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— Ken Wong

Teen programs director, Redmond Parks and Rec

For more information about bullying and its solutions, contact your local school counselor or Ken Wong at kwong@redmond.gov. You can also try one of the following books recommended by Wong:

4“How to Handle Bullies, Teasers and Other Meanies: A Book that Takes the Nuisance out of Name-calling and Other Nonsense,” by Kate Cohen-Posey.

4“Your Child — Bully or Victim? Understanding and Ending Schoolyard Tyranny,” by Peter L. Sheras, Ph.D. and Sherill Tippins.

4“Talking About Bullying,” by Jillian Powell.

4“Mom, They’re Teasing Me: Helping Your Child Solve Social Problems,” by Michael Thompson.

4“Words Will Never Hurt Me: Helping Kids Handle Teasing, Bullying and Putdowns,” by Sally Northway Ogden.

Bullying in schools is on the rise

Local officials working to combat the problem

By Elisha Grange

Bullying in schools is on the rise nationwide, despite an overall decrease of violent incidents.

Not only is bullying happening more often, kids are getting better at it and more brutal, said Ken Wong, teen programs director for Redmond Parks and Recreation.

“It used to be, if you fell to the ground, it’s over,” Wong said of schoolyard fights. “Now you fall and they kick you and punch you, and five of their buddies help them.”

Wong, a former violence intervention specialist, spoke about bullying during a PTSA-hosted education seminar last week for parents and school counselors. At the seminar held in the Issaquah School District administration building Dec. 6, Wong went over modern-day bullying and how to stop it.

Bullying behavior extends beyond the classroom, with instant messaging and Web sites such as www.myspace.com making it easier to quickly transmit rumors and other detrimental information, Wong said. By the time students reach high school, they are more likely to be bullied off campus than they are on campus, Wong said.

Bullying is most prevalent in elementary schools, when children are still learning and experimenting with the concept. It is getting worse as children are exposed to more bad behaviors and examples at younger and younger ages, Wong said. “There’s a lot more information out there than we imagined,” he said. “Things we were going through in high school, they’re going through in elementary.”

Bullying is more than just fights and physical aggression — some of the most lasting scars come from social and emotional bullying, Wong said. This is especially the case with female bullying, where girls use ostracizing body language and words to hurt victims.

“Female bullies use verbal harassment,” Wong said. “Girls are good at that. They know what to say and how to say it. The facial expression — the quick smile at you and then they turn away.”

Male bullies tend to pick a victim and focus on repeatedly harming that person, but female bullies attack a wider range of victims.

“Girls are like stealth bombers; they come in, hit and go,” Wong said. “Most times, victims are kind of blindsided by it.”

Girls also tend to be more vicious when the fight becomes physical. They will plan a fight with their friends and when it comes time to fight, it’s about making it hurt and leaving a mark.

“Guys push each other and make a lot of noise,” Wong said. “Girl fights are the toughest fights. When they’re in that moment, they don’t care.”

One mother spoke about the social harassment her daughter has undergone in school.

“She walks around eating her lunch and then goes to the library,” the mother said of the lunchroom politics. (Her name was withheld to protect her privacy). “She doesn’t want to sit down.”

The wide variety of bullying behavior can make it difficult to recognize. As a result, most parents and teachers miss the subtle bullying that is constantly going on, Wong said.

“I tell the kids — bullying is when you feel hurt, when someone hurts your body, your feelings or your things,” Wong said.

Bullying hurts the victim, the bully and everyone around them. If the behavior is not stopped, bullies and victims can become locked in their roles, with bullies learning to enjoy bullying and victims’ confidence and self-esteem slowly eroding, Wong said.

“A lot of the bullies will say, ‘By victimizing them, I feel better,’” Wong said.

“Feeling better, that’s the whole key. After they’ve learned it, they get a rush. It’s fun. These bullies get excited just thinking about it.”

The key to stopping bullying is catching it early, as children who are going to be bullies have figured out how it works by age 3, Wong said.

“From then on, they’re only refining their skills,” he said.

Elementary school bullies are usually not selective and pick on everyone. But by age 7, they become more selective and pick out specific kids to target.

By age 24, up to 60 percent of the people who are identified as bullies have at least two criminal convictions, Wong said.

Solutions to bullying can be complex, as many traditional approaches only ignore the problem or re-victimize the victim, Wong said.

“A 2002 study showed that 25 percent of teachers see nothing wrong with bullying or put-downs,” Wong said. “They consequently intervene in only 4 percent of bullying incidents.”

Bullying is about power and control. The bullies take victims' power, often as a way to compensate for a lack of power or source of pain in their own lives, Wong said. The key to stopping a bully is taking that negative power away from them and redirecting their energy in a positive direction.

"You'd be surprised at how many bullies are popular because we think of them as go-getters," Wong said.

Bullying is not a harmless part of childhood and it doesn't toughen kids up. But victims should not fight back physically because it will only do more harm, Wong said. Instead, they should fight back with words in a way that takes the bully's power away from them. For example, if a bully makes fun of the child's clothing, the child should make a joke about how the clothing is kind of funny and then walk away, Wong said.

In order to stand up for themselves, parents should help their children learn assertive skills, help them socialize in healthy ways, be involved in their schools and be ready to always intervene, while not being overprotective, Wong said. Students, especially teens, think that intervention will only make the bullying worse. But if the damaging behavior continues, its long-term effects will be worse than the initial embarrassment of parental involvement.

Parents help their children the most when they are available to listen.

"Create opportunities for dialogue," Wong said. "Ask them open-ended questions and listen."

Victims can also be helped when their parents help them feel cared for, capable and connected to their family and the community — the three Cs, Wong said. If the victims are not made to feel those three Cs, negative consequences can go beyond low self-esteem.

"The school shootings — the students were not necessarily angry, they didn't care about the environment," Wong said. "They didn't feel like they belonged and thought no one cared about them. They felt helpless and hopeless."

Onlooker students should be taught to ignore the bully and acknowledge the victim. This can be difficult, as onlooker students are often afraid of being the bully's next victim if they speak up. They should also be encouraged to reach out to adults for help when bullying happens.

As for bullies, they should be taught empathy through example, have clear direction from parents on how bullying will not be tolerated and learn the art of negotiation, Wong said.

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