



ASHBROOK INDEPENDENT SCHOOL

To Nurture and Challenge Academically Capable Students

From the Office of the Head of School, Dr. Christopher A. Schoberl

Is it Monday, Yet? is my once monthly attempt to address developmental and topical issues we confront as we “challenge and nurture” our children. The topics I cover will be drawn from developmental and cognitive psychology, current research, and my own parenting and school administrator experience, and could just as easily be a response to local, national, or world events that have parenting implications. Keep your eyes on this spot in the final Compass of each month, and if you have any great ideas about future topics, please shoot me an email or text me... or, better yet, kick it old school and give me a call.

Is it Monday Yet? 3/4



Exploring Bullying

When I was growing up, bullying was not a topic that schools spent any time addressing. I guess they just felt that there were some things kids themselves needed to work out. As someone who was bullied, I still harbor tremendous regret and sadness when I think of that little boy I was, embarrassed, inarticulate, socially isolated, worried about being branded a tattler, and not sure who to reach out to. Along with my anemic academic experience, which I have shared with many of you, this is a significant part of the reason I dedicated my life to educational leadership and to ensuring that the focus of our core business remains sharply trained on the student experience.

Back in the day, if you were a student who experienced bullying, you were more inclined to struggle in silence rather than have it be known that you were unpopular enough to be bullied, lacked friends, or couldn't handle things yourself. Even now, a half century later, I pause before sharing aloud that I was bullied. Unlike the “if you see something, say something,” or upstander culture of today, those who witnessed bullying when I went to school were more inclined to avoid involvement by calling it out, either because they were happy enough THEY were not being bullied and did not want to call attention on themselves through retaliation, or because they did not want to be perceived as uncool. Having been bullied, and not having the words to be an upstander myself (the word itself did not exist yet), I also avoided involvement when I saw others bullied, and remember being moved to tears and frightened by the experience.

Having spent the vast majority of my time as an educator in independent schools, I have been fortunate enough to be a part of cultures, stated or not, that responded to bullying with a zero

tolerance approach; it was just a cultural norm. My students and my own children who attended the schools where I worked, were the beneficiaries of this more enlightened approach to ensure a healthy social emotional school environment.

This “enlightenment” included student training in peer interaction; definitions of, and actual training in, making and keeping friends; self advocacy; the sensibility to understand when you were in an unhealthy relationship and how to get out of it; conflict resolution strategies; the importance of empathy, peer refusal strategies, and kindness practices; and inclusion and equity lessons. This is not the same as saying that bullying did not occur at these schools. In the same way we think about drug and alcohol education, sex and sexuality education, and student safety in general, the moment we think “reasons to address these topics do not exist in my school,” is the moment we’ve taken our collective eye off the ball and put our students in harm’s way.

Ashbrook is a special place, to be sure, but contrary to one stereotype we are trying to shake, we do not enroll “Stepford Kids,” but normal kids in need of guidance by wise and loving adults. Although our school’s stats are likely much lower for a variety of reasons, it’s important to note that

... the rates and impact of bullying around the world are alarming. According to the National Center for Education Statistics, 21% of American children in 2015 said they’d been bullied during the school year. A World Health Organization survey of adolescents in twenty-eight countries found that an average of 18% of boys and 15% of girls had been bullied in the previous thirty days (Murthy, 179).

This is not a question with a binary answer, as if bullying were either present or not present, but more nuanced and one of degrees. In this spirit, I wrestled with the title for this IIMY installment because I knew any mention of bullying would be provocative, and I bet it aroused more than a few to wonder, maybe even fear, that bullying was “a thing” at our beloved school, so much so that the Head of School needs to call it out. Trust me: on some level, to some degree, the student experience includes some amount of friction which can be defined in a variety of ways and may be experienced by a given student as bullying. We need always to remain open to this, tuning our collective antenna to the possibility. To parse the language further, while I believe a normative amount of bullying *does* happen at Ashbrook, I would be hesitant to call any Explorer *a bully*.

Bullying is also sometimes very subtle and sometimes tough to spot, often existing virtually and through social media, and not playing out in the hallways or classrooms where we can see or hear it, and statistics on the issue point to a significant gender split with male students more inclined to bully face to face and girls more likely to bully virtually. Sometimes it is *even trickier* to spot. For example, at another K-12 school where I was a middle school head, and where we were more than a little smug about what a great job we were doing in our response to bullying, we were given quite a wake up call by one situation. A middle school student who claimed to be bullied *actually manipulated the system* we had developed to respond to bullying, to bully another student (a popular student she had lost both an athletics team captaincy and student government position to) alleging that she was physically and verbally assaulted on several occasions. Add an angry and vocal parent, a few students who were intimidated into “witnessing” several alleged situations, a few distant but overly involved trustees who wanted results, and an administration over-proud of its anti bullying accomplishments, and you suddenly had a recipe for misreading the situation.

The popular student “bully” was called on the carpet several times, escalating consequences doled out according to our very thoughtfully designed “zero tolerance” bullying policy, and almost


separated from the school! This final step we were able to avoid only after reviewing school security videos of student interactions that contradicted the “bullied student’s” allegations. Shame on us for not being more careful (and congratulations to Ashbrook for addressing even this eventuality in its policy on bullying).

When I interviewed for the position of Head of School, I fell in love with many parts of the Ashbrook experience, including the thoughtful way Ashbrook went about defining bullying, making sure that we remain committed to our role as educators, and do NOT police bullying by “prosecuting,” “shaming,” or “disciplining” as if we were in a court of law. Instead, Ashbrook responds as an educational institution, seeing such unfortunate moments as opportunities to support the bullied and teachable, bridge building moments for those accused of bullying.

As I have grown into this position, I have also grown quite proud of Ashbrook’s Health Education curriculum and the way our awesome PE and Health teacher, Kayla Weber, deploys this material, which was on display in a very impressive way during our [recent Zoom Panel Discussion](#).


Ashbrook School Lower School Health Curriculum - A Brief Breakdown
(specifically around relationships/bullying)

Kinder and First	Second and Third	Fourth
<p>Introduction to health concepts</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Lots of “I” and “me” statements early on before thinking about others - Examples: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Why do we warm up and cool down before vigorous exercise? - What does it mean when we sweat? - How can I tell if I am working my hardest? <p>Challenge Zones and Comfort Levels</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - How do you recognize your own challenge comfort zone? - How can we support and encourage others to find their zone, or even step out of it to try something new! 	<p>Continued discussion on important health topics</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Examples: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - What factors influence our health? <p>Introduction to Competitive Play</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Respecting our teammates AND opponents - How do we talk to each other in a competitive environment? - What does “being a good sport” look like? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Coxy versus Confident talk - Winning humbly and losing with grace - Communication, conflict resolution and problem solving <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - When can I handle problems on my own versus involving an adult - What does problem solving look like in sports? - How can I be proactive instead of reactive? - How can I best express to myself and my teacher what I am feeling? 	<p>Continued discussion on important health topics</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Examples: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - We talk a lot about physical health, but what other types of health are there? <p>Continued work conflict resolution and problem solving</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - How can I take my problem solving skills from the gym/classroom and involve them in other aspects of my life? - Proactive vs. Reactive - How can I best express to my peers what my feelings are so that we can find a solution together? - How can I best hear/understand what my peers’ feelings are so that we can find a solution together? - How do these play in to good leadership skills <p>Gender Role Influences in Sport</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Where do we see it and why is it still around? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Why is girls gymnastics about “putting on a show” while mens is about “showing strength” - Why do some women’s sports have different rules than mens (like lacrosse) - Uniforms (women sports tend to have more revealing outfits versus mens)
All Grades		
<p>Creating a Safe Place</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Letting students know that they have a place and a voice in their education, specifically in their PE and Health education. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - We work together to set the rules and expectations in the gym - They have a say in the sports that we have. Creating autonomy in the classroom to increase interest in the activity. - It is normally important to me that everyone in the gym feels safe and comfortable to push their comfort zones and try something new. I specifically play games across a wide range of sport categories, skill perspectives and activity. Want to try and feel something for yourself. <p>Progress over Perfection - It is not about what the score is at the end of the game, but how much effort you left on the field / court</p> <p>Exposure</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - I try very hard to make sure that every student feels seen in my class. We play many games and activities that include different types of skill level or that come from all around the world. I want my students to see themselves in the sports world, so I show them athletes from around the world who might look like them or speak like them. - Along these same lines, I want to normalize as many sports as I can for the students. I don’t want them to see a sport as a “girl sport” like ballet, figure skating or gymnastics. I just want them to see it as a sport. We also go into adaptive games, like the paraplympics, to show them a whole world of competitive play that they might not have known was out there. - The more they are exposed to new games or ways of seeing competitive play, the more it will become normal in their lives. They won’t see it as different, and hopefully they will want to respect it, maybe even defend it if need be. 		


Ashbrook School Middle School Health Curriculum Progression

5th	6th	7th	8th
<p>Influences on Health & Barriers to Fitness</p> <p>Health-Related Fitness</p> <p>Skill-Related Fitness</p> <p>Goal Setting and Tracking</p>	<p>Introduction to Body Systems</p> <p>Responsible Decision Making and Communication</p> <p>Nutrition</p> <p>World Games</p>	<p>Self Esteem & Body Image</p> <p>Relationships, Bias & Bullying</p> <p>Mental & Emotional Health</p> <p>Diseases and Transmissions</p> <p>Alcohol and Tobacco</p>	<p>Diversity, Equity & Inclusion</p> <p>Sex Education</p> <p>Stages of Life & Development</p>
Health Outreach Ideas			
<p>Parent and Student Outreach Night</p> <p>Guest speakers and activities in the gym or around the school that dives deeper into topics the students are working on. This gives the students more time with the material and gives the adults some of the language and tools we use in class for them also to use at home.</p> <p>CARDV Presentation</p> <p>Healthy Recipe Cookout</p>			
Sex Education Breakdown			
<p>This is a rough breakdown and brief outline of what we could cover. I adapt and add to the curriculum for each class and what they need / can handle as a whole.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Responsible Decision Making and Communication <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Defining different types of relationships - Healthy vs. Unhealthy (Factors that influence our decisions/ideas) - Clear communication skills workshop - Male Reproductive System <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Parts and Functions - Problems, injuries, illness and diseases that occur in the system + prevention or care - Female Reproductive System <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Parts and Functions - Problems, injuries, illness and diseases that occur in the system + prevention or care - Reproduction <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Breaking down each stage - Problems that could occur in each stage - LGBTQ2A+- History, Terminology and Understanding <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Brief history of the community (HIV/AIDS) - Terminology - Resources and Outreach 			

I am also enormously proud of our character education program and the ethos of kindness and inclusion we model everyday at Ashbrook, supported by buddy days and our advisory program. More than simply mottos or phrases we utter in discussions with prospective families, our teachers live these values in the way they observe our students, always keeping an open eye and ear for a teachable moment, beyond the subjects they have chosen to teach. As a case of semantics worth being obvious about, they teach *young students* BEFORE they teach science, history, or math.

On top of this, I have come to know the Oregon Department of Education as an active leader and important part of policymaking in these and related areas, impacting Ashbrook’s practices and policies even though we are an independent school, a partnership that is not the *modus operandi* of DOEs and independent schools on the East Coast. For example, you will notice in the [2022-23 Ashbrook Family Handbook](#) the recent inclusion of a policy regarding dating and domestic violence

(in Section 4), and the Board has recently ratified the School's responsibility to include suicide prevention training in our Health curriculum (in accordance with a recent Oregon State law), changes that speak to the close attention Ashbrook and other schools pay to all student behavior. While it might be obvious that all of this impacts the student experience on the social emotional and physical sides, it is also important to acknowledge how it affects the student experience in terms of academics and learning: if I am not feeling safe, regardless of the specific policy violation that is making me feel that way, I am not available for learning because I am living in the "fight, flight, or freeze" zone of the amygdala.

Still, even at the best schools attended by the best kids in the best of times, there will always be some amount of friction between kids. Of course, the existence of such friction is developmentally normative and if supported by loving adults and friends, the silver lining is that it is possible for this friction to provide students with a chance to develop the skills needed to navigate the tricky social situations that are always going to exist (they do not magically go away once you reach adulthood!), but even more important, is that all feel as though Ashbrook is a school where students do not need to suffer in silence if they are feeling bullied or harassed.

When you read the Ashbrook Family Handbook recently included in your re-enrollment materials, please sign off on the careful reading of this document by paying special attention to Section 7, Behavior Support and Student Development, where we address bullying and harassment. You will note that Ashbrook considers bullying as severe misbehavior, warranting the most significant of disciplinary consequences on the same level as arson, racism, theft, and possession of drugs or alcohol.

It is also important to understand that the standards for kindness and inclusion that we practice in actual physical environments of our school are also to be adhered to in the virtual world, though this point is sometimes lost on our children. In this vein, it would be important to disabuse students of a wrongheaded sense of what they might claim as their First Amendment rights when called on an act of bullying, either online or using their words face to face. In response to the Constitutional question, I would suggest that such students review exactly what the First Amendment protects (hint: it's not this).

If questioned on the School's involving itself in incidents that did not happen on campus or through school-owned technology, I would respond by noting that if it lands on my desk, it's in my jurisdiction, whether or not it happened on campus during school hours or on school owned technology. Finally, it is also critical to be able to respond to students accused of bullying who claim, "I was just fooling around," "It was just a joke," "people need to lighten up," or "I didn't realize I was doing anything wrong," by helping them to realize the difference between intent and impact, and the importance of owning the latter. What one person experiences as humor, others may feel as threatening, whether they are the target of the joke or someone witnessing it, neither of which helps us to be a stronger community,

Unfortunately, I have been involved in several adult personnel conversations over the years, responding to friction between adult employees, when many of the above excuses were proffered by the person accused of offending, bullying, harassing, or being hostile. Tragically, they had not learned the proper lessons as younger people when the stakes were lower, and because of this, were facing serious, life altering consequences that would impact not only themselves, but their families as well.

Ultimately, Ashbrook and I want to be strong partners with our families in all ways that optimize the student experience.

Bullying and harassment prevention, and healthy responses to bullying and harassment, ARE our responsibility: families and schools working in partnership can make a significant impact on the student experience in this regard. As you have heard me say on several occasions, we are raising these children together. In this, we are called upon to pay attention to so many different facets of what it means to challenge and nurture that it would be difficult, nay irresponsible, to think that any single one of us, parent, teacher, administrator, can go it alone and do it the way it deserves to be done.

As you have also heard me say, none of us is as smart as all of us, so let's work together on this.

If your child or the child of someone else claims to have been bullied, shows the signs* of bullying, or of being bullied, first, be a good listener.

Guy Winch, who counsels parents whose kids have been bullied or socially isolated, says the first step for all adults is to respect and acknowledge the importance of a child's concerns. The most common thing adults say to reassure kids is, "It doesn't matter what other people think." Instead... [Winch] believes, kids need to be reminded in that moment of the people who do value and accept them, whether they be a different group of friends, a club, a community group, or family members" (Murthy, 255).

After joining with your child in the way Winch suggests, please let us know. In the Lower School, the first "go to" for you and/or your child should be the classroom teacher. In the MS, you and/or your child should reach out to your child's advisor or to the teacher in the classroom where your child is feeling bullied (beyond this, any member of the staff can be approached). Of course, Mrs. Sechler and I are always available for a conversation and will always be kept in the loop to support those involved, both the bullied AND the bully, to ensure a safe and healthy community for all.

*Especially important to remain vigilant for "signs" as many of our students, particularly the youngest among them, may not have the words to express "being bullied" or, if they do have the words, may want to hide it (again, please refer to Section 7 in the Family Handbook).

Works Cited:

Murthy, Vivek: Together, The Healing Power of Human Connection in a Sometimes Lonely World, 2020, Harper Collins, New York.

Some Clickable Resources you may Find Useful

