

Pediatricians take on bullies, dating violence

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(AP) -- The American Academy of Pediatrics wants doctors to take an active role in preventing bullying in schools and violence among dating teenagers.

The academy gives doctors tips for doing that in an updated policy being published in the July issue of its journal, Pediatrics.

Doctors should tell parents to talk to their children about bullying, teach children how to resolve conflicts and promote respectful relationships in dating, the policy says. It also suggests doctors volunteer to talk about the topics at schools, churches and youth organizations.

The doctors' group has published educational materials on bullying and dating before, but this is the first time the policy has addressed the issues in detail.

"Violence is a public health problem that needs to be dealt with in the context of health care," said Dr. Joseph Wright of Children's National Medical Center in Washington. Wright heads the academy's violence prevention committee and helped write the recommendations.

Studies suggest children's early home life, if stimulating and emotionally supportive, can protect them from being victims of bullying later in life, Wright said.

"Having meals with your child, watching television with your child" are among ideas that doctors can share with parents at "every single visit

between birth and age 21," Wright said. The AAP's Connected Kids protocol provides more detail on what doctors should address.

The policy also says a European program that emphasizes the role of bystanders in preventing bullying in schools could be a good model for prevention efforts in the U.S.

Dr. Robert Sege of Boston Medical Center, who also helped write the policy update, said the Olweus Bullying Prevention Program teaches children that bullies are kids with problems and bystanders can protect victims.

Schools that use the program teach children that "we take care of our own," Sege said. Kids learn "even if you have freckles or wear glasses, it's our job to include you in the social environment."

To prevent dating violence, pediatricians should tell teenagers that respect is important in relationships, Sege said.

He said his personal approach is to ask teens how they make decisions with their boyfriends and girlfriends. He also asks if they're ever afraid on dates.

"I make sure the young lady knows she deserves to be treated with respect and she doesn't need to put up with a boyfriend who's so jealous he tries to control what she's doing," Sege said.

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