

Middle school bullying declines

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Prevention efforts are being credited with a steep drop in the number of bullying incidents at Scottsdale middle schools.

In the past three years Scottsdale Unified School District eighth-grade students who reported being picked on or bullied declined significantly from 21.5 percent in 2006 to 10.8 in 2008, according to the 2008 Arizona Youth Survey provided by the Arizona Criminal Justice Commission.

Dana Sherman, former Scottsdale Prevention Institute specialist for Cherokee Elementary School, said this type of behavior can begin as early as elementary school.

"We all know these kids; they are the ones who have temper tantrums, refuse to listen and kick or hit others on the playground and generally disrupt the learning environment," she said.

Teaching kids anger management exercises such as clenching and unclenching their fists when they feel angry helps them release stress and can help them stop before acting out, Sherman said.

Milissa Sackos, executive director of Student and Community Services for Scottsdale Unified School District, credited the decline in incidents of bullying to district prevention efforts.

"It's very difficult to pinpoint a single program to contribute to the decrease," Sackos said. "Our main goal is to create a safe school environment."

Starting in 2005, Scottsdale began using a curriculum called Lions-Quest that addresses the issue of bullying in middle schools. The program's goal is to decrease anti-social behavior and increase social behavior.

Lions-Quest also uses components of the Olweus Bully Prevention program such as reinforcing school rules, regular classroom meetings with students to increase knowledge of pro-social behavior and empathy, and meetings with parents, Sackos said.

The curriculum is implemented on a school level with a bully-prevention coordinating committee, as well as on a classroom and individual level, Sackos said.

"We do everything we can to prevent (bullying), but what is extremely important is to be able to acknowledge and be able to intervene appropriately," Sackos said.

"However, we know we still have students that exhibit inappropriate behavior and that's where our relationship with the police comes in."

Sackos said although other schools have student resource officers, the close relationship between the district and the police department makes a big difference.

"It helps serve as a comprehensive approach, because the officers are able to develop positive relationships with youth," Sackos said. "It also allows the students to come forward when they see a problem."

Sgt. Mark Brachtl of Scottsdale's Student Resource Officer Unit said aside from the bullying awareness campaign, officers mostly interact with students in school cafeterias.

"We also spend a fair amount of time with school counselors. It can be as simple as assisting a principal in bringing in a child and having our officers come in and speak with the student."

Five years ago, the student resource officers decided to make bullying their top priority, Sgt. Brachtl said

Although instances are decreasing in Scottsdale schools, bullying, defined by the National Association of School Psychologists as "aggressive behaviors ranging from overt acts of physical violence to more subtle patterns of cruelty" is still a national concern.

According to a 2005 report by the U.S. Department of Education, 28 percent of students age 12 to 18 reported having been bullied in the previous six months on school grounds.

Ruby Alvarado Hernandez of the Arizona Prevention Resource Center in downtown Phoenix has helped more than 160 schools implement the Olweus curriculum.

She said school shootings have helped bring the issue of bullying to the forefront. One in four children who bully will have a criminal record by the age of 20, according to the U.S. Department of Education.

Even though states are realizing the need for bullying prevention efforts, results are hard to track and it's often one of the first programs to face budget cuts, Alvarado Hernandez said.

"Chances are it (bullying) will increase, not just because of the loss of SROs but the removal of social workers and counselors," Alvarado Hernandez said.

Lynne Marion, formally of the Arizona Prevention Center and an elementary school teacher who does volunteer work in bully prevention, said she dedicated herself to volunteering for bully prevention because she knows it can be stopped.

"Bullying is child abuse and it's just as severe as verbal or sexual abuse," she said.

Prevention is important because the impact of bullying is so great, she said.

"Not only do the kids bully each other, but they bully the teachers," Marion said. "Every once in awhile you'll find a school that says they don't have a problem but it just takes one person to start it."

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Abstract (Document Summary)

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