

# Bullying acts like poison, experts say

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MASON CITY — Leaders of a forum on bullying of girls in grades K-8 in Mason City Thursday described relational aggression — also known as emotional bullying — as being like carbon monoxide poisoning.

It is difficult to detect on the surface so it often “goes under the radar” of teachers and parents, said Blair Wagner of Iowa City, a life coach who co-wrote the book, “When Girls Hurt Girls” with educator Jane Balvanz, also of Iowa City and a former St. Ansgar resident.

By contrast, physical bullying “is more like fire,” Wagner said.

But emotional bullying can be even more harmful than physical bullying because of the way it erodes self-esteem, Balvanz said.

Relational aggression begins “as soon as kids are friends” and sometimes happens when they are adults as well, according to Balvanz.

“We call it from the nursery to the nursing home,” she said.

Wagner said the five most common relational aggression tactics used by girls are gossip, secret-sharing (when friends betray what their friends tell them in confidence), exclusion, teasing and name-calling.

She also outlined strategies girls can use when they are targets of emotional bullying.

If the bullying is minor, it sometimes works to ignore it or brush it off with a joke, Wagner said.

If it escalates into threats that make a girl feel unsafe or if cyberbullying is involved, then it is time to tell an adult, she said.

But the most important strategy is “when a girl learns to speak up for herself,” Wagner said. “This is the clincher.”

Wagner and Balvanz had several volunteers from the audience role-play some strategies for dealing with name-calling and secret-sharing.

The scripts called for the target of bullying to use statements such as “It makes me angry when you do that” or “I want to be able to trust you.”

Wagner, whose own daughter was a target of bullying, said parents need to be able to emotionally distance themselves from the situation to be able to help them.

Calling the parent of the girl doing the bullying is the “number one mistake” parents tend to make, she said.

On the other hand, “teachers and parents should communicate all the time about this,” Balvanz said.

More than 30 parents, educators and members of community organizations attended the forum, which was sponsored by Girl Scouts of Greater Iowa.

Parent Kevin Hansen of Ventura said the forum “gave me some tips and ideas on when to get involved” if his daughter experiences problems with bullying.