

Scared of school: Middle school bullying a disturbing trend

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As a sixth-grader at Watson B. Duncan Middle School in Palm Beach Gardens, Christian Coury often hated going to school.

For nearly half that school year, Christian, now 13 and in seventh grade, was taunted and bullied in the lunchroom. Another boy kicked Christian's backpack, ordered him where to sit and insulted him.

"It happened pretty much every day," Christian said quietly. "Some days I got so mad - and scared."

Christian told school officials, but the student was never caught in the act. Then the boy stopped.

"I'm wondering if he didn't have something going on at home," Christian said. "A lot of people should be more aware how often youth violence and bullying occurs."

Middle school violence and bullying have certainly been in the news lately.

- In March, Josie Lou Ratley, a 15-year-old student at Deerfield Beach Middle School in Broward County, nearly died after authorities say she was stomped, kicked and beaten by fellow teen Wayne Treacy. Treacy was charged this month with attempted murder.

- Five months before that attack, Michael Brewer, a student at the same school, was doused with rubbing alcohol and set on fire at an apartment complex near the campus. Brewer, 15, is now a student at Jeaga Middle School in West Palm Beach.

- Last year, an 11-year-old sixth-grader in Massachusetts committed suicide by hanging himself with an extension chord after enduring merciless taunting at his school.

Statistics show a disturbing trend

The most recent government statistics show that 32 percent of 12- to 18-year-old students say they have been bullied. Meanwhile, reported bullying incidents in Palm Beach County schools are on the rise.

The school district says 2,286 incidents occurred in the 2008-09 school year, up from 2,032 in 2007-08.

The district defines bullying as using physical, verbal, written or psychological power to hurt or humiliate someone for any reason, such as gender, race, religion or sexual orientation.

"Bullying is becoming a major issue around the country," said Eugene Pettis, a Fort Lauderdale attorney who has represented the Palm Beach County School Board for 10 years. "It's not an act or crime that happens in an instant. It's something that usually happens over time."

While horrific incidents such as those in Deerfield Beach remain mostly isolated, middle school students say they're seeing more physical confrontations.

"Fights break out over really stupid things all the time," said Jessica Stone, a 14-year-old seventh grader at Palm Springs Middle School in West Palm Beach. "The last time it was over an eraser. It's pretty bad."

Maxx Melanson, a 12-year-old sixth-grader at Boca Raton Middle School, said he recently witnessed two fights in the same day.

"It was pretty brutal," he said. "One person attempted to choke another person, and on a school bus a kid got punched in the eye and went to the hospital."

Ellen Bredeweg, a language arts teacher at Palm Springs Middle, said today's kids have an unacceptably high tolerance for violence.

"It's all around us," she said. "The moral climate of our country has changed drastically, and what we would've been horrified by in earlier years, now it seems like acceptable behavior."

Girls are also becoming much more aggressive - and physical.

"Most of the violence I see is girls fighting over boys," said Catherine Martinez, a Pahokee Middle/Senior High teacher who works with kids who don't speak English as their first language. "The boys encourage it. It builds up their ego, and it's like a sport to them."

Like in prison, kids often fight to earn respect, said Vanessa Cruz-Guerro, a 15-year-old eighth-grader at Christa McAuliffe Middle in Boynton Beach.

"They just want to be the cool kids at school," she said. "They want to impress people."

Chad Bonincontri, a seventh grader at Western Pines Middle School in Loxahatchee, said last year bullies would go into his backpack and take his lunch. It got so bad that he decided to put a padlock on his backpack.

"Eighth graders like to pick on sixth graders a lot," Chad said. "I'd turn around and they were taking my lunch from my backpack and running with it. I chased them down the hall. I was really mad about it."

Chad said he stood up to the kids and eventually the bullying ended.

Social networking sites don't help

Many parents, teachers and school officials blame the increasingly aggressive behavior on such social networking sites as Facebook and MySpace. Also, more students own cell phones and are constantly texting on them.

The Pew Research Center's Internet & American Life Project recently found that 75 percent of 12- to 17-year-olds own a cell phone, up from 45 percent in 2004. Seventy-two percent of all teens are texters.

Ratley's savage beating was instigated by a text message she allegedly sent her attacker about his dead brother, according to law enforcement.

Twenty years ago, kids fought on the school playground and that's where the dispute was settled. Now, students continue bullying and harassing in cyberspace long after the final bell has sounded.

"It's so easy to say something on Facebook about a person," Stone said. "Today kids have more mediums to harass and bully."

Pettis said teachers are often clueless about a brewing dust-up because they're not privy to what kids are saying about each other online and in text messages.

"In today's world, much of the rumbling occurs outside the school and not within earshot of the teachers," he said.

The organizers behind the National Campaign to Stop Violence middle school program are attempting to do their part. The program has been in Palm Beach County for four years and is now in 18 middle schools.

The program involves a classroom discussion about violence and asks students to write an essay, poem or song answering three questions as part of a Do the Write Thing Challenge: How has youth violence affected my life? What are the causes of youth violence? What can I do to reduce violence?

More than 13,000 kids have taken the challenge.

"The idea is to talk about violence before these students are in the middle of it," said Bill Bone, a civil justice lawyer in West Palm Beach and the program's chairman. "By the time they're in high school, it's too late."

According to the Palm Beach County Sheriff's Office, more than 35 known and documented gangs in the county recruit sixth-, seventh- and eighth-grade students for gang activity.

Joelishia Banfield, a 13-year-old seventh-grader at Osceola Creek Middle School in Pahokee, took part in the Do the Write Thing Challenge. She wrote how she was once a bully while she was a safety patrol captain.

"My friends were bullies and I wanted to fit in with them," she said. "I taunted other kids, said their hair and clothes were ugly."

But she stopped after she realized how much she was hurting people.

"Bullying leads to low self-esteem and sometimes suicide," she said.

Dave Benson, assistant director for the Department of Safe Schools in Palm Beach County, said the school district is taking every measure to educate students about the dangers and often tragic consequences that can result from bullying.

"Kids' behaviors are better when they know what's expected of them," Benson said. "We're providing information to administrators and staff on how to address all victims of bullying."

Melanson, the 12-year-old sixth-grader, thinks that's a good idea.

"At my school they're more worried about buying textbooks," he said. "But stopping bullying is more important."

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Bullying on the rise

Number of reported bullying incidents in Palm Beach County schools:

- 2005-06: 1,824
- 2006-07: 2,084
- 2007-08: 2,032
- 2008-09: 2,286

Source: Palm Beach County School District

Note: The district defines bullying as using power (physical, verbal, written or psychological) for any reason in a willful manner with the intent of hurting or humiliating another individual for any reason including but not limited to age, gender, race, ethnicity, religion or sexual orientation.

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