

# Shutting Down the Bully Pulpit



Laura Vernon,  
WEAC member and National  
Education Association Director

Bullying may be one of the most underreported safety problems in American schools. Once thought of as a rite of passage or as relatively harmless behavior, bullying is now known to have long-lasting effects for both victims and the bullies themselves. Awareness of bullying in the United States is improving somewhat with recent reports that in nearly two-thirds of recent school shootings, the attackers had previously been bullied.

## WHAT IT IS

Bullying occurs when someone keeps doing or saying things to make another person feel powerless or fearful. It's done in many ways: name calling; excluding a student; threatening; saying or writing nasty things about a student or taking or damaging a student's property.

## WHY IT HAPPENS

Laura Vernon, paraeducator and safety assistant in Milwaukee Public Schools and member of the Milwaukee Educational Assistants' Association, has spent more than 35 years working on desegregation and cultural issues for the Milwaukee Public Schools and is currently working on programs to keep schools safe.

"Children bring issues from their communities into the schools," says Vernon. "In my experience, 99% of the time, kids get bullied because parents don't pay attention. Some parents believe that if a child is quiet, everything is okay. But I'm here to tell you: If they're quiet, check it out."

## WHAT TO DO

Vernon says there are a few simple things that parents can do to make sure their children are safe.

"Most importantly, check in with your child every day. Ask your child how the day went. If he or she hesitates at all, pursue it," says Vernon.

"Be sure to show up at your children's schools to observe the environment, meet the teachers and find out about their safety policies. Some parents rarely or never show up; others show up only when their child is in trouble."

"Pay attention to your child's friends. Your child may be associating with someone who is in trouble. Watch for behavior changes in your child and in his or her friends."

## NEW CONCERNS

It was once believed that bullying took place between home and school, not in school or in other places. Today, there is a great deal of cyber-bullying taking place on the home computer and on electronic devices.

Pay attention to social media sites: Facebook, MySpace and others. Do you monitor your child's accounts? How much do you really know about what's going on in these online communities?

"Some parents give their children complete control over their cell phones. Parents need to take back control to keep their children safe everywhere," says Vernon.

In addition to online sources, most school districts have bullying prevention programs, and teachers have resources they can provide to parents. Many local police departments also have bullying prevention programs as well as materials to share.

"Check in  
with your child  
every day."