

# Obama to bullying victims: I know what it's like

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President Barack Obama and first lady Michelle Obama meet with Brandon Greene of Burrilville, R.I., right, and Jacqui Knight of Moore, Okla., as they meet with students and parents from the Conference on Bullying Prevention in the Oval Office of the White House in Washington, Thursday March, 10, 2011. (AP Photo/Pablo Martinez Monsivais)

(AP) -- President Barack Obama smiled when he said his large ears and funny name once made him a target of school-yard harassment. But he was all seriousness Thursday when he told a White House conference on bullying that torment and intimidation must not be tolerated.

Some 13 million students, about a third of all those attending school, are bullied every year, the White House said. Experts say that puts them at greater risk of falling behind in their studies, abusing drugs or alcohol, or suffering mental or other health problems. Kids who are seen as

different because of their race, clothes, disability or sexual orientation are more likely to be bullied.

"If there's one goal of this conference," Obama said, "it's to dispel the myth that bullying is just a harmless rite of passage or an inevitable part of growing up. It's not." He spoke to more than 100 parents, students, teachers and others gathered to discuss the problem and share ideas for solutions.

"Bullying can have destructive consequences for our young people. And it's not something we have to accept," he said.

The issue has been getting more attention partly because texting, Facebook, Twitter and other technologies are being used to carry it out - it's called cyberbullying - and because of media coverage of teens who have killed themselves after such taunting.

Families of some of those youngsters joined Obama at the White House, including the mother of Carl Walker-Hoover, an 11-year-old boy who hanged himself at his Massachusetts home in 2009. The mother said classmates had tormented him.

"No family should have to go through what these families have gone through," Obama said. "No child should feel that alone."

Speaking as a parent and as a victim, Obama urged everyone to help end bullying by working to create an atmosphere at school where children feel safe and feel like they belong. He said that even he felt out of place growing up.

"I have to say, with big ears and the name that I have, I wasn't immune," said Obama, who moved around a lot as a boy, being born in Hawaii and growing up there and in Indonesia. "I didn't emerge unscathed," he said.

Obama said adults have too often turned a blind eye to the problem by chalking up the harassment to kids being kids. But he said a national attitude adjustment is in order because of the damage that bullying can do.

A White House conference doesn't immediately solve any problem. But what it does do, particularly by involving the president, is tell the country that an issue is, in fact, a problem that requires a national response.

"Sustained attention and community-wide effort can make an enormous difference in the lives of our young people," Health and Human Services Secretary Kathleen Sebelius said as the meeting drew to a close.

In the case of bullying, the conference also gave Obama another chance to press his education agenda. He has tried to make bullying a part of that by warning that failure to address the behavior puts the U.S. at risk of falling behind other countries academically.

Before breaking into smaller groups, conference participants heard from experts who study bullying. Discussions in the breakout sessions touched on anti-bullying efforts in schools, communities and on campuses, as well as on cyberbullying. Two other sessions were conducted online, including one with Sebelius answering questions.

Michelle Obama said parents need to be more involved in their children's lives, their schools and their activities since youngsters "don't always tell us every little detail." She said her youngest daughter, 9-year-old Sasha, often says "Nothing" in response to questions about her day at school.

The first lady, who introduced the president, also urged adults to set an example by treating others with compassion and respect and giving each other the benefit of the doubt. "It sends a message to our kids about how

they treat others," she said.

**More information:** <http://www.stopbullying.gov>

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