A new approach to ending bullying:
Empowering kids to be kind

Minnesota teacher Lora Hill has found an inspiring way to create a community of kindness in a high school cafeteria. Every Friday morning, Hill cranks up the music and everyone dances.

“We dance together and in that way we overcome bullying. It’s by building community through dance,” says Hill. “If you have the self-confidence to dance, to be who you are, you are powerful. You don’t need to bully anymore.”

Bullying comes in many forms. It may involve making threats, spreading rumors or attacking someone with words or fists. Excluding someone from a group is another way of bullying. The internet has expanded the bully’s playground and audience. Cyberbullying comes in the form of mean text messages or emails, taunting posts on social networking sites or posting embarrassing photos and videos.

Power players
Bullying almost always involves a perceived power imbalance. A bully may be trying to control others to get what he or she wants. Or it may be an attempt to gain social status.

The target is typically someone who is seen as being different: a kid with special needs, a teen who’s perceived as gay, or anyone who doesn’t meet the bully’s definition of “normal.” For kids who are trying to fit in, the effects can be devastating and long lasting. Victims of bullying are more likely to be depressed, lonely and anxious. As the victim takes the bully’s words to heart, self-esteem takes a hit. He or she may get headaches or stomach aches, feel tired or make poor food choices. In the worst case, the victim may think about suicide or even try to commit suicide.

Bullying is a social event. In almost 90% of observed cases, it involves an audience of peers. The way the audience responds — or doesn’t respond — can make the situation better or worse. Some laugh along. Others are afraid to get involved so they sit silently. In any case, the bully relies on bystanders to allow his or her behavior.

That brings us back to the Minnesota school teacher. One day she heard students mocking a kid with special needs who was dancing. The next week, she set up the speakers as usual, but she didn’t play music. Instead, she hung anti-bullying banners. The students started talking about why they weren’t dancing anymore. Several weeks later, when the teacher felt all the students got the message that bullying was not acceptable, she turned on the speakers, and everyone danced. Respect won.

Is your child being bullied?
Here are some warning signs:
• Unexplained injuries
• Has few, if any friends
• Damaged or missing clothes, jewelry, electronics or other belongings
• Seems afraid of going to school or taking part in activities
• Takes a long route when walking to or from school
• Has lost interest in school work or suddenly begins to do poorly in school
• Appears sad, moody, teary or depressed
• Complains frequently of headaches, stomachaches or other physical ailments
• Has trouble sleeping or has frequent bad dreams
• Change in eating habits, whether loss of appetite or binge eating
• Appears anxious and suffers from low self-esteem

Visit www.stopbullying.gov for resources to learn more about the warning signs and how to respond if you think your child is being bullied.
If your child is being bullied

As many as 50% of kids are bullied during their school years. At least one in ten is bullied on a regular basis. If you think your child may be one of them, ask him or her about it. If your suspicions are confirmed, assure your child he or she did the right thing by telling you. Ask what he or she thinks should be done to improve the situation.

Ignoring or walking away from a bully may be an option, or saying “Leave me alone.” Let your child know it’s okay to ask a teacher or other trusted adult for help. Encourage him or her to be with friends when walking to and from school or in other places where a bully might strike.

Seek help from your child’s teacher or school counselor. Ask if the school has an anti-bullying program and how they respond to bullying, whether it’s cyberbullying or face to face. The most effective prevention programs involve students, faculty and parents collaborating to build a culture of respect and kindness.

If your child is threatened with violence, or if a crime has been committed, contact the police.

Cyberbullying

Try to prevent cyberbullying before it happens. Be aware of what your child is doing online, and teach him or her to be smart about what he or she posts. Tell your child not to respond to cyberbullying. Instead, block the cyberbully. But save and print emails and screenshots of emails and texts. You can use this evidence to report the bullying to internet and cell-phone providers. Cyberbullying violates the terms of service of many social media sites. Visit the site’s safety center page to learn more. If the cyberbullying involves a crime, report it to the police.

What if your child is a bully?

It’s important to know if your child is picking on others. A child who bullies may have problems in school, unresolved emotional issues, troubled relationships and legal difficulties. Signs your child may be bullying include:

• Getting into fights, whether physical or verbal
• Hanging out with friends who bully
• Blaming others for problems
• Bringing home money or items you can’t account for
• Being disciplined at school

If your child resorts to bullying, be clear that such behavior is not ok. Tie meaningful consequences to behavior. For example, if he or she sends mean text messages, take away the cell phone. Find out what’s behind the bullying. Is it an attempt to control others? To gain power or status? A lack of social skills? When you know what’s behind it, you’re in a better position to help your child find healthier ways of interacting.

Warning signs. www.stopbullying.gov/at-risk/warning-signs/index.html#bullied; Resources

www.liveandworkwell.com

If your child is being bullied or is bullying others, consider seeking help from a mental health professional. Find a child or adolescent therapist in your area by using the “Search for Clinician” link. You can also find articles and other resources on liveandworkwell.com. Use the search term “bully.”