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Schools teach kids to put out put-downs

Insults » Words can be as devastating to children as physical action.

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Students from East Layton Elementary School put their "put downs" in a box as part of a project. (Rick Egan / The Salt Lake Tribune)

You're stupid. You're fat. I don't like you.

They're put-downs that likely have passed between children since the first kid learned to talk. And they're put-downs that continue to invade many homes, hallways and classrooms.

But it doesn't have to be that way, and it shouldn't, experts say. With increasing incidents of school violence in recent years, educators and experts say it's crucial that schools and parents learn to prevent such bullying. Many schools are trying to minimize violence, hurt feelings and academic disaster by teaching children when they're young the power of put-downs and how to avoid and deal with them.

"A lot of people think bullying and put-downs are just part of childhood and kids need to toughen up, but ... it's clear to me put-downs and bullying are not things we can ignore," said Donna Burcher, with **PeaceBuilders**, a California-based violence prevention and character education program in many of the nation's schools.

In Utah, 56 elementary schools follow the **PeaceBuilders** program, which is based on teaching kids six basic principles: Praise others, give up put-downs, seek wise people, notice hurts, right wrongs and help others.

One of those schools, East Layton Elementary, recently asked kids to not only give up put-downs, but help the school destroy them, literally. For a week, students wrote put-downs on small pieces of paper, crumpled them and put them in boxes in their classrooms. At the end of the week,

students gathered in the back of the school and dumped them on the lawn. Local firefighters then decimated the put-downs with a fire hose.

Students watched as hundreds of insults -- things they thought but didn't say or things others said to them -- softened into the grass.

They cheered to see them destroyed.

"They don't make people feel good and don't do anything good at all," said fifth-grader Thomas Montoya.

"If everyone said put-downs to everyone else, it wouldn't be a peaceful place," said second-grader Harrison Pond.

In fact, put-downs and other types of bullying can devastate some children, said Daniel Olympia, an associate professor of educational psychology at the University of Utah. In recent years, Olympia supervised teams of students who worked to educate students, teachers and parents at Daybreak Elementary School in South Jordan about bullying.

"We have young people who internalize a lot of this feedback, and it makes it very difficult for them to remain enthusiastic about coming to a place that should be of some benefit to them," Olympia said. "On the most extreme end of things, kids subjected to repeated harassment or bullying may think about physically harming themselves or acting out in other ways."

Kara Paul, a second-grade teacher at East Layton, said put-downs also can make it difficult for children to learn. It's such a serious issue that the Utah State Board of Education recently tweaked its hazing and bullying policy to make sure schools have their own strong policies that include training for students and teachers.

"When you're in an environment where you feel safe and can explore and take risks, you're more willing to challenge yourself," Paul said. "When you're in an environment with put-downs, you're more withdrawn and don't have those same opportunities."

Bonnie Barlow, a counselor at East Layton, advises students to deflect put-downs by ignoring them, making a joke or changing the subject, among other things.

Olympia said adults also can make a difference by watching their own words when they're around children. He said when children see adults speaking harshly to one another about controversial issues or differences in opinion, they sometimes mimic that.

"As children mature, they learn the power of language," Olympia said. "They learn that sometimes words can be much more harmful than any other type of physical action."

East Layton parent Olga Cooper said she tries to remind her son that bullies tease because of their insecurities. She admits it can be difficult to make children understand.

"Sometimes, it's easy to say that to kids, but it's another thing for them to believe it," she said. How can kids respond to put-downs?

Make a joke. Ignore it. Change the subject. Walk away. Agree in order to throw off the bully. Tell a trusted adult.