

## Bullying programs around the valley help kids stand up for themselves

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A year ago, when Project Cornerstone consultant Kelly Noftz was wrapping up an anti-bullying workshop at a Campbell elementary school, a fourth-grader named Sam stood up and asked if he could share his dream for the future.

Noftz chokes up when she recounts what happened next.

"He said, 'My dream is to kill myself when I'm 18. Bullying for me has been awful. I decided I was going to wait until 18, because I know it's a really big decision. But after today, I feel like I've got hope.' "

"I'm crying," Noftz recalls. "Two teachers are crying, and I looked at the group - 120 kids - and said, 'Who's going to be there for Sam?' " And the room exploded; people are raising their hands, yelling, and this kid was surrounded, and everyone was telling him, 'Hey, I never knew you felt that way.' "

Sam ended up getting the help he needed, but Noftz still worries about what a Project Cornerstone survey revealed: 16 percent of the middle and high school students in Santa Clara County polled had attempted suicide at least once. Nationally, bullied boys are

four times more likely to be suicidal than their peers, and girls, eight times more likely, according to a 2003 report by nonprofit Fight Crime: Invest in Kids.

Of course, children are also succeeding in killing themselves because of bullying. In 2002, for instance, 12-year-old Daniel Scruggs of Connecticut, whose classmates had constantly bullied him by pushing him off bleachers, banging his head into lockers and shoving him down a stairwell, eventually hanged himself in his closet.

In a newer trend, victims are lashing out before taking their own lives. According to a study by the U.S. Secret Service, nearly 75 percent of "school shooters" - including those from Columbine High School and Virginia Tech - had endured years of bullying before their deadly rampages.

Even the everyday, "sticks and stones" bullying nearly everyone experienced as children is too much, Noftz says. And, according to research by Cupertino psychiatrist Tom Tarshis, 90 percent of the students he tested at two San Jose schools had experienced at least one such bullying victimization.

Noftz points out that children can't learn well if they're distracted by fears of bumping into their bully in the hallway or if they're depressed - as bullied children are five times more likely to be. No learning at all happens for some victims: Each day in the United States, 160,000 children skip school, fearing bullying, according to the National Education Association.

Bullying affects children's futures as well, Tarshis says. Victims miss out on social development opportunities if they withdraw or are shunned by peers who fear the bully will turn on them. The resulting developmental void can lead to entrenched victim behavior, depression and other











