

Delray Beach elementary school a pilot for anti-teasing program

By Scott Travis
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Banyan Creek Elementary fourth-graders know how it feels to get teased for being different, and they don't like it.

"I get teased because of the way I look. They say I'm not skinny enough," Erica Torres said. "I just walk away. It makes me feel bad."

"Kids tease me because of my culture, and because I'm short," said Pancham Goregaonkar, whose parents are from India.

"They talk about the bumps on my face. They say, 'Why don't you use Proactiv?'" said Tabitha Dulcio, referring to the prescription acne medication.

Such childhood cruelty needs to stop, said Alyse November, a parent of two Banyan Creek students and a licensed social worker. She started an anti-teasing program called "Different Like Me" at the school. The program, which could expand to schools districtwide, encourages children to celebrate, not criticize, differences in others.

While teasing sometimes has been viewed as a rite of passage for elementary-school students, many childhood experts say it can damage a child's sense of self-worth. Students who start out as teasers often become bullies, experts say.

It's hard to know how prevalent teasing is in schools. The Palm Beach County School District doesn't report it on discipline forms unless it rises to the more severe level of harassment.

National experts think it's a growing problem in schools.

"I think teasing is on the rise," said Judy Freedman, an Illinois social worker who wrote the book *Easing the Teasing*. "If we look at the media and late-night TV, a lot of the humor can be perceived as sarcastic put-downs and condescending. People then copy that. I think there's more of a blurred line between what's funny and what's disrespectful."

Freedman said teasing usually starts in preschool, peaks in middle school and tapers off in high school when students are more likely to find their own niche.

November started the "Different Like Me" program after her second- grade son, Jacob, complained that he was teased last year. She found in her research that some children committed suicide or took antidepressants after they were constantly teased or bullied.

The school district's Department of Safe Schools has agreed to pilot the anti-teasing program in four classes at Banyan Creek. If successful, it could be used in more schools next year, said Kim Mazauskas, a teacher who oversees bullying programs with the department.

The program uses lots of puppets, props and re-enactments to help kids figure out the right way to deal with anger and respond to people who are unlike themselves, whether the differences are physical, cultural or behavioral.

In one scenario, a kid named Stone asks a bespectacled friend named Stick whether he can play with Stick's toy car.

"No, I'm playing with it," Stick responds.

"Well just keep it, Four Eyes!" Stone snipes.

November then asked the kids how to better handle the situation. They re-enact the situation and this time, Stone, while still upset, asks Stick if he can use the car when he's finished. Stick agrees.

Principal Bill Fay said November's program has led to a couple of students coming forward with complaints about teasing problems. Guidance counselors helped the children resolve the conflicts.

All schools are encouraged to run programs on bullying and conflict resolution, both of which deal with teasing, Mazauskas said. But in an environment where so many schools are focused on performing well on the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test, participation levels can vary, she said.

"We're accountable for student success, and what we have to realize is that the curriculum and the FCAT are not the only factors that assure student achievement," she said. "A safe learning environment is also necessary."

Educators and guidance counselors throughout the school district are dealing with the issue in various ways.

At Hagen Road Elementary, west of Boynton Beach, the students' camaraderie was tested after 16 Hurricane Katrina evacuees arrived last month. Most of those students were black, while the rest of the student body primarily is white and Hispanic. Guidance counselor Ronald Berman said one of the students from New Orleans complained about being called derogatory names.

"He was kind of set upon by one or two youngsters, who felt he was different and didn't belong," Berman said. "We had to counsel with him and counsel with the other kids and set them straight."

Berman said he and several outside groups offer group counseling and classroom exercises at Hagen Road that teach children the value of respecting others.

While malicious teasing may be a problem, schools should be careful not to go overboard, advised Judith Vessey, a nursing professor at Boston College who has conducted national studies on teasing.

"Not all teasing is bad. A lot of it is friendly humor," she said. "These schools that say we have a no-teasing policy are not sending a clear message."

November agrees that the teaser's intent can determine whether something is funny or hurtful. But she cautions that friendly teases can be taken the wrong way.

"Making fun of someone and calling people names can hurt people's feelings," she said. "There are times when it starts out as innocent but it turns into something that causes emotional stress."

Several students at Banyan Creek said they think the new program is working.

"I know not to tease," fourth-grader Savanna Cary said. "It makes people mad, and it hurts their feelings."

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COPING WITH TEASING

1. Self talk. Think about what you can say or do in a teasing situation. Do not react with anger or tears. Ask yourself: "Whose opinion is more important ... the teaser's or mine?" A child should say to himself, "Even though I don't like teasing, I can handle it."
2. Ignore. Provide no eye contact or verbal response. Pretend the teaser is invisible. If possible, walk away and join others.
3. "I" message. Say, "I feel upset when you make fun of my glasses. I would like you to stop." This is effective in structured situations and when talking to friends, but in unstructured setting it may lead to more teasing.
4. Visualization. Create a mental picture that the words are bouncing off. Pretend there is a shield to repel the put-downs and teases.
5. Reframe. Accept the tease as a positive comment rather than a put-down. "Thanks for noticing my glasses" or "Thanks for your opinion."

6. Agree. Agree with the facts. "Yes, I have poor vision."
7. "So?" Convey the message of "so what?" or "who cares?"
8. Respond with compliment. "I wish I could see as well as you."
9. Use humor. Laughing or smiling defuses the mean comments.
10. Ask for help. An adult can often intervene successfully.

Source: Judy Freedman, author of Easing the Teasing. For more information, go to www.easingtheteasing.com