BULLYING

By Melissa Alder, LICSW

As a child and adolescent therapist, I am seeing an increased prevalence of clients who are being bullied and whose parents often have misconceptions of what bullying is. Contrary to what people believe, bullying can happen to anyone. Kids are being teased because they are taller than their peers or aren’t wearing the latest fashions. They are being publically embarrassed because they are not having sex or staying out past their curfew. Many are being excluded from social events or being gossiped about because they are an honor student and applying to college. There was a time when bullying was restricted to face to face encounters. Not any longer. Our HI FI society has made it easy for students to publicly humiliate and embarrass their victims using online venues such as face book, MySpace and text messaging.

Many of my parents ask: Are there signs we should be looking for? The most common red flags are as follows:

- Abrupt lack of interest in school or refusing to go to school
- Decline in academics
- Withdrawing from family and after school activities
- Sad or angry after receiving a phone call, text message or being online
- Physical complaints such as headaches, panic attacks, difficulty sleeping, stomach aches

Another question that I’m often asked is: What can I do to help? Here are a few suggestions:

- Communicate with your child: ask questions about what is going on with them and address any behaviors that they are exhibiting that are out of the ordinary.
- If your child confides in you, respond with love, patience and support. Do not minimize or rationalize what they are going through.
- Get to know your child’s friends. Pay attention to how they spend their time so that you can recognize any changes in their behaviors and you can explore what is going on.
- Monitor their online use - periodically look at the websites that they visit.
- Talk to the school to see what type of anti-bullying programs they have in place. It is NH law for all schools to have a violence prevention plan to address bullying.
- Help your child develop positive attributes by getting involved in activities that will empower them such as athletics or the arts.
- Consider counseling. The damage done to victims can be very impacting. Counseling can provide an environment for your child to talk openly with an impartial person.

Melissa Alder, LICSW specializes in working with adolescents and teenagers with emotional and cognitive disabilities. Her many years of experience include working with clients involved in the juvenile justice system and their families.