Allegan County, MI —

Session warns of school bullying

By MEGAN SCHMIDT
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At her school, one Michigan teen said her friend was picked on for liking sports and wearing clothes that were too "boyish." One day, after finding her friend crying, the teen said the girl told her: "Someone pulled my pants down to see if I was a girl or not."

The teen was one of a handful of students filmed by the Michigan State University Extension program to describe the fear bullying creates on campuses.

MSU Extension program leaders showed the students' comments to a group of educators, law enforcement officials and others who work with youth at the presentation, "Mean Girls and Real Boys," at Grand Valley State University's Meijer Campus on Tuesday.

The program focused on how bullying differs by gender — and how it is becoming increasingly vicious, particularly in "girlfighting," or bullying between females.

Presenter Janet Olsen defined bullying as any behavior intended to harm or disturb that occurs repeatedly over time. She said bullying also involves an imbalance of power — the most obvious example being a bully who is physically bigger than the victim. The imbalance of power could also equate to a bully who holds some other social advantage, such as popularity, age or race.

According to a 2007 National School Climate Survey by the Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network, 6.5 percent of high school students reported not going to school at least once in a 30-day period because they felt unsafe. The number was 32.7 percent for gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender students.

"And what is our dropout rate in this state?" Olsen asked. "We can't afford to have kids not going to school."

Social cues children receive from birth about how girls should act and how boys should act could be to blame, presenter Karen Pace said.

While girls are taught it is important to be physically attractive, agreeable and to "grin and bear it," boys learn they should suppress their emotions in a "straightjacket of masculinity," Pace said.

Both habits lead to a breakdown in healthy expression of anger.

"If you're taught to be a good girl, you're taught not to show your anger," Pace said. "Girls have learned that they can't express anger in a way that is constructive. But they are expressing it in ways that are still poisonous and insidious."

Narrow definitions of masculinity and femininity can also lead some adolescents to ridicule others who do not fit the mold, using demeaning sexually-oriented descriptions, Olsen noted.

FEBRUARY EVENT

The Allegan County MSU Extension team will present a full-day workshop, "Mean Girls and Real Boys," on Feb. 24. Anyone who works with youth is encouraged to attend. For information, contact Jan Brinn at brinn@msu.edu.