

# New approach to bullying

**M**uch attention has been paid in the media recently regarding the growing epidemic of school bullying.

The good news is that this horrific issue, which for far too long has gone unaddressed, is now publicly exposed where it can be fully confronted. The bad news, of course, is that bullying exists in a civilized society.

School bullying covers a wide range of behavior done on school property including peer-to-peer bullying, bullying of younger children by older children, or bullying in which a teacher is either a victim or a culprit. According to the National Center for Education Statistics, nearly one-third of all students aged 12–18 reported having been bullied at school in 2007, some almost daily. One reading of the daily newspaper tells us that the issue is tragically getting worse.

Emotional bullying is the most prevalent type of bullying, with pushing, shoving, tripping and spitting on someone coming in a close second. And of course, with the advent of technology, now we have cyber-bullying to worry about as well.

Victims of bullying are often scarred for life and display a wide range of responses including low self-esteem, difficulty in trusting others, lack of assertiveness, aggression, difficulty controlling anger and isolation. And as we have seen recently, at its extreme, has led to tragic suicides.

In a curious sense, the victims of bullying are also the bullies themselves who, for reasons not fully comprehensible, have turned early in life to this harmful behavior. And while psychiatrists and sociologists debate the root causes of bullying, many agree that it often stems from a negative environment, a lack of self-esteem and a shortage of positive influences in the child's life.

And that is the real shame.

America's youth have much to contribute in energy, thought,



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creativity and action if their power is channeled in the right direction.

Schools can play a big part in this, so can parents, churches and temples,

community organizations, business leaders, and anyone who takes the time to offer support and encouragement.

Through Hugh O'Brian Youth Leadership we come in contact with more than 10,000 high school students every year from all across the nation (and foreign countries as well). While these students come from different backgrounds and cultures, what they all share is a common desire to be a positive influence in their communities through a commitment to service.

We try to impress upon these students that they are not just the leaders of tomorrow — they are the leaders of today. By feeding their energy in the right direction, they can make a positive impact right now in their own communities and beyond.

It can be as simple as joining a graffiti paint out in a neighborhood park, organizing a food drive in a high school gym, or cleaning up a yard at a senior citizen's home. Or it can mean getting more formally engaged with any of the wonderful not-for-profit organizations here in Ventura County. In some cases it also means young people organizing their own projects and nonprofit organizations, as many of our more than 365,000 alumni have done, addressing community needs as they see them. All of these efforts are needed. All of them matter.

Not only does youth service help others, but studies have shown that volunteering provides young adults with many of the social and practical skills that can help

them succeed in life. Youth volunteerism contributes to identity development; increased self-esteem; the development of empathy for others; and exposure to like-minded, good-hearted individuals they might not otherwise encounter. It also gives youth the self-confidence to stand up for themselves and others, perhaps even intervening in bullying situations, as we have heard many times from our HOBY Ambassadors.

Youth service provides students with new opportunities for personal growth and positive peer influence, as well as the education, role models, motivation and support to succeed.

The development of leadership contributes greatly to the positive improvements of young people and their communities. Leadership skills, such as goal-setting, problem-solving and sound decision-making, are not just necessary for leaders — these skills are needed for success in today's world. Helping young people develop leadership competencies makes them better able to solve community problems and enhances their civic participation.

And young leaders also demonstrate higher career aspirations, increased self-esteem and improved high school completion rates.

Having students become involved in programs such as these won't eliminate all of the bullying going on in schools today. Sadly, no single action or program can. But it will make an impact by steering rudderless students in a positive rather than destructive direction and, in doing so, hopefully set them on a path of leadership, service and high self-esteem.

— *Javier LaFianza is president and CEO of Westlake Village-based Hugh O'Brian Youth Leadership, the nation's top not-for-profit youth leadership development organization.*