Five myths about bullying

By Susan M. Swearer, The Washington Post

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From schoolyards to workplaces and now in cyberspace, it seems that bullies are everywhere. New efforts to stop them and to help victims cope- such as the It Gets Better campaign- are gaining attention and popularity, but are they the best ways to protect kids and others from the worst forms of bullying? For them to have a fighting chance, let's first dispense with a few popular fallacies about getting picked on.

Myth 1. Most bullying now happens online.

Cyber-bullying has received enormous attention since the 2006 suicide of Megan Meier, an eighth-grader who was bullied on MySpace. The suicide of Rutgers freshman Tyler Clementi- who jumped off the George Washington Bridge near Manhattan in September after his roommate streamed video of a sexual encounter between Clementi and another male student online - also grabbed headlines.

As tragic as they are, these high-profile cases should not distract from more traditional- and more prevalent- forms of bullying. Whether battling rumors about their sexual orientation, enduring criticism of their clothes or getting pushed around at recess, kids are bullied offline all the time. While it's hard to stereotype bullying behavior in every school in every town in America, experts agree that at least 25 percent of students across the nation are bullied in traditional ways: hit, shoved, kicked, gossiped about, intimidated or excluded from social groups.

In a recent survey of more than 40,000 U.S. high school students conducted by the Josephson Institute, which focuses on ethics, 47 percent said they were bullied in the past year. But, according to the 2007 book "Cyber Bullying," as few as 10 percent of bullying victims are cyber-bullied. Meanwhile, a study of fifth, eighth and 11th graders in Colorado that same year found that they were more likely to be bullied verbally or physically than online.

Myth 2. Bullies are bullies and victims are victims.

Actually, it is common for kids who are bullied at home by an older sibling or abused by a parent to become bullies themselves at school.

Domestic violence and bullying feed each other. Researchers have found that elementary school bullies are more likely than non-bullies to have witnessed domestic violence during their preschool years. According to a 2007 study of bullying in Japan, South Africa and the United States, 72 percent of children who were physically abused by their parents became bullies, victims of bullies or both.

But taking out their frustrations on kids at school doesn't help bullies. Researchers have found that bullies who are bullied themselves have higher rates of depression, anxiety, anger and low self-esteem than kids who are only bullies, only victims or who are not involved in bullying at all.

Myth 3. Bullying ends when you grow up.

Bullying is negative, mean, repetitive behavior that occurs in a relationship characterized by an imbalance of power. It can happen in a middle school- but it can also happen in an office. According to the Journal of Management Studies, nearly 50 percent of American workers have experienced or witnessed bullying in the workplace, even if they did not recognize it as such.

In that study, more than 400 workers in the United States completed an online survey about negative workplace behaviors. They were told that bullying occurs when an individual experiences "at least two negative acts, weekly or more often, for six or more months in situations where targets find it difficult to defend against and stop abuse." The workers reported verbal abuse (threatening, intimidating, critical and humiliating comments), physical abuse (throwing a paperweight, shoving, pushing, slapping) and sexual abuse (unwanted sexual advances and sexual assault).

Columnist Dan Savage's It Gets Better campaign is a worthy effort to convince bullied adolescents that their lives will improve. However, anti-bullying programs and legislation focused on schools should- and probably will at some point- extend to adults in the workplace.

According to the sponsors of the Healthy Workplace Bill, 80 percent of workplace bullying is legal- and 72 percent of bullies outrank their targets.

Myth 4. Bullying is a major cause of suicide.

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, suicide is the third-leading cause of death for 15- to 24-year-olds, behind traffic accidents and homicide. And while individuals who are bullied are at increased risk for self-harm, it's too simplistic to blame the deaths of victims solely on bullying.

According to the CDC, risk factors for suicide include a family history of suicide, depression or other mental illness, alcohol or drug abuse, a personal loss, easy access to firearms and medication, exposure to the suicidal behavior of others, and isolation. Bullying can be a trigger for suicide, but other underlying factors are usually involved. Interpreting a teen-ager's suicide as a reaction to bullying ignores the complex emotional problems that American youth face. To understand the complexity of suicidal behavior, we need to look beyond one factor.

Myth 5. We can end bullying.

Can we? The debate rages on. In 2008, a study of school bullying-prevention programs over nearly 25 years found that they changed attitudes and perceptions about bullying, but not bullying behavior. This isn't great news. Victims of bullying don't want to know more about bullying- they want it to stop. Nonetheless, when schools collect data about bullying and intervene when they observe it, they can change the culture that supports the behavior.

Programs such as Steps to Respect, Second Step, Bully-Proofing Your School and the Olweus Bullying Prevention Program have proved particularly promising. A 2009 study in the Journal of Educational Psychology found that Steps to Respect- whose Web site says it "teaches elementary students to recognize, refuse, and report bullying, be assertive, and build friendships"- reduced bullying by 31 percent in some schools in Washington state. Parent training, increased playground supervision, effective disciplinary methods, home-and-school communication, classroom management and the use of training videos have also been associated with reductions in bullying.

No program can end bullying in every community, and no program has eliminated 100 percent of bullying behaviors. However, when awareness of bullying becomes as much a part of school culture as reverence for athletics or glee club, we'll have a shot at finally stopping it.

*Susan M. Swearer, an associate professor of school psychology at the University of Nebraska at Lincoln, is the co-author of "Bullying Prevention and Intervention: Realistic Strategies for Schools" and the co-director of the Bullying Research Network.*