

# Bullying: It's not a rite of passage

Katie was an all-American girl—pretty, blonde and full of life. She and her middle school friends were looking forward to their high school years together. When Katie got to high school, she tried out for the cheerleading squad and became a cheerleader. This expanded her circle of friends, and her pals from middle school didn't like it. Decisions were made to hurt Katie—by those who were once her closest friends.

Every day something awful happened, from trash being put in her backpack to drinks being spilled on her clothes at her after-school job. Her former friends called her names and intentionally cornered her in the hallway. No day was carefree. It was more than Katie could deal with.

She suffered from depression and low self-esteem, headaches, stomachaches, poor appetite, nervousness, and fatigue. She became so depressed that she dropped out of school. She wasn't a cheerleader anymore. She missed her prom. Her parents didn't get to see their daughter proudly receive her high school diploma in cap and gown.

Katie's parents initially thought that bullying was something every kid goes through and that she would get over it, but Katie didn't recover easily. It took years for her to recover and begin to live a normal life. She sought therapy and still goes today.

## Highmark Healthy High 5

Unfortunately, this is a typical story. Every day 160,000 children stay home from school because they are afraid of being bullied again. But it doesn't need to end for them the way it ended for Katie.

With the launch of the Highmark Healthy High 5 initiative in 2006, the Highmark Foundation made a determined commitment to address bullying on a large scale. Why? Because bullying is a public health issue that affects almost 30 percent of youths in the United States (more than 5.7 million) who are estimated to be involved as either a bully, a target of bullying or both. The foundation

recognized that over the years, many efforts had been formed, but they were disjointed and underfunded. Highmark Healthy High 5 took a different approach. It enlisted partners throughout Pennsylvania and beyond, experts with success in bullying prevention—to show that focusing and working together to begin an evidence-based approach could radically reduce bullying in the classroom.

## Signs to look for

Looking back, Katie's symptoms and behavior were characteristic of someone who was being bullied. She found excuses not to go to school. Her clothing was damaged or pieces were missing. She was nervous and afraid of riding the bus or walking to school. She had bruises that she didn't want to talk about. She became sad and moody. Her grades, which had usually been high, suddenly dropped. Her parents became very concerned and wanted to talk about it, but Katie was reluctant. It was difficult to get the conversation started. So Katie's mother asked some subtle questions. Do you have any special friends at school? Who do you sit with at lunch and on the bus? Are there any kids at school you really don't like? Do they ever pick on you or leave you out of things? Katie eventually told her mother what had been happening.

At that point, Katie's mother talked with the school principal one-on-one. Most importantly, she didn't talk with the girls' parents—she left that up to the school. All of these steps were good ones, but they came too late to make Katie feel safe enough to stay in school.

Had Katie's new friends come to her rescue rather than being bystanders and watching, the bullying most likely would have stopped. Some felt anxious and worried that they might be targeted next. Later, after Katie left school, some friends felt guilty for not intervening. Everyone was affected by the bullying.

## Putting a stop to bullying

If the school had had an effective bullying prevention program, such as the Olweus system, this might never have happened to Katie. The

Olweus system is internationally recognized as the blueprint for reducing bullying in schools.

A recent report, *Bullying Prevention: A Statewide Collaborative That Works*, showed that after three or more months of schools' following the Olweus Bullying Prevention Program, bullying decreased by 14 percent among elementary students and 25 percent among high school students. After six or more months, 14 percent of middle school students said that they would try to help another student who was bullied. This is a significant and positive change in bullying episodes in Pennsylvania schools.

If this program had been in place during Katie's high school years, teachers and school staff would have been trained to recognize bullying and its harmful effects and, most importantly, would have known how best—and how soon—to intervene. Students would have known that there were steps to take if they saw bullying, and they could have counted on adults at school and home to communicate and respond correctly. Tolerance and empathy would permeate the school environment and students would be encouraged to connect with one another, not build walls.

"Stopping bullying takes a team effort," says Sheryl Barto, MEd, of the Windber Research Institute and National Technical Assistance Consultant for the Olweus Bullying Prevention Program. "The best and most effective programs are ones that provide ways for parents, students and school staff to work proactively together to inoculate against bullying and not just react when a case turns serious."

Two partners in the Highmark Foundation's bullying prevention efforts in Pennsylvania are the Windber Research Institute, which administers the Highmark Healthy High 5 HALT™—A Bullying Prevention Program, and the Center for Safe Schools, which coordinates PA CARES. Both programs are based on the Olweus system.

As a parent or guardian, what can you do to help your child avoid having an experience like Katie's? Educate yourself about bullying. Look into your school's bullying policy. Learn more about bullying prevention and how to talk with your kids and their school staff. ←



## Learn more

Go to [www.highmarkhealthyhigh5.org](http://www.highmarkhealthyhigh5.org) and click on the "Bullying" tab at the top of the page. Then read the "Take the Time. Talk to Your Kids. Tackle Bullying" section.

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