

UNL expert hopes film helps reduce bullying

Middle school can be one of the most turbulent times in a young person's life. That's partly because bullying peaks in late childhood to early adolescence when children undergo major physical and emotional changes.

A UNL educational psychologist's work is providing resources and information to help kids, parents and schools cope with bullying and other negative peer behavior. Susan Swearer, associate professor of school psychology, is a nationally known expert on bullying. She co-directs the online Bullying Research Network and has worked for 10 years with schools in Nebraska and across the United States on bullying.



Susan Swearer

Her latest project is consulting with a film producer on a film, written and acted by eighth-graders at Lincoln's Irving Middle School, which provides insight into the causes and effects of bullying and how to prevent it. Swearer partnered with Australian filmmaker Christopher Faull to produce "Stories of Us: Bullying." Faull had made an Australian documentary and agreed to film the American version in Lincoln and Champaign, Ill.

The film takes a realistic look at why kids become bullies and how bullying affects victims.

"It's designed to get kids to think about the complexity of bullying," Swearer said. "It's a complicated dynamic, and a lot of bullying behavior starts from misunderstandings."

Bullying starts in subtle ways and escalates over time. Film is the ideal medium to show those nuances, she said.

"Stories of Us" was filmed in December and is expected to be available this summer. The DVD is part of a broader project, "Promoting Positive Peer Relationships," which will include study guides and lesson plans about identifying and preventing bullying. Those resources and the "Stories of Us" DVD will be distributed nationally to teachers, parents and students through www.storiesofus.com.

Swearer will collaborate with colleagues at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign and the University of California, Santa Barbara to evaluate whether the program changes students' attitudes and behaviors.

Bullying is a topic that's relevant to most teens. The American Psychological Association reports that 90 percent of fourth- through eighth-graders are bullied at some point. Victims are more likely to suffer from low self-esteem, depression and anxiety. The bullies don't fare any better. Their aggressive behavior can lead to other problems, such as drug and alcohol abuse, truancy, vandalism and violence.

Swearer is working on two other major projects on bullying. She's exploring the dynamics of bullying internationally, comparing behaviors she observed in students at 20 Lincoln schools with behaviors that researchers in Canada, Japan and Korea observed among students in those countries.

She's also conducting research in partnership with the TeamMates mentoring program started by UNL athletic director Tom Osborne and his wife, Nancy. Swearer is studying whether students who have strong role models are less likely to bully and whether students who are bullied feel less victimized if they have someone to talk to when it happens. She also is developing a training program to teach mentors how to help their mentees build healthy relationships with their peers.

Swearer's research is available through the UNL College of Education and Human Sciences' [Bullying Research Network](#). She co-leads the 2-year-old online clearinghouse with a University of British Columbia colleague. This Web site contains academic research on bullying from a variety of institutions. Although it's mainly geared toward researchers, it contains useful information for parents and educators, as well.

Swearer said she doesn't expect her research to uncover a simple solution for preventing bullying. However, she hopes the film will encourage adolescents to pay attention to their own behaviors and understand why they and their peers act out.

"Education is a big component in terms of preventing bullying," she said.

