

Dana Bunnett: Santa Clara County kids gang up against bullying

By Dana Bunnett

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Before all the recent buzz about Mitt Romney as a "mean boy" in high school, my 14-year-old son and I attended a Mountain View screening of the excellent documentary "Bully." The film ends on a hopeful note, with parents and students coming together to form a movement that refuses to accept bullying as an unavoidable ritual of adolescence.

Now, a group of students from high schools in Santa Clara County also has made bullying prevention a priority by pledging to create an environment where students stand up for each other. The pledge, written by the Silicon Valley Interschool Council, will be posted Monday on the group's website.

SVIC wants students, parents and teachers all over the valley to read it and sign it. Now that the students have taken the initiative, we need to back up their effort to stop the taunting and abuse.

These teenagers, who established the council as a nonprofit organization two years ago, have crafted the "One Kind" pledge to put responsibility on students themselves to stop bullying in its tracks. Part of this remarkable commitment includes a promise "to take a stand if we witness any form of bullying, whether online or in person, and try to resolve the issue."

When I spoke with Keren Hendel, a junior at Westmont High School who is leading this bullying prevention effort, she told me that most students don't realize how much bullying hurts or how damaging it can be. She said it sometimes isn't easy for her to defend students who are being picked on because she feels like she is calling out her peers -- especially if the confrontation happens in a public forum, such as Facebook. But when she has taken a stand, she has found there are others who publicly support her. It gets easier each time. So where do adults come in?

Some of the most sobering scenes in "Bully" showed that most of the adults involved didn't have a clue about how to recognize or stop what was happening. Worse, many shrugged it off with the attitude that "kids will be kids." But now the kids themselves are saying this doesn't have to be the way things are.

The "One Kind" pledge says students will ask for help from adults on campus if a situation becomes too difficult to handle, and that places a lot of faith in us to do something about it. Since students are taking bullying seriously enough to try to change the culture in school and in the community, we need to make the same pledge. After all, adults can be bullies, too. Will we cry foul when we see a coach bullying a young athlete, another parent bullying a teacher or a teacher bullying a student? We must be willing to intervene and set a good example.

The "One Kind" student pledge will be posted at www.svicouncil.com. Let's help it be the beginning of the end of excuses like "Kids will be kids."

Dana Bunnett is director of Kids in Common, a program of Planned Parenthood Mar Monte. For more information on bullying prevention programs, go to www.kidsincommon.org. She wrote this for this newspaper.