

## *A Message from Jennifer Murray, TOPS Counselor*

### **TOPS Anti-Bullying Program**

The TOPS community strives to create an environment that is warm and welcoming to all students. We want all students to have friends, feel safe, and be included in all class activities, such as class discussions, group projects, field trips and parties. We know that a sense of belonging to the community is crucial for all students to be successful academically.

We do many things that support our vision of a welcoming school. Teachers regularly conduct classroom meetings which give students an opportunity to work out disputes with the help of their peers. Fifth graders pair up with Kindergarten buddies for numerous cross-age activities throughout the year. Fourth graders are taught to be playground conflict managers. Our self-contained special education students have many opportunities to participate in activities with the rest of the school community. Student-created posters and signs throughout the school remind us all of appropriate, respectful behavior towards others. Middle school students work as teacher's assistants in the elementary classrooms and often lead Topics groups. The counselor teaches social skills and anti-bullying curriculum, works with students individually, and facilitates groups for elementary and middle school students for stress management, anger management, and social skills. Guest speakers talk to the middle school students on topics such as racial bias, homophobia, sexual harassment, internet safety, homelessness, and substance abuse. We ensure our playground and hallways are adequately supervised during recess. We rely on our partnership with TOPS parents to help us follow through on consequences when their child has been involved in a serious problem with another student.

In spite of these efforts to teach all students the skills to navigate social situations and have a sense of respect and responsibility towards others, some still have problems with bullying. Therefore, we want to become more proactive in our attempts to "bully-proof" our school.

Bullying differs from the occasional exchange of negative words or actions between two students. Bullying is a form of aggression in which:

- 1) There is an imbalance of power or strength among the parties involved. The imbalance of power may be physical, such as hitting or shoving; verbal, such as name-calling, teasing, taunting, threats; racial, gender, or religious slurs; psychological, such as excluding, gossip and rumors, manipulating relationships, graffiti, instant messaging.
- 2) The behavior is intended to cause distress or harm;
- 3) The behavior occurs repeatedly over time. It may be perpetrated by one or more individuals.

Many of the strategies already in place at TOPS are similar to those recommended by the Olweus Anti-Bullying Program, created by Professor Dan Olweus, Ph. D., the Norwegian researcher who is a leading authority about bullying among school-age children and youth. The Olweus Program suggests that the following elements are necessary for an effective anti-bullying program: awareness and involvement on the part of adults with regard to bully/victim problems; a survey of bully/victim problems; a school conference day devoted to bully/victim problems; better supervision during recess and lunch hour by adults; consistent and immediate consequences for aggressive behavior; generous praise for pro-social and helpful behavior by students; specific class rules against bullying; class meetings about bullying; serious individual talks with bullies and victims, as well as serious talks with their parents; a meeting with parents on the topic of bullying;

cooperative learning activities at school; teaching of social skills; formation of a parent-staff committee to oversee implementation of the program.

In August, elementary and middle school staff members attended a two-day Positive Discipline in the Classroom workshop. They will be using the strategies they learned to create a more cohesive classroom environment. In addition, Terry Chadsey, a trainer for the Olweus Anti-Bullying Program, facilitated a one-day workshop for all staff in August, and will provide a training for parents in the fall.

If you think your child is being bullied, ask them about it and look for signs such as fear of going to school, lack of friends, sadness, missing belongings, or torn clothing. Talk to someone at school immediately about the situation. We take reports of bullying seriously and we will act on the information. We will do everything possible to ensure your child's safety and privacy. If your child doesn't have many friends at school or is experiencing exclusion from their group of friends, make sure they have other interests and positive social interactions with peers outside of school.

If your child is aggressive or bullies others, take the problem seriously. Bullies can have lifelong problems with relationships and get involved in criminal activities. Examine how your family solves conflicts. If your child watches violent TV shows, cartoons, movies, or plays violent video games, consider limiting or eliminating these sources of exposure to anti-social behavior. If your child has participated in bullying, do not accept the excuse that "I was just joking" or "We were just playing around." Give an age appropriate, non-violent consequence in proportion to the severity of your child's actions. Increase your supervision of your child's activities and who they are spending time with. Set reasonable rules and curfews for them. Focus on the positive things your child is doing and let them know you notice their efforts. Communicate frequently with school staff to ensure your child is getting the support they need at school to change their behavior.

Here are some resources for further information about bullying:

[www.bullying.org](http://www.bullying.org)

[www.positivediscipline.org](http://www.positivediscipline.org)

*Best Friends, Worst Enemies: Understanding the Social Lives of Children* by Michael Thompson, Catherine O'Neill Grace, Lawrence J. Cohen. (2002). Ballantine Books.

*Odd Girl Out: the Hidden Culture of Aggression in Girls* by Rachel Simmons. (2003). Harvest Books.

*Queen Bees and Wannabes: Helping Your Daughter Survive cliques, Gossip, Boyfriends, and Other Realities of Adolescence* by Rosalind Wiseman. (2003). Three Rivers Press.

*Raising Cain: Protecting the Emotional Life of Boys* by Daniel J. Kindlon, et al. (2000). Ballantine Books.

*Speaking of Boys: Answers to the Most-Asked Questions About Raising Sons* by Michael Thompson, Teresa Barker. (2000). Ballantine Books.

*Bullying at School: What We Know and What We Can Do* by Dan Olweus, Ph. D. (1993). Blackwell Publishers.

*Positive Discipline* by Jane Nelsen. (1996). Ballantine Books.