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ESTHER BUSH

Bullying

This month, the "Take Charge of Your Health Today" page focuses on bullying. Erricka Hager, health advocate at the Urban League of Greater Pittsburgh, and Esther L. Bush, president and CEO of the Urban League of Greater Pittsburgh, discussed this critically important topic.

ERRICKA HAGER

EB: I'm so pleased that we are finally addressing the issue of bullying, Erricka. I know this topic resonates with you because you're raising a young family. Although the concept of bullying isn't old, it has evolved somewhat with the creation of the Internet and social media.

EH: Yes, Ms. Bush. My son is getting close to the age when he will begin to interact with his peers on social media. I'm in a unique position because social media has evolved during my adult years. However, I'm still somewhat out of touch with the vast number of available platforms and apps. This area of technology is constantly changing. It's hard for anyone to stay up-to-date. Many social media platforms are successful because of adolescents.

EB: I agree, Erricka. I admit I'm unfamiliar with many of these new apps myself. With so many people being connected via social media, the face of bullying is changing. Sometimes you may not even know whose "face" is really behind a screen.

EH: That's true. It can be difficult for parents to monitor their children's online activities. Another part of this is through TV. Parents and caregivers like me are being exposed to new forms of bullying, as seen in the series 13 Reasons Why, and are having difficult conversations with the young people in our lives. We're seeking resources to educate them and ourselves about bullying.

EB: Absolutely. I know from reading the Courier that there have been many articles educating communities about the new face of cyberbullying, as well as what students are doing locally to fight back against cyberbullying. Although each piece had a different message, they're all equally important to our work at the Urban League. The youths in programs under our African American Leadership Development Institute would benefit from understanding the evolution of cyberbullying and what they can do to fight back in their respective communities. I've also witnessed the uproar 13 Reasons Why has caused but welcome the conversations that have taken place because of this uproar.

EH: Yes, Ms. Bush. I've also witnessed the confusion and frustration among parents because their children have watched the Netflix series. I agree that community conversations are needed. As the Courier has stated, bullying is changing and is starting to affect all races. The Urban League's Health Education Office (HEO) could be a great resource for both parents and youths to access information and resources about bullying. The HEO can connect youths and parents to Pitt researchers who are conducting research about social media and its connection to mental health. The HEO can also assist with referrals to various community organizations that specialize in mental health services. Either way, the HEO is available to offer any support and local resources.

EB: I second that! Thanks for having this chat with me, Erricka. These conversations are hard to have, but we must not shy away from them. Bullying and cyberbullying affect so many people. The effects cannot be ignored. I know our research partners at Pitt and around the country are working hard to understand how, why and where it happens so it can be prevented. I look forward to chatting with you next month. Until then, happy holidays!

Cyberbullying on the rise

With the popularity of Snapchat, Facebook and other social media sites, many young people spend a lot of time online. During that time, young people can be exposed to unwanted aggressive behavior—or cyberbullying. Cruel comments or photos can be seen via e-mail, chats, social media posts or texts. Cyberbullying is a concern for young people, their parents and adults who care about them—and it is happening more frequently.

Bullying is not new. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reports that in 2015, 15.5 percent of high school students reported being bullied. But experts see cyberbullying as different from in-person bullying.

"Cyberbullying is particularly worrisome," says Leanne Bowler, PhD, associate professor and chair of the Department of Information Culture and Data Stewardship in the University of Pittsburgh's School of Computing and Information. "Young people are leading the charge in the use of digital media and devices. Many parents haven't experienced it and can't draw on their own wisdom to help their children cope with it. Living a digital life is still somewhat foreign to parents. Young people don't have the same resilience or life experience as adults to deal with cyberbullying. The effects of cyberbullying are magnified because so many people can see and send comments or photos at any time of the day. It's nearly impossible to truly erase them from the internet or other people's phones, etc."

The health effects of cyberbullying are serious. According to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, young people who are bullied are more likely to experience depression and anxiety, increased feelings of sadness and loneliness, changes in sleep and eating patterns, loss of interest in activities they used to enjoy, increased health complaints and lower academic achievement and school attendance.

File photo (AP/Paul Sakuma)

LEANNE BOWLER, PHD

Dr. Bowler and her research team looked at ways developers could design websites and apps to help reduce the rates of cyberbullying. They spoke to different groups of young people about ways a website or app could be designed to get a potential bully to stop and think before harassing someone. Dr. Bowler and the groups came up with different design recommendations, some of which include anti-bullying messages, a "bully button" to flag material for review by the site or app manager, pop-up warnings and messages showing the consequences of cyberbullying.

"The design ideas touched on showing empathy," says Dr. Bowler. "The internet can feel like an empathy-free world."

In addition to Dr. Bowler's research, she has other suggestions for parents and caregivers looking to help their loved ones avoid or deal with cyberbullying. She recommends not engaging with a cyberbully. If a situation comes up, young people should disengage immediately—block or unfriend the bully, disable comments and report the behavior. Parents and young people can get help from their schools and law enforcement, if necessary. If parents or caregivers are concerned that a loved one is thinking of suicide, they should call a health care provider or the **National Suicide Prevention Lifeline (1-800-273-8255)**.

"Parents should become familiar with the digital environment," says Dr. Bowler. "Know about the tools you can use—set restrictions on phones, use child-friendly messaging services, etc. I recommend a site called Common Sense Media that has a lot of parent education tools. Talk to children at an early age about what to do if someone is mean to them online. If a child reports cyberbullying, take a screenshot as evidence. Try not to be judgmental about your child's use of social media. Remember that young people live a large portion of their lives online, and this is their space."

WILLIAM LEWIS, a senior at Carrick High School, raps during an anti-bullying event in Beltzhoover, June 24.

SLIM, SAMANTHA, MZ. NIK AND ONDAISHA AT THE EVENT. Mz. Nik, the executive chair of the Youth for the Beltzhoover Neighborhood Council, told the New Pittsburgh Courier that "some of my girls in my group were being bullied and picked on in school, and one likes to fight a lot. They wanted to speak out against bullying but they didn't know how. So, I prayed and asked God what he would have me to do, and this is what he put in my spirit."

LGBT youth more likely to be bullied

by Robert W.S. Coulter, PhD, MPH

Some youths are more likely than others to be victims of bullying and cyberbullying. Researchers want to understand why this is happening and how to prevent it. The following results are from youths across the United States who completed the Youth Risk Behavior Survey. Lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) youths are twice as likely as heterosexual (straight) youths to be bullied. Transgender youths are also twice as likely as nontransgender youths to be bullied. These findings are true for both traditional bullying and cyberbullying.

Data from youths in Pittsburgh suggest the same story is true in our own neighborhoods. Forty percent of LGB youths were bullied in the past year, compared to only 22 percent of heterosexuals. Twenty percent of LGB youths were cyberbullied in the past year versus 8 percent of heterosexuals. These results are from 1,813 teens who completed the Health Allegheny Teens Survey (HATS). The University of Pittsburgh Evaluation Institute administered HATS in 2014.

Being bullied has been linked with multiple mental and physical health problems. Victims of bullying are much more likely than nonvictims to be depressed, think about suicide and use alcohol or drugs. All these health outcomes are higher among LGB and transgender youths. Bullying has also been shown to be a major contributor to the differences between these groups' health outcomes.

Bullying can be reduced by school policies and social practices. Antidiscrimination policies and gender and sexual alliances (GSAs) can help reduce bullying. Adults and caregivers can also help LGB and transgender youths by actively listening to them and affirming their identities. If a youth tells you about their sexuality, you can say things like, "I am proud of you for sharing that with me," or "Thank you for telling me; you are brave for doing that." These kinds of phrases can make youths feel heard and accepted. But adults must be careful not to discuss the youths' sexual orientations or gender identities with others without permission. More ways to support LGB and transgender youths can be found at *www.cdc.gov/lgbthealth/youth-resources.htm.*