

## OPINION

# Bullying prevention starts at home

The White House last month hosted a Conference on Bullying Prevention in which students, parents, educators and community leaders discussed ways to combat this problem which affects 13 million students in the U.S. — roughly one-third of the school-age population — who are victims of bullying.

President and First Lady Obama spoke on how sometimes it is difficult for parents to know what is happening at school. They even mentioned that, when they ask their own daughter Sasha what happened at school today, she typically replies, like most kids her age, “Nothing.”

I encourage parents to train their children to give more specific answers by asking them more specific questions. By asking open-ended questions about the school day, children are forced to respond with more detail. For example, asking questions such as “Who did you play with at recess?”, “Who did you sit next to at lunch?”, “What did you guys talk about?” or “What happened on the bus today?” encourages children to talk about their friends, and parents get an idea of what is going on during “unstructured” time at school. It is important to note that most bullying happens during these “unstructured times.” By purposely asking about these times, parents are more aware when problems arise. When asking about your child’s day, parents should target these three areas: recess, lunch, and the school bus.

If your child is anxious about something happening at school or on the bus, don’t take it lightly. Make sure to address it, though appropriately. If your child’s anxiety is not treated properly, it can turn into a full-blown phobia. I see several kids a year who have developed a school phobia, or refuse to go to school as a result of being bullied. If your child tells you that he or she has been bullied, be sure to contact the school district to meet with the teacher, principal and administrator. (If it is not written, it did not happen. It is important to follow up a phone call with a written

letter or an email.)

During the conference, the first lady touched upon the issue of adults’ responsibility to model respect. Often, children repeat what they see being done at home by their parents or by adults in the community. We often think bullying happens between children only. However, it also happens among adults, and this is usually where the breeding ground for bullying exists. When children see adults in their community demeaning, degrading or hurting another adult, they may begin to think that sort of behavior is acceptable.

Bullying starts in the community and at home. Usually, the foundation is set at a young age when children grow up in a home environment where this negative behavior is reinforced among the adults and when there is social or physical aggression in the home and

community. Perhaps they see an adult verbally assault a store clerk or service professional. This is how bullying begins and breeds.

Bullying is a sociocultural problem affecting the community. If the community accepts bullying, it will breed easily. Breeding begins at home; children who bully their siblings are more likely to bully others in school. If this negative behavior is reinforced, in that the child gets what they want as a result of bullying, they will continue to do it into adulthood.

Parents and adults are the role models for the future generation. They should remember that anything they say will impact children on how they will deal with certain situations. It is important that adults and parents engage in positive behavior so that they can be someone their children can truly emulate.

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## Your turn



BY DR. RENEE CLAUSELLE

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