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Bullying Isn't What It Used to Be *Local Expert Offers Tips to Surviving Today's School Bully*

Sept. 24, 2007, TAMPA, FL – Today's parent faces a whole new monster when it comes to school bullies. Gone are the days of picking a fight on the playground. Now, school hallways are filled with bullies packed with weapons called blogs, cell phones, MySpace, You Tube and other high-tech devices that cause wounds so deep they can hurt the intended target for a lifetime.

“Teasing, name calling, and physical intimidation are still very prevalent when it comes to bullying, but tech savvy students are learning creative ways to gain the upper hand,” says *April Lott, Director of Community Treatment Programs at Directions for Mental Health in Clearwater*. “Parents and teachers need to be aware of the warning signs that children are being bullied – both in school and in cyberspace.”

The National Education Association estimates that as many as 160,000 children miss school every day because the fear of attack or intimidation by a bully. Among boys, bullying typically involves pushing, shoving, and other forms of physical violence. Girls tend to bully through gossiping, social exclusion, and verbal teasing. Online or “cyber-bullying” can include sending mean text, email or instant messages, as well as posting rumors or lies about a person on blogs or websites.

“Many times, children fear exposing a bully simply because they are embarrassed or they don't want to be known as a “tattletale,” says Lott. “That's why it's important for an adult to take the first step to help a child overcome a bully. Take time to notice small changes in personality, routine, or health. Those changes can symbolize a problem in the child's life.” Victims of bullying are more likely to suffer physical problems such as colds, sore throats, poor appetite and difficulty sleeping. They may miss school more frequently, perform poorly and suffer from low self-esteem. Eventually, bullying may lead to more serious problems such as depression, anxiety and suicidal thoughts.

What can parents do if they suspect or are told that their child is being bullied?

First, keep emotions in check. When a parent realizes their child is being bullied, it's a natural instinct to protect their young. There is a right way and a wrong way to protect your child. Stay calm. Remember that any action taken while you're under such distress is often regretted later. Don't contact the parents of the student you believe is bullying your child. Don't post responses you find online about your child, and most importantly, don't close yourself off if your child is trying to open up to you about being a victim.

Second, talk with your child openly. Explain to your child that you are concerned about him or her. Be supportive, listen and gather information about the situation. Never blame your child for being bullied. Don't assume that your child did something to provoke the bully. Empathize with your child. Let him know that bullying is wrong, that it is not his fault and that you are glad your child had the courage to tell you about it. Assure your child that reporting bullying behavior is not the same as tattling.

Third, form a plan. Talk with your child about safety strategies. Teach him how to seek help when he feels threatened and how to use words to protect himself. Do not encourage retaliation as a solution. Having your child "hit back," whether it's physically or through his own web posts or text messages will only make the problem worse. If you suspect that your child is being bullied over the internet or text messages, ask your child to show you what the bully has posted. If possible, print all of this information.

Fourth, contact your child's teacher or principal. Whether it's over the internet or in the schoolyard, most schools have strict rules against bullies. School personnel are in the best position to understand the relationships between your child and others at school and recommend a course of action.

"When a parent learns their child is being bullied, it can be devastating," says Lott. "Reactions range from denying the situation to feeling like a target them self. But, no matter what emotions a parent faces, they must overcome their own feelings, focus on their child and stop the bullying all together."

About Directions for Mental Health Inc.

Directions for Mental Health, Inc., established in 1982, is a non-profit organization committed to helping heal the hurt in the lives of thousands of Pinellas County residents suffering from—or at risk of—mental illness. With nationally accredited programs, Directions sets the standard for best practices in mental health treatment, while making mental health care affordable and accessible to individuals and families, and building a safer, healthier community. Serving more than 8,000 people per year, Directions is dedicated to developing innovative programs that change lives, while reducing crime, homelessness, drug abuse and child abuse.

For questions about mental illness and programs, visit Directions for Mental Health's website at www.directionsmh.org or call (727) 524-4464 extension 1700.

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Note: National Bullying Prevention Awareness Week is Oct. 21 – 27, 2007.