

## Trying New Ways to Tame Bullying in the Schoolyard

- One program uses simple symbols to help young children grasp the problem. In another, a movie and video game foster tolerance and empathy among teenagers

By Jean Merl, Times Staff Writer  
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Ava de la Sota is talking with 5- and 6-year-olds about bubbles, kaleidoscopes and toothpaste.

As visiting principals watch intently, De la Sota, who specializes in school safety issues at UCLA's Corinne A. Seeds University Elementary School, demonstrates Cool Tools. It's a system she developed at the laboratory campus to help young children grasp such abstract concepts as integrity, self-reliance, kindness, fairness and responsibility.

On the opposite side of the Los Angeles Basin, leaders at Claremont High School are experimenting with an interactive movie and video game called "**Hate Comes Home**" to foster and build tolerance and empathy among students. **WILL Interactive Inc.**, a producer of training films for the military and other organizations, developed the program for the **Anti-Defamation League**, which distributes it free to high schools.

Both strategies are attempts to combat bullying, the longtime scourge of the schoolyard. Incorporating some of the latest research on the phenomenon that has long made life miserable for those who are picked on, the programs seek to enlist "bystanders" as a solution to the problem that experts know affects more than just the victim.

Contrary to popular opinion, bullies are not social outcasts suffering from low self-esteem, according to UCLA psychology professor Jaana Juvonen, the lead author of a study on bullying published last year in the journal *Pediatrics*.

"Bullies are popular and respected; they are considered the 'cool' kids," Juvonen said when the study results were released last December. "They don't show signs of depression or social anxiety, and they don't feel lonely."

Intervention programs that seek to boost bullies' egos are on the wrong track, Juvonen said, leaving their victims to suffer in silence while classmates and sometimes even adults do nothing to help.

Instead, schools should focus on creating environments in which abusive behavior is not tolerated and on giving youngsters effective ways to deal with bullies.

At University Elementary, Cool Tools evolved from the school's goal of providing a safe, nurturing atmosphere free of harassment. The eight "tools" give youngsters, and the adults they interact with, a common language for resolving conflicts and teach them ways to cope with peer taunting, exclusion and other socialization issues.

A filmy soap bubble, for example, represents each child's personal space. It's to be respected, not popped. The shifting design in a kaleidoscope demonstrates an important life lesson: that people often see things differently, but that doesn't mean somebody else's point of view is wrong.

An inflatable plastic foot reminds a child that sometimes just walking away is the best recourse for the moment, and a giant toy microphone signals that it's time to "cool down" an angry voice.

And the toothpaste? You can't put it back in the tube, the children soon discover during one of De la Sota's demonstrations.

"When we say 'toothpaste' to a child, it's an instant signal to remember that hurtful words, once spoken, can't be taken back," De la Sota explained to half a dozen principals invited to the campus recently to hear about the system.

Parents, teachers and others at the school have learned the program and have agreed to intervene whenever they see any sign of trouble, whether it's taunts, shoves, shouts or tears. Students fill out simple "incident reports" on the spot and later discuss what happened with an adult, often De la Sota. She looks at such incidents as teachable moments that help children learn social dynamics they can use all their lives.

"We make it concrete and simple," she said, so children can easily learn new behaviors and so busy teachers and administrators don't have to spend an inordinate amount of time to get results.

Though she did not develop Cool Tools specifically as an anti-bullying program, she has found that it works well to reduce harassment incidents and eliminate the "look the other way" atmosphere that enables bullies to thrive. The system is being used at several area elementary schools.

By the time youngsters reach adolescence, unchecked bullying can take the form of hatred against members of other ethnic groups or religions, or gays or lesbians, according to the Anti-Defamation League.

The "**Hate Comes Home**" video presents students with a quickly escalating scenario involving two boys arriving together at their school's homecoming dance. Students are then introduced to four other teenage characters and asked to make choices about what each of them could do.

The CD-ROM video, which the **Anti-Defamation League** has distributed to about 800

high schools in California, comes with a detailed discussion guide that includes suggested lesson plans and homework assignments. It can be used in computer labs or conventional classrooms, by entire classes or small groups, officials said.

At Claremont High, the video was used last school year in an English class in which a student was being teased because he had the same name as the gay college student beaten to death in a highly publicized hate crime.

Junior Adam Primack, 17, a leader in tolerance-building programs on and off campus, helped facilitate the showing of the video and discussions over several class periods.

"It's a great program, and it really got everybody's attention," Adam said of the movie, which opens with the murder of the two boys.

Students are then assigned a character, and they make choices for their character that have the power to change the course of events.

"It's very down to earth, and it deals with many different issues — such as being popular — not just racism" or anti-gay bias, he said. "I think it connects with many different groups."

Though not every student took the video seriously, he said, he believed "some walked away with a better understanding."

"Even now, some will still come up to me and thank me," Adam said.