



OnTeam
April/May 2009

Dear Parents/Guardians,

Promoting school safety has been identified as a national priority and our school has articulated an annual District goal pertaining to this important issue since 2006. Within our individual school buildings, within our curriculums and within the district at large, we know that simply talking about the dangers of violence prevention is not enough. Instead, school safety is enhanced through collaboration and practical training for students, teachers, and parent/guardians.

On April 15th, the SpEd PAC and Pupil Services were delighted to present Nancy Mullin, whose nationally recognized work in the area of bullying research and prevention promoted awareness about the negative effects that bullying and related gender role stereotypes have on both school climate and student performance. Currently, Nancy Mullin is the Executive Director of Bullying Prevention, Inc., which is a non-profit organization focused on integrating her broad based experience in training, consulting, and materials development. As both a regular and special educator in public schools, Ms. Mullin's bullying-prevention work has an educational focus and has included several publications that may be of interest:

- *Quit It!: A Teacher's Guide on Teasing and Bullying for Use With Students in Grades K-3* (1998)
- *Selected Bibliography About Teasing and Bullying for Grades K-8: Revised and Expanded Edition* (2003) and
- *Relational Aggression and Bullying: It's More Than Just A Girl Thing* (2003).

Prior to starting her own company, Ms. Mullin served as the Director of both the Project on Teasing and Bullying (2000-2008) and the Preschool Empathy Project (1998-2008) at the Wellesley Centers for Women for 8-10 years. She has published works that focus on bringing conducted research-based training and consultation about bullying prevention nationally and her work has provided best practices about bullying prevention into schools.

Experts like Nancy Mullin agree that the only way to effectively stop bullying in school is to create a learning environment where students feel safe to speak up against bullies and let them know their behavior won't be tolerated. In addition to adopting policies prohibiting harassment, intimidation, or bullying in school -- during the day, at school-sponsored activities, or on school-provided transportation -- consequences and appropriate remedial action for students who commit acts of bullying, intimidation or harassment are essential. Our commitment is to create a culture that clearly and unequivocally sends a message that bullying, ridiculing, or taunting classmates is

not acceptable behavior and will not be tolerated. This includes the provision of an atmosphere where students will not fear reprisal for telling a teacher or a trusted adult when they feel their safety is jeopardized.

In Acton and Acton-Boxborough, we don't want to strive for individual resolutions in isolation; we want to transform school cultures. Both bullies and their victims need help in learning new ways to get along in school. Children need to learn about gaining, using and abusing power and about the differences between negotiating and demanding. They must also learn to consider the needs, behaviors and feelings of others. The "tattling" dilemma faces many victims of bullying.

Ms. Mullin's "Myth Busters" were of particular interest to parents and some examples included:

- Bullying is not an unavoidable part of childhood and adolescence.
- Bullying is not conflict; it is a form of aggression.
- Conflict resolution techniques are counter indicated in bullying situations because conflict resolution assumes a level playing field, whereas bullying by definition involves an imbalance of power between the individuals involved.
- Bullying affects all students – those who are bullied, those who bully, and those who observe the bullying.
- Boys bully twice as often as girls do and are bullied twice as often as girls are.
- Bullies do not suffer from a lack of self-esteem.
- Using "I" messages can set bullies off; instead say "stop that, Billy!"
- Responding aggressively to a bully will only escalate the situation; be assertive, not aggressive.
- Trying to stop bullying by addressing the individual situation is the most frequently used approach and the least effective approach.
- Effective bullying prevention requires collaboration between the individual, the classroom, the school and the community.
- Some common misconceptions about stopping bullying:
 - a. Expecting the child to handle the situation and stand up for him/her self.
 - b. Telling the child to ignore it.
 - c. Denying the problem or keeping it private.
 - d. Trying to fix things yourself.

Curriculum developers and publishers now offer a variety of prevention/intervention materials to eliminate bullying and other forms of personal conflict from school life. Curriculums used in Acton, such as Open Circle and Second Step, are designed to help children understand the difference between teasing and bullying and to gain awareness about bullying and harassment through class discussions, role-play and writing, reading and art exercises. In building a school culture that is safe for all children, conflict resolution training is another element of these curriculums, designed to include social skill building for victims, positive leadership skills training for bullies, intervention techniques for those who neither bully nor are bullied and the development of parental support. Positive social skills to children and families, including skill building in empathy, impulse control, problem solving and anger management is a critical element of all anti-bullying programs. The schools strive, in concert with our parents/guardians, to teach respect and dignity for each other, whether they are classmates, younger or older, or they are adults. This multi-pronged approach through curriculum, direct teaching, and your parent support helps to create a school culture that facilitates respect, encourages conflict resolution and utilizes prevention and intervention programs to affect how our children perceive and respect their social and learning environment and all individuals who participate in it.

It is important to recognize that bullying can present itself in different forms, including, but not limited to, physical aggression, verbal or physical threats, intentional exclusion from a group, spreading rumors, menacing gestures or faces, repeated name calling. All programs seek to address possible school scenes where bullying might occur.

In addition, teachers are given guidelines on how to teach students the difference between telling and tattling. Teachers are also shown how to establish and use immediate consequences when dealing with bullies. Teachers that lead class discussions, role plays, creative drawing and writing activities, physical games and exercises give children a vocabulary and a conceptual framework that allows them to understand the distinction between teasing and bullying.

In addition to building-based curriculums, the District's systemic initiative on safe schools has taken many shapes. The District has prioritized staff professional development days to offer all District staff comprehensive training in combating hate, bullying and harassment in our schools (Richard Cole, Esq., Civil Rights and Safe Schools Consultant) and Dr. Elizabeth Englander, on promoting cyber safety and reducing cyber bullying. Both Mr. Cole and Dr. Englander have provided parent/guardian trainings as well. Annual trainings for faculty, staff, bus drivers also occur on these important topics. It's an on-going team effort!

It is a huge task for all schools – especially for teachers who have the utmost responsibility in creating a school climate which ensures inclusion for all our children, while at the same time, erasing hate, preventing bullying and stopping harassment. We model and teach strategies to prevent serious incidents; this is part of our school pride, our mission, and our mandate.

To continue our work, this essential goal requires a process of ongoing reflection and thinking about the following questions:

- Are we providing clear, concise information to parents?
- Are our written policies and procedures up-to-date?
- Are we, as an interdisciplinary team, systemically reviewing the data that comes before us?

This is also a process that requires the following actions:

- Continuing to train teachers and staff through professional development
- Continuing to train students across curriculum areas
- Continuing to create a school environment that is so rich and nurturing, that all children want to come to school
- Availability of faculty to parents
- Focused training for parents

We continue to work on all safety issues, PK-12, for students as we reflect on our written policies and procedures and input from the schools and home. All schools have committed to a comprehensive, multi-team approach for bullying prevention.

Yet, both school and home know that prevention starts at home and parents are always a child's first teacher. Children need their parents to validate their feelings and help them feel supported. Various strategies and solutions help children feel more confident and less like a victim in difficult social situations. Some of the following strategies at home may prove useful:

- Listen and validate your children’s feelings
- Try not to evaluate how well your children handled teasing; instead, praise your children for trying to handle a difficult situation.
- Teach your child practical strategies for managing stress.
- Help your child develop a repertoire of confident come-backs using examples for practice.
- Have your children practice making full eye contact with bullies as this shows confidence and strength.
- Teach your child to remain calm and in control in a stressful situation.
- Make sure your child can articulate the name of one trusted adult to go to for assistance when you’re not immediately accessible.
- Get involved in your child’s life both in and out of school.
- Be alert to warning signs of victimization.
- Be alert to warning signs of bullying.

In Acton/Acton-Boxborough, a coordinated effort for safe schools exists. And while it is impossible to quantify these moments, it is clear that all those human connections that don’t make the newspapers are there: parent/teacher partnerships, Youth Resource officers in schools, and parent support for special education. It all makes a difference.

A good school and a good family unit reflect a strong home/school partnership. That reflection comes from constantly assessing what are the best strategies – the optimal strategies – to learn and be safe. While a coordinated effort exists within our schools, we know we need to do more. Broader strategies are always needed. Should we initiate categorical reporting for acts of kindness? Should we be measuring all the good things that happen in our classrooms and in our schools? Our values are of acceptance, not of injury. Reporting does help our school cultures to evolve.

Ms. Mullin also offered all of us some well thought out parenting tips that are attached to this OnTeam mailing. I would also like to acknowledge the contribution of articles from “Stop Bullying Now” provided by one of our parents with a special thank you for her insights. These include:

- *Stop Bullying Now: Misdirections in Bullying Prevention and Intervention*
- *Stop Bullying Now: How to Intervene to Stop Bullying: Tips for On-the-Spot Intervention at School*
- *Stop Bullying Now: Children Who Bully*

Sincerely,

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