

**Editorial: Bullying is Everyone's Problem**  
**Vacaville Reporter**  
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The Bay Area may have a reputation for tolerance, but a recent survey sponsored by the Sikh Coalition finds that, for their children, it isn't very welcoming.

Last month's Bay Area Civil Rights report surveyed 1,300 Sikhs in the nine Bay Area counties, including 500 young people. Nearly three-quarters of all Sikh boys who wear small turbans, called "patkas," reported being harassed. Two of every three Sikh boys in middle school -- with or without turbans -- said they suffered some sort of racial or religious bullying.

Harassment takes place outside of school, too. The report included a description of a Vacaville family's unfortunate experience with a soccer coach who refused to act when her own sons taunted a Sikh team member.

Sikh children, of course, are not the only ones to suffer from bullying.

According to the It Gets Better Project, launched this fall to reassure gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered youth that they can have a fulfilling adult life if they survive their teen years, nine out of 10 LGBT students have experienced harassment at school. Perhaps not surprisingly, these same young people are four times as likely to attempt suicide as their straight peers.

Across the country, 66 percent of youth are teased and nearly one-third are bullied at least once a month, according to GroundSpark, a San Francisco-based organization that creates anti-bullying films and educational campaigns.

It's a phenomenon locally, too. A California School Climate

Survey conducted in the Vacaville Unified School District last school year found that 42 percent of fifth-graders, 27 percent of seventh- and ninth-graders and 22 percent of 11th-graders reported being harassed at school in the previous 12 months.

"Bullying has serious physical and mental health consequences for youth," according to GroundSpark's Web site. "An estimated 160,000 children miss school every day out of fear of attack or intimidation by other students. One out of every 10 students who drops out of school does so because of repeated bullying. ... Those who are bullied are five times more likely to be depressed and far more likely to be suicidal."

Earlier this year, the National Youth Violence Prevention Resource Center reported that the rate of bullying is dropping, thanks to anti-bullying lessons taught in schools. The most effective programs, it said, are those that raise awareness about bullying, set rules for expected behavior and persuade all adults on campus to take it seriously rather than look the other way.

But not everyone is ready to tackle this problem. Parents in Vallejo mobbed their school board this week, protesting GroundSpark films shown to their children during lessons required by a court settlement the school district made with a lesbian woman who was harassed while she was a student there.

Between budget cuts and an almost singular focus on academic test scores, it's hard to ask schools to tackle one more thing, yet respect for other people is perhaps the most important lesson any child can learn.

And, of course, it's not just schools that need to be teaching it. Parents ought to be the first line. Bullying feeds on fear and ignorance. Ask your children if they are afraid and, if they say yes, find out why. If they are being harassed at school, report it, and insist that schools follow their anti-bullying policies.

If children are curious about another child's religion, handicap, sexuality, living situation or any other perceived "difference," educate them -- even if that means educating yourself. Those anti-bullying films that Vallejo is showing are available online, and they offer age-appropriate ways to begin a discussion.

Community sports programs and other youth-oriented groups should also include basic harassment-prevention information when they train coaches and leaders.

It is natural for children to be curious, and they will act inappropriately at times. It's up to adults to teach them to be civilized. Fortunately, the basic rules to prevent bullying are quite simple: Don't call each other names and keep your hands to yourself.

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