Helping Children Respond to Conflicts and Bullying

In the fall, teachers prepare students to work and learn together by discussing and modeling positive relationships and behaviors. Communication, empathy, conflict resolution and decision-making are fundamental to learning at school and teachers invest time in developing these social and emotional skills because they pay off in the long run by setting the norms expected in relationships at school. This proactive approach is the basis of the District's social and emotional learning program, SELAS (http://www.d181.org/resources/selas/index.aspx).

In spite of classroom discussions, school-wide activities that promote a positive school climate, and work that parents do at home, conflict and bullying occur. While these are related problems, they are not the same (LINK http://bullying.about.com/od/Basics/a/Normal-Conflict-Or-Bullying-How-To-Tell-The-Difference.htm) and are often confused.

Conflict is normal and unavoidable. It is two-sided and may be upsetting and serious, but it inherently needs two opposing views to occur. The goal is to be able to argue respectfully and come to an understanding of the other point of view. In school and at home, children need to learn how to respond constructively to disagreements and resolve them. This is learned with our help and positive examples.

Bullying is a severe or pervasive act directed toward someone. It is unwanted and one-sided. The goal is to cause fear or harm and undermine the identity of the victim. It can be an attack on an aspect of a person's identity, such as gender or sexual orientation, race, religion, or appearance, or takes advantage of a vulnerability. Bullying interferes with the victim's experience of school and capacity to learn and usually requires the intervention of adults to counteract it.

The District's 2016 policy on Preventing Bullying, Intimidation, and Harassment, http://www.boarddocs.com/il/hccsdil/Board.nsf/Public (7:180) reflects this definition and is in place to prevent and respond to the serious problem of bullying and the trauma it can cause.

Sometimes when conflict is not resolved, it can escalate to bullying. It is important that we learn different ways to respond to situations of conflict and have tools to help solve problems. With conflict resolution, we can learn to give and take.

Jeana Considine, Principal at Elm School, recommends a set of strategies children can choose from in responding to conflict:

• Walk away (give it space and time) and cool off
• Rock-Paper-Scissors (a quick method for resolution; often used on the playground) LINK https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rock-paper-scissors
• Talk it out (adult guidance may be needed with a problem solving process) LINK http://www.morningsidecenter.org/teachable-moment/lessons/two-problem-solving-approaches
• Listen and say back what you hear
• Use an I-message (LINK https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/I-message)
• Take responsibility
• Come up with a solution
• Affirm, forgive, thank, or apologize

These approaches can help children de-escalate situations of conflict at school and home.

When a student needs help in managing conflict or is being bullied, let his teacher and/or principal know. They and the school social worker are equipped to help solve the problem so that every child can can feel safe and included at school and be a successful learner.

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