district’s child and adolescent psychiatry program are regularly screened for signs of bullying, regardless of the nature of their visit, which can range from depression and anxiety to disruptive behavioral patterns and panic attacks. Screening is especially important when treating patients with behavioral problems and learning disabilities, because those traits are often targets for bullies.

Bullying can take many forms – name-calling, relentless teasing, spreading rumors about a person, and even physical violence. Other forms of bullying include using technology, like e-mail and chat rooms, to spread harmful messages or images about a person, and emotional bullying, where bullies isolate or exclude a child from certain group activities.

Bullying affects a child’s physical and emotional well-being. It instills fear and worry, and often leads to self-esteem and self-worth issues. It can also prevent a child from advancing in school and in extra-curricular activities. As for long-term consequences, bullying can cause victims to have relationship problems as adults, and it can lead to substance use or abuse.

“At school, where it is most common, bullying affects everyone in the teaching-learning environment,” said Sargent. “This includes children who witness the abuse, as well as teachers who are forced to spend more time disciplining students and settling disputes.”

Signs to look for at home that suggest a child is being bullied include sudden irritability and withdrawn behavior, depression and anxiety, mysterious bruises or injuries, and missing belongings, like money. Children may also begin making excuses, like sudden illnesses, to avoid going to school, which can lead to poor academic performance.

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But what if your child is the bully? Bullying is as much a problem for the aggressor as it is for the victim, according to Sargent. Many times, children who bully are unhappy or insecure, or they have been victims of bullying or abuse themselves. They may also be having trouble coping with a difficult situation at home, like a divorce, and bullying is a way of dealing with their problems.

“Bullying can be a strong indication that a child is heading toward serious trouble or violence,” said Sargent. “Bullies can become involved in dangerous antisocial behaviors like fighting, dropping out of school, stealing or vandalizing property, drinking, smoking, and even carrying a weapon.”

Sargent recommends that families address the issue before it becomes a serious problem. Parents should take a proactive approach by talking with their kids about bullying, preferably early, at the beginning of the school year. This will open the lines of communication and encourage children to confide in them if or when something like this happens.

Children who are bullied often feel vulnerable, especially when talking about their problem, so it is important for parents to comfort them by listening and showing their love and support. Above all, it is essential to remain calm and avoid displays of anger, which can be misinterpreted as disappointment by a child. This is also important when talking to bullies about their behavior.

“Parents should send clear messages that bullying is not acceptable and will not be tolerated,” said Sargent, “They should bear in mind, however, that there is a reason the child is behaving the way they are.”

Sometimes, just talking and asking questions can help. Other times, it may be necessary for families to seek professional help, either from a counselor, therapist or family doctor. Parents should also address the issue with their child’s school, starting with the principal. Most schools support a violence-free environment, but if parents feel they’re not getting the support or attention they need to ensure their child’s safety, they should go to someone higher up until they do. In severe cases, police intervention may be needed.

“There are a number of reasons to stop bullying,” said Sargent. “There are academic reasons, physical and emotional health reasons, and human rights reasons. Every child has a right to be happy and grow and do well in school without having to worry about being harassed.”

The hospital district’s child and adolescent psychiatry program provides comprehensive care to help young patients overcome emotional and behavioral problems that prevent them from reaching their full potential at home, at school or in the community.

Families can access mental health care and support services through Ben Taub’s pediatric psychiatry outpatient clinics and through the hospital district’s community behavioral health program. Psychiatrists and other behavioral health specialists also offer services through Ben Taub’s pediatric injury and pediatric consultation clinics.

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