

School Beat: Fighting the Good Fight by Christy Simeral

As much as we hate to admit it, bullying is an issue in every community, even here in Coronado. According to the violence and safety portion of the 2006 California Healthy Kids Survey, a daunting 39 percent of 5th grade students have been bullied sometime in their lives—a figure that's enough to make any teacher, parent or student cringe.

Deborah Schwartz, chairperson of the Coronado Human Relations Commission, defines bullying as "repeated oppression, both psychological and physical, of a less powerful person by a more powerful person." On the playground, in the classroom and off-campus - bullying takes its form through a variety of ways, including pushing behavior, physical fights (possibly with weapons) and verbal harassment. It can also include spreading bad rumors about people, keeping certain people out of a "group," teasing people in a mean way or getting certain people to "gang up" on others. Victimization instills a sense of vulnerability, isolation, and fear in its victims. Bullying can cause both physical and emotional damage that can stay with the victim throughout their entire life.

How can you tell if a child is a bully or a victim? Warning signs of bullying include aggression towards adults, hot-tempered nature, impulsiveness and malicious teasing. Warning signs of victimization include a drop in grades and/or attendance, a fear of going outside and playing with others, and obvious signs of physical confrontations.

Though an issue all through elementary, middle and high school years, the peak of bullying occurs in grades 6 through 10—through the entirety of a child's middle school years and the beginning of high school. Why is this? During adolescence it can be difficult to feel comfortable in relationships with oneself and others. High stress levels can lead to students resorting to bad behavior. When students are less comfortable, they are more apt to use power over others. National studies show that one out of three children experience bullying in these grades, making it a significant issue. By the time they're adults, bullies are four times more likely to engage in criminal behavior. By age 24, 60 percent of bullies will face one or more criminal convictions, and 35 percent of them will have faced three or more. In response to these overwhelming numbers, the city of Coronado is making several efforts to minimize bullying in our community.

Every year, students in grades 5, 7, 9 and 11 participate in the California Healthy Kids Survey administered by Coronado SAFE. The results of the survey are then used by members of the community to decide how they can better meet the needs of students, minimize violence and increase safety in our schools.

Bullying can lead to substance abuse: bullied victims can turn to drugs and alcohol, and those who turn to drugs and alcohol can turn into bullies. Bullying can be the product of a variety of issues-difference in race, ethnicity, religion, or even family background (military vs. non-military families or families with divorced parents). Unlike many other problems, bullying can be intangible and hard to see. As Samantha Bowman, Executive Director of Coronado SAFE, says, "You can't see scars with bullying." Bullies feel the need to harass for a variety of reasons-a need for attention because they have low self-esteem, to compensate for insecurities, or possibly because of grief or a loss. SAFE wants the youth of the community to realize that if there is any behavior that makes the child uncomfortable, they need to tell someone, whether it is a parent, teacher, friend, counselor or principal. Through individual or group counseling, peer mediation, the Coronado Human Relations Commission, or Coronado SAFE, students who feel harassed or bullied can find a haven. As Bowman emphasizes, although telling is the hardest part, it is the most important part.

Eight years ago, inspired by the Columbine High School shooting incident in Littleton, Colorado, ten Coronadans united to form the Coronado Human Relations Commission in hopes of preventing such an incident in Coronado schools. Deborah Schwartz, chairperson of the commission, noted that "Coronado truly is paradise, but it's not a lot different from Littleton, Colorado," because unfortunately, it only takes one person to start these high-profile shootings, which are an extreme form of bullying. The commission helps children to get along better in hopes of eliminating bullying. "Bullies make war in human relations," Schwartz added. To offset the issue of bullying in our community, the commission seeks to create peace through positive acts of change.

Within the Coronado Unified School District, the Coronado Human Relations Commission is busy at work doing their best to prevent bullying in our schools. The school district supplies a Discipline Action Guide including rules and discipline for bullying and personal aggression within our schools. This guide emphasizes that Coronado schools have a zero tolerance for bullying. During "Take My Hand, Coronado" week, Schwartz and her college interns lead workshops in the classrooms of Village and Strand elementary schools focusing on the prevention of bullying and creating peace in human relationships. Students learn how to "take a stand and lend a hand," and what to do if they feel harassed or bullied-most importantly to ask a grown-up for help. Students are also challenged to make at least one intentional, positive "act of change" every day that week. This past school year at Coronado High School, students were asked to write a thought about making the world a more peaceful place on a cutout in the shape of a hand. These hands were then attached to resemble a hand-in-hand chain and displayed around the campus. And at Strand Elementary, the Commission helps with a Peace Patrol, a mediation team of students who monitor the playground at lunchtime, report and bullying and act as a go-between in the disagreement.

Miko Peled, head karate instructor and owner of Martial Arts America in Coronado, believes that "bullying is the number one problem among children." Peled remarks that there are "a million and one" tools that a child can utilize to solve problems without fighting, and once learned, the tools will stay with them for the rest of their life. These tools, including martial arts such as karate, include the knowledge of how to stand up for themselves and how to solve issues using their mind - learning how to get along without resorting to violence. "If kids know how to use the tools they have, it will keep them out of trouble nine out of 10 times," Peled notes. It is important for children to know that they have rights as humans to be kept safe from the wrath of

bullies. As Peled believes, no one deserves to be bullied. "If kids are assertive, use a firm voice, and set boundaries for themselves they will be fine," Peled says. "It shows the bully that they're not an easy target."

Veterans of Foreign Wars (VFW) offers two opportunities to students. The **Patriot's Pen National Youth Essay Contest** gives students in grades 6, 7 and 8 the opportunity to express their views on democracy. Contestants write a 300- to 400-word essay based on an annual patriotic theme. The 2007-2008 theme is "Why I Am An American Patriot" and the entry deadline is Nov. 1. National winners receive savings bonds between \$1,000 and \$10,000, and there are also regional monetary and certificate awards. **The Voice of Democracy National Youth Audio-Essay Contest**

For more information, visit www.stopbullyingnow.hrsa.gov; Coronado SAFE, 1009 C Ave., (619) 522-6884, Samantha.Bowman@coronadosafe.org; Coronado Human Relations Commission (619) 522-8915, Deborah Schwartz.



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