

Campos: A Way To Keep Bullies At Bay

Rocky Mountain News OPINION
January 17, 2006

Recently, the 10-year-old daughter of a friend of mine spent several months being bullied viciously by three other fourth-grade girls. Several times per week, these girls would surround the victim on the playground or in the hallway, and bombard the girl with cruel remarks about her appearance, her clothes, her unpopularity, the "fact" that when she was in high school no one would take her to the prom, and who knows what other creative torments.

(In his cartoon series *Life in Hell*, Simpsons creator Matt Groening has a drawing entitled "The Cruellest Thing in the World: A Roving Gang of Fourth-Grade Girls." The drawing features a group of girls surrounding their victim and chanting "Cry, Debbie, cry!" over and over again).

My friend and his wife spent weeks trying to persuade the school to do something about the situation, with minimal results. In the end, the school's principal finally intervened after my friend (who is a well-known lawyer) threatened to discuss the situation in detail with the school district's superintendent. At that point, the principal had a meeting with the girls and their parents, and let the girls know that there would be serious consequences if the behavior didn't stop immediately. It did.

My friend was fortunate in that he and his wife had the sort of "cultural capital," as sociologists say, to put real heat on the authorities until something serious was done. Most parents are not in such a relatively privileged position.

Fortunately, a year ago last September, Colorado implemented a program that has the potential to help students help themselves, when their teachers and parents can't or won't. The Safe2Tell program was developed at the Center for the Study and Prevention of Violence at the University of Colorado. Students and others can call a phone number (1-877-542-SAFE) to report an unsafe situation, or that a crime has occurred. The phone is staffed 24 hours per day, and trained personnel forward the information from calls to local school officials and law enforcement agencies when it's appropriate to do so.

Callers are given code numbers that protect their anonymity, which is also protected under Colorado state law. The program requires that every call generate a disposition report by the contacted school or law enforcement agency. The report notes whether the tip was unfounded, whether it resulted in an arrest, whether drugs, alcohol or weapons were involved or recovered, and whether charges were filed as a result.

I recently had lunch with Safe2Tell's director, Susan Payne. Payne, a detective who is on leave from the Colorado Springs police force, told me that, of the approximately 145 calls the program received in its first year, only one was unfounded. She emphasized that the "code of silence" which so often surrounds schoolchildren makes it very difficult for them to report what's going on in their school, even if they themselves are victims of criminal or bullying behavior.

Breaking that silence is crucial. Colorado Attorney General John Suthers notes that, according to the Secret Service, in 75 percent of violent school incidents, someone other than the attacker knew the incident was going to occur, but failed to report it.

Safe2Tell is funded by the Colorado Trust, a private foundation that over the past decade has contributed more than \$36 million toward improving the welfare of Colorado's youth, especially by lessening youth violence. In its 17 months of existence, Safe2Tell has run on what can be characterized as a shoestring budget. It's the kind of program that needs and deserves public funding. For more information: www.safe2tell.org