

History, Process & Outcomes

HISTORY:

In April of 2013 we learned of a situation in which one of our middle schoolers was suffering from serious and ongoing bullying at school regarding her religious beliefs. Her mom came to Director of Faith Formation (DFF) Jessica Laike for help because the school wasn't doing anything. Jessica tried to comfort her, let her know that she and her daughter weren't alone and Jessica would look into ways we could help.

PROCESS:

Jessica shared the situation with the interim minister, Rev. Beatrice Hitchcock, and the high school youth group and had a discussion around religious bullying.

- All youth in the group who had grown up as UUs had experienced religious bullying at some point in elementary or middle school.
- The youth rallied, and wanted to make a difference for this girl and any other kids who might be dealing with this as well.
- We decided a workshop with both the younger kids and their parents was the best way to address the issue.
- Came up with talking points
 - What did they wish they had known when they were going through religious bullying?
 - What would have been helpful advice?
 - What did their parents do that helped?
 - What did parents do that made it worse?
 - What did they wish their parents would have done?
 - Etc. (see talking points document)
- Scheduled workshop for parents and youth in upper elementary and middle school
 - Started with everyone together in a big group.
 - What does bullying look like?
 - Who (in the room) has experienced it?
 - We realized that this is a shared experience - no one is alone in this.
 - The High School youth shared their own experiences.
 - We split the group: some HS youth and an advisor stayed with kids, other HS youth and advisors took parents to another room.
 - HS youth shared their own experiences of what helped, what made it worse, and what they wish their parents would have done.
 - Asked parents' opinions – asked for stories if any had been through this. What helped, what didn't?
 - Gave parents bullying and UU Pride resources.
 - After separate discussions came back together as a full group to watch "To This Day" by Shane Koyczan - video about bullying.
 - Finally, asked group who was feeling more supported around the subject.
 - Do they feel better, more prepared to deal with it if/when it comes up in the future?
 - Do they now feel like they have someone they can turn to for support?
 - Reminder that this community will always be here to support them.

OUTCOMES:

Over the next several weeks we had many parents share that not only did they feel more empowered and prepared after the workshop, but that their child(ren) seemed much less stressed and bothered by the bullying. They were no longer taking the remarks personally and sometimes were even able to have meaningful conversations around belief with the bullies themselves.

One boy who was in 5th grade at the time, was so moved by the whole experience that he got permission from his school principal to show the Shane Koyczan video to every homeroom class in his grade and then facilitated a discussion around bullying.

Today, the same girl who was having such a hard time is still at that same school and says that sometimes kids still say nasty things about UU'ism not being a real religion or that she is going to hell, but instead of taking it personally or getting upset about it, she now just tells them that she's sorry they feel that way, and if they'd ever like to really understand what we are about then she'll be happy to tell them.