

## Bullying help on way for Centennial school girls

By Gary Weckselblatt Staff Writer | Posted: Monday, September 1, 2014 1:00 am

Karin Kasdin knows what it's like to be the target of bullies.

As a young teen, Kasdin described herself as very tall with flaming red hair and a large nose.

"I might as well have had a target on my back," she said. "I was horribly picked on. My middle school experience was horrific."

As bad as things were for her growing up in the 1980s, Kasdin could always close the door to her bedroom and feel safe from her peer tormentors. Today's youngsters don't have that safe haven.

"With social media, it's there all the time," she said.

Kasdin has taken her experiences, working with the Langhorne-based Peace Center, along with degrees from Northwestern and Harvard, to create a program called Girls Unlimited. It's designed to provide fourth- and seventh-grade girls with a forum to discuss the issues and pressures they're facing. The goal is to help girls develop social awareness, empathy and responsibility within the context of demonstrating respect for others.

Seventh-grade girls in Centennial will take part in Girls Unlimited, a program that runs one hour a day for one week. It begins Sept. 8 at Log College Middle School and heads to Klinger on Sept. 29. Bristol Township, Council Rock and Palisades have also signed up, using grants from Foundations Community Partnership and St. Mary Medical Center.

"Many years ago, in the dinosaur age, we used to have a citizenship or civics class that basically taught you how to be a good person," she said. "We don't have that anymore. Now we are so focused on test scores, and there's very little time for character education.

"In the times we live in, character education is more important than ever before. With social media and reality TV, kids need to deal with other people. This program is about relational aggressive, backstabbing, cyber bullying, social isolation.

"We give them a lot of tools on how to manage their stress."

Joyce Mundy, superintendent at Centennial, can't wait to get started. "This program is fantastic, and is the kind of thing we're going to build around," she said.



Karin Kasdin, bully prevention resource center director at the Peace Center, has started a program for seventh-grade girls called Girls Unlimited, where she goes with facilitators into schools to talk to girls about bullying one-on-one.

Middle school students, in particular, she said, need the help as “their emotions are off the charts.”

Two decades ago, Mundy wrote her doctoral dissertation on bullying, and has been an advocate for programs as an assistant principal in Souderton and as principal in New Hope-Solebury that help students feel safe and connected in school.

She’s traveled to Washington, D.C., to lobby for the Safe Schools Act of 2013 and attended President Obama’s summit on bullying.

“Our expectation is to have a welcoming community, with conversations around diversity and reporting systems to protect students,” she said. “For me, as superintendent, this is one of my goals. It’s time for our district to not just bring in someone when there’s a conflict, but establish preventative measures to help teach students skills before they find themselves in those situations.”

Kasdin spoke at a Centennial School Board meeting in May about the “drama” in middle school.

“Sometimes seventh-grade girls are not the kindest people ever,” Kasdin said. “There’s a lot of pressure on them. A lot of pressure to succeed academically. A lot of pressure to be thin and gorgeous and beautiful. A lot of pressure to have the boys like them.

“And it sometimes comes out in what we call relational aggression, which is bullying in a very subtle way. It’s not often noticed by teachers and administrators right away. It involves excluding people from groups. It involves gossiping. It involves spreading rumors.”

Kasdin said the problem is made more challenging by social media.

In an interview last week, she said one in eight teens engage in some form of self-harm such as cutting, burning or an eating disorder.

“That’s a staggering number,” she said. “We need to take a step back. Math, science, social studies are important. But so is learning to negotiate your way in the world during these volatile times.”

Kasdin said her program works where having a speaker at a school assembly does not. “Study after study shows that,” she said. “Kids don’t pay attention. They can’t talk. After it’s over they go about their way and there’s no impact.”

In Girls Unlimited, “The girls see us day after day,” she said. “They develop trust. There are small groups, safe space for them to talk. We get to every single girl in the class.”

Kasdin said when the program is over “the girls don’t want us to leave.”

She gets letters from students that said things like “it made me brave” and “someone sat with me at lunch.”

Guidance counselors, she said, have told her of a “change in climate at school.” The results have been “quite remarkable for us.”