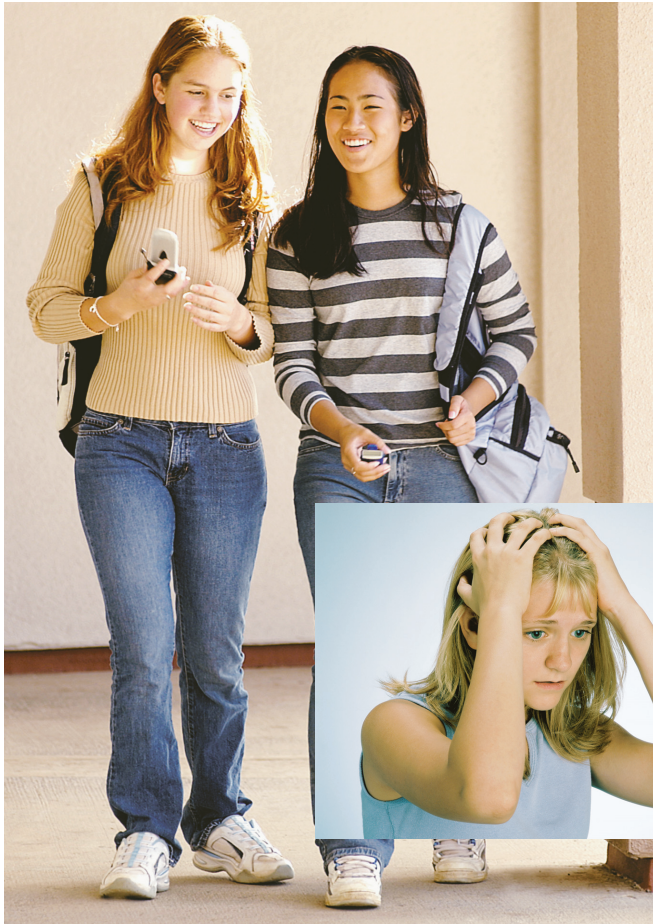


# Taking Bullying Head On

by Colleen Hollinger Petters



Girls will start rumors, whisper in groups, and spread lies designed to destroy friendships and crush self-confidence. With boys, it is more often physical: pushing, shoving, and hitting, with name calling attached. It's all bullying, and according to the National Institute of Health, youth in grades six through eight are most likely to bully or become a victim of a bully.

Imagining the young girls in our lives as victims or bullies send bits of panic through our souls.

Then, we comfort ourselves knowing our kind young daughter/granddaughter/niece/nice neighbor girl couldn't possibly be included. But denying that bullying exists is

what perpetuates bullying and hands bullies even more power and control. Often, other kids may avoid children who are being bullied for fear of becoming victims themselves.

A determined group of middle school educators and administrators in Central Minnesota knows bullying is happening in their schools, and they've taken action to confront it.

"We started to talk about what we can do to help kids feel empowered to act, and discuss what really stops bullying," explained Elaine Odette, Assistant Principal at St. Cloud's South Junior High School. Teaming with

the financially supportive Women's Fund of the Central Minnesota Community Foundation (CMCF), the collaborative group has hosted an event called The Forum on Middle School Bullying and Harassment, held January 17th in St. Cloud.

"Our purpose for this forum was to get people involved in this issue, thinking and working with each other on this topic," said Dee Holsinger, Rocori Middle School Music Instructor. "Many of us had already started talking to each other, reading anything we can get our hands on regarding this. We've been trying on our own to figure this out. This forum was to get together and share our knowledge with each other," described Holsinger.

Concerned educators from nine school districts were invited to participate in this event, and Odette said, "These teachers were there on their own time, volunteering to share their wisdom about addressing this issue." Holsinger emphasized that as educators, they are about learning. "If we are going to help these girls get through this maze, then we have to try to create and teach ways to gain confidence, being kind to one another, and not being or creating victims. If they can learn this, they'll be much better students," said Holsinger.

Participants described a major outcome of the Forum as the strengthening of local and regional networks for knowledge sharing

among those who teach and work with middle school kids. Representatives from area non-profits including the Girl Scouts, Central MN Task Force on Battered Women, CentraCare Child and Adolescent Specialty Center and Big Brothers Big Sisters attended, as did observers and learners from the Women's Fund.

Women's Fund Grants Committee Chairperson Shelly Bauerly Kopel expressed optimism about how the Women's Fund can positively impact youth, particularly area girls, during this stressful time of social and physiological growth of the middle school years, by supporting events like the Forum. The challenge the Women's Fund faces is awareness: of the complex issues of today's middle school girls, the need for funds to support training and education on this and similar topics, and the newness of the Women's Fund itself. Their targeted \$1 million goal is almost a third of the way, with donations providing \$200,000 to trigger a matching \$100,000 Bremer Grant. The Women's Fund is asking for monetary donations to further their efforts in meeting needs of girls and women in the greater Central Minnesota area.

For more information about the CMCF Women's Fund contact: Barb Carlson at 320-253-4380 or bcarlson@communitygiving.org.

The next  
**Women's Fund Event**  
*Women on Stage Encore*  
June 15, 2004 • Holiday Inn  
featuring "The Girls"  
dynamic jazz music group.