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### PTOs take on bullying problem

By Elizabeth Malloy / [emalloy@cnc.com](mailto:emalloy@cnc.com)  
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At a Marshfield townwide PTO meeting a little over a year ago, member Sheryl Craig was amazed and troubled to hear that nearly everyone had a story about their children being bullied.

"It seems to get particularly bad around the middle school age, and a lot of parents were concerned about how they were going to get their kids through those years safely," Craig said.

Bullying and its effect on students has held a special significance in Marshfield after two Marshfield High School students, who claimed they felt like outcasts, were arrested earlier this fall for allegedly plotting a Columbine-like massacre at MHS. But Craig said the decision to hold a seminar on bullying where parents could learn more about the issue was made well before that unfortunate incident.

"It's all about choice, bullying is a choice," said Susan Fitzell, who lead the seminar at Martinson Elementary School last week. "We need to teach kids how to respond so they don't give away their power."

Fitzell, a high school special education teacher who also teaches a program called Martial Arts for Peace, travels around the country giving seminars on bullying. She stressed that understanding all the different kinds of bullying are important, from physically hurting someone to excessively staring at them. Fitzell also noted that it's important not to label one child "a bully" and to understand that at some points in their lives, everyone is a bully, willfully hurting, oppressing or stressing someone out in order to get something they want.

"Bullying is never okay, it just isn't. The problem is we're fighting a culture which finds humor in bullying, in putting people down," Fitzell said. "If we really want to do something about bullying, we need to start with how we treat each other and we say to each other. It's not just the kid on the playground punching out the other kid."

According to Fitzell, bullying does happen everywhere, but some school systems are more proactive about it than others. A Massachusetts native who now lives in New Hampshire, she said she has noticed that the priorities of all Bay State schools has shifted toward the MCAS achievement exams, and as a result a lot of social programs such as those aimed at curbing bullying have been scaled back or cut.

"In education today, it's not the priority," she said. "A lot of school districts don't see a tie in between a safe school and high achievement scores, and there is one."

Fitzell said schools and parents need to work together to teach kids how to deal with bullies. She suggested going over scenarios with kids where they might get teased or hurt and the best ways they can handle it without losing self-esteem or becoming a bully themselves.

About a half dozen teachers attended the conference, and Fitzell said it's important for educators to keep an eye on what's going on in their classrooms.






"In classrooms, kids feel more betrayed by a teacher that turns their head than the bully that picked on them," she said.

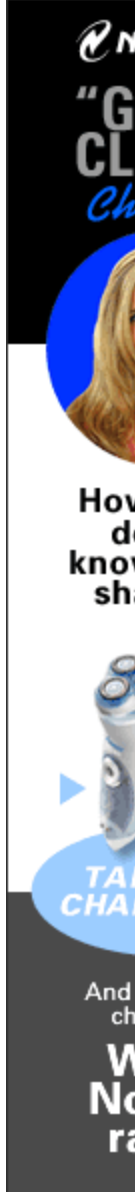
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Fitzell suggested teachers put a "reporting box" in their classroom, where students can write down any instances of bullying they've witnessed, and, anonymously or not, drop it into the box as a way of alerting the teacher.

Many of the approximately two dozen parents and teachers who attended the conference last week said they came out of the seminar with a better idea of how to help their kids deal with being bullied, or, prevent their kids from becoming bullies themselves.

"What we need to put into our children is that they are worthwhile," said Rick, whose daughter drives her children to school because they had so many problems with bullies on the bus. "They need to know that we're in control, they can make choices."

Linda Loiselle, principal of South River Elementary School, which has an anti-bullying program called Second Step, said that any new information educators can get is always helpful.

"It's important to give kids strategies because you're not with them all the time," Loiselle said.

Craig, of the Town Wide PTO, has a son with special needs, and she said she has always gone out of her way to make sure kids in the neighborhood understand her son's differences, but she still does worry as he goes through school that he could be a victim. She said she thought learning skills she could her son on how to deal with it was helpful.

"I think everyone in this room walked away with the feeling that we really do have to teach our children that there are choices," said Craig.

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