

'Upstander' students HAFTR takes lead in moving beyond bullying

By Ann E. Friedman

A new program at the Lower School of the Hebrew Academy of the Five Towns and Rockaway is teaching fourth and fifth graders to go beyond not being a bully.

The "Upstander" program asks HAFTR students to be an "Upstander — someone who, unlike a bystander, stands up to bullying," said the school's psychologist, Dr. Jennifer Yedlin, who developed the program.

"Upstander behavior includes standing up to a bully, tell[ing] a teacher or other staff member when bullying is happening and ask[ing] friends to include a child who is being left out or ignored."

The program, which was implemented when school began last month, promotes awareness of how harmful bullying can be, using storybooks, role-play scenarios and craft projects; it asks students to come up with their own definitions of bullying and describe their own bullying experiences, Yedlin said.

Schools today "teach the whole child by addressing their social and emotional needs," as well as academic requirements, said Lower School Principal Joy Hammer.

"At HAFTR, children participate in weekly social-skills workshops where they learn the tools to build good character," Hammer said.

"Students learn the importance of being part of a team, stand up for one another and take comfort in knowing the adults around them are here to help," she said.

Meanwhile, advances in technology have taken bullying to a new level, said Yedlin.

"Technology provides anonymity and adds a new layer to bullying that was not present in the past," she said. "Cyberbullying can be the scariest kind of bullying because many people can become involved very quickly, whether by mass text messages or through social media."

"I think bullying comes from a place of insecurity," Yedlin continued. "Often it's a quest for power from someone who has very little power in their own life, or a way to divert attention away from the bully. It's my hope that by learning these things at a young age, they will be prepared to face the social challenges of middle school and high school and create a safe environment for all students."

Rebecca Jerolim, a social worker at HAFTR

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who works closely with fifth-grade girls, discussing thoughts, actions and feelings about bullying, said that through the program she's seen "tremendous growth ... an awareness that was previously lacking for the students."

The program "opens up their hearts and minds to better understand the depth behind the feelings and emotions of those who bully and those being bullied, ultimately encouraging them to have control over their thoughts, feelings and actions in a healthy

way," Jerolim said.

Yedlin said she hopes to expand the Upstander program to all grades in the Lower School. "If this program is successful, I'll be working on adapting it for the younger students as well," she said.

"It's my hope that through this program, they'll learn to identify when bullying is taking place and take action to stop it."

The HAFTR Lower School, in Lawrence, comprises kindergarten through fifth grade.

A version of this story originally appeared in the Nassau Herald.