Winston Salem Journal

Editorial: Bullying: Students themselves may be key to solving problem

Posted: Saturday, October 12, 2013 5:00 pm

Anyone who was bullied as a student – which includes most of us – remembers that the best defense was always to avoid the bully, if possible. If you took a different way to class, skipped lunch or darted for the door the second the bell rang, you might just survive another day without an embarrassing confrontation.

It used to be that bullies were creatures of opportunity. If they came across a potential victim, they would act, especially if they had an audience. They didn’t necessarily seek out their victims.

That’s how students who went to school before the age of the Internet and social media dealt with bullies. But things have changed and those who dismiss the issue today, those who say, “I was bullied in school and I turned out OK,” don’t understand how the world has changed for young people.

In the age of ubiquitous electronic communication, the bully cannot be avoided. There is no place to hide, no alternate routes to take, no way to stay out of the bully’s way. In short, no relief.

Social media has left bullying victims with few ways to escape, Andy Hagler, executive director of the Mental Health Association in Forsyth County, told the Journal’s Arika Herron. And perhaps because of the nature of social media, the bullying can be more extreme, leading some students to commit suicide. Gay and lesbian students are often specifically targeted.

"Nowadays with bullying, it’s more than just the teasing,” Hagler said. “It has a lot to do with intimidation. It’s not just a rite of passage. It becomes fear-based.”

October is National Bullying Prevention month. Winston-Salem/Forsyth County school officials are working with community groups to raise awareness about bullying and cyber-bullying. A survey of students last year revealed that 53 percent of eighth-graders, 43 percent of fifth-graders, and 28 percent of high-school seniors agreed or strongly agreed that bullying was a problem.

Last Wednesday was Unity Day, sponsored by the PACER National Bullying Prevention Center, an effort to raise awareness and show support for students who have been bullied. Schools and community groups also gathered for a Bully Walk on Saturday at BB&T Ballpark.

It’s important that students themselves are getting involved to combat bullying. They may be the solution because while bullies may seem like fearless rebels, most often they are troubled and insecure and looking for acceptance. The last thing they probably want is to be on the outside.

Which brings us to the parents of bullies, and you probably know who you are. Do your child a big favor and let them know that you also think that bullies are uncool.