Bystanders only enable the culture of bullying

By Ron Slaby and Kim Storey | Monday, April 20, 2009 | http://www.bostonherald.com | Op-Ed

On this, the 10th anniversary of the Columbine school shootings, we are challenged to take a closer look at the role of bystanders in preventing such tragedies.

Our hearts ache every time we hear that bullying has triggered another school or workplace shooter to take revenge or caused another victim of bullying into committing bullicide such as 11-year-old Carl Joseph Walter-Hoover in Springfield.

Could these tragedies have been prevented if bystanders had been better prepared?

All too often bullying is overlooked, silently tolerated or even encouraged by bystanders. More than 5.7 million children in grades 6 through 10 (nearly 30 percent) have reported being involved in moderate or frequent bullying.

We have all been bystanders to bullying. As bystanders, we hold the key to prevention.

At its core, bullying is an intentional and repeated act of harm against someone based on an exploitation of power imbalances. Bullies exploit their power over individuals they perceive to be less powerful due to a multitude of reasons.

But bullying does not have to be a part of growing up. It does not have to shape the culture of our workplaces.

We now know that, more often than not, bullying stops immediately when a child bystander stands up for the victim by telling the bully to stop. And potential tragedies have been averted when a student informs an adult about someone threatening a school shooting or some other violent act.

What can a bystander do to stop bullying? First, believe that bullying can be stopped or prevented. Second, recognize and report bullying, and encourage victims to do the same. Third, learn, practice and teach others how to be effective, helpful bystanders.

Talk to your children about what they can do to help. They can ask the bully to stop, help the victim walk away, get support from other bystanders, ask an adult for help and report the bullying.

We also need to teach by example. How do you solve problems, provide effective discipline, control your anger and frustration, and stand up for yourself and others? If you yell at the driver who cuts you off, listen silently as a co-worker puts down another employee or use physical force to discipline your child, you have modeled behaviors that support and teach bullying. Prepare yourself instead to become a model of bullying prevention. Consider yourself an agent of change.

Bullying spreads when bystanders fail to intervene. We need to build alliances of adults and children who are prepared to stand up, speak out and support a society free from bullying.

Ron Slaby and Kim Storey are co-authors of the new Eyes on Bullying program developed by the Education Development Center in Newton.

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