

Monthlong program aims to stop bullying

Local, national efforts designed to create supportive environment

By Erin Toland

Special to The Tuscaloosa News

National Bullying Prevention Month was founded by the nonprofit group PACER's National Bullying Prevention Center in 2006. The campaign serves as a platform for taking action at the local level to create safe, supportive schools by encouraging communication among educators, parents and students.

Tuscaloosa city and county schools have taken steps to prevent bullying.

In August 2012, Tuscaloosa City Schools initiated Harassment Awareness Learning Together (HALT) districtwide to combat bullying.

In September 2014, the Tuscaloosa County School System adopted Building Responsibility Acceptance through Voice Empowerment (BRAVE), a program that calls for students, parents, educators and the community to work together to eliminate bullying.

Larry Deavers, a licensed clinical social worker and executive director of Family Counseling Service in Tuscaloosa, helps teenagers and children cope with their own personal crises in relationships with their parents and peers.

"As far as myself and several others who work in this field, we felt a calling to it, a need and a desire to help people dealing with the personal crises they face,"



Members of Leadership Tuscaloosa raised money to have 32 "Buddy Benches" installed at all Tuscaloosa city and county schools in 2016. The benches are part of a nationwide anti-bullying effort that teaches children about acceptance and the importance of getting along with each other. [STAFF FILE PHOTO]

On the Web

- www.tuscaloosacityschoools.com/halt
- www.pacer.org/bullying
- www.stopbullying.gov

Deavers said. "Most of us have been through some kind of crisis in our own past that stimulated us to be more conscientious and more compassionate to other people who are suffering from painful experiences in their lives."

Deavers said there are several types of bullying:

physical, verbal, social and cyber. Each comes with its own warning signs and prevention methods, he said.

Many negative emotions come with being bullied, such as depression, anxiety, loneliness and decreased self-esteem. Victims also are at an increased risk of suicidal thoughts and substance abuse. These effects are not only prominent in childhood, but they also can extend through adulthood.

Being targeted becomes all-consuming, meaning that it takes over every aspect of a victim's life and makes it difficult to think about anything else. Not only does

being bullied lead to emotional turmoil, but it also leads to physical stress such as an increase in migraines, stomachaches and insomnia as well as other symptoms of anxiety.

Bullies are also at risk for these symptoms, and it's possible that other factors contribute to their behavior. Many people who are severely bullied suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder, Deavers said.

"A lot of times, what happens is the bully is acting out of his own fear or maybe not being satisfied with

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themselves, so trying to provoke a response out of another person that they can exercise some kind of intimidation over is a little bit rewarding," Deavers said. "It provides a way of making that bully feel better about themselves at least for a moment."

Deavers offers several pieces of advice for dealing with bullying whether you are a bystander, a victim or even an aggressor.

Deavers advises victims to never deal with bullying alone, because that increases vulnerability. Bullies do not believe they will be held accountable for their actions until a teacher, counselor or parent is informed. Taking accountability measures such as informing an authority figure is what can make a difference.

"Ignoring it is a good skill to use to see if it works," Deavers said. "It doesn't work for everybody, because sometimes, just ignoring it can encourage the bully to escalate their own tactics.

They may keep pushing and keep pushing to try to get a response, because that's ultimately what a bully is trying to accomplish."

To combat bullying, it is more effective to seek the guidance of an adult or to be surrounded with supporters.

"One of the primary deterrents to bullying is when you have a support group," Deavers said. "When there's one person who kind of isolates themselves from their peers, that's a lot of times the kind of person that a potential bully will seek out."

As for bullies themselves, a long-term solution is to talk to authority figures or trustworthy peers with whom they can develop positive relationships to get the reinforcement needed to deal with their past experiences in a more positive light, Deavers said.

Cyberbullying comes with its own obstacles, he said. It creates physical space between the perpetrator and victim so that innermost thoughts can be said. Bullies recognize that they can be anonymous on the internet and create the emotional distance needed to go through with the act.

To combat cyberbullying,

do not respond to the messages. Instead, document the harassment by taking screenshots and printing out emails and direct messages in order to report it, Deavers said.

Parental involvement can make a world of difference, he said. When parents monitor their children's online activity and maintain healthy lines of communication, the child can feel comfortable telling them about bullying behavior.

It is not in the victim's best interest for a bystander to stay out of the situation, Deavers said. Intervention can help significantly, whether a bystander reports it or simply reaches out to the victim.

To lessen or even eliminate long-term effects, reach out to mental health professionals, process experiences with others who have had similar experiences, practice methods of reducing anxiety and stress, and build a positive self-image.

If you or someone you know is being bullied, submit a form via www.tuscaloosacityschools.com/halt or call Family Counseling Service in Tuscaloosa at 752-2504.