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In middle school, Ryan Pattillo was smaller and almost a year younger than his peers, making him an easy and frequent target of bullies.

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Curtis Compton, cocompton@ajc.com Ryan Pattillo, 14, and his sister Madison Pattillo, 12, shown with their mother Jeannine Jannot at the family home in Alpharetta, have both been the victims of bullies.

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"The middle school years were not kind to him," said his mother, Jeannine Jannot, of Milton.

Truth is, they aren't for a lot of kids, experts say. Studies show that about 30 percent of schoolchildren in grades 6-10 have been bullied, been the target of bullying or both.

"Bullying is one of the most enduring and yet underrated problems in our schools," said Ronald Stephens, executive director of the National School Safety Center. "It's an issue that still needs a lot of attention."

And one that has consumed Jannot for most of the past four years.

"I have been very interested in the issue of social aggression since my son entered middle school," said the mother of three.

The issue took on new urgency in recent weeks following a string of high-profile cases in which students have committed suicide after enduring bullying by classmates.

Last week, the U.S. Department of Education issued a letter clarifying the legal responsibilities of public school officials to prevent such harassment, including name-calling and graphic and written statements using cellphones and the Internet.

"I think this is a good step because it signifies the urgency of the problem," said Jannot, a former school psychologist and preschool teacher. "Ultimately, however, it will require that parents, educators and students take the necessary steps to be part of the solution."

Stephens said he is already seeing signs of progress with more and more states, including Mississippi, passing legislation requiring districts to have a bully prevention policy in place. In Georgia, state law requires strict bullying policies, and for districts to notify parents when their child is a victim or instigator of bullying.

Named for Jaheem Herrera, the Dunwoody Elementary School student who committed suicide last year, the law goes into effect in January 2011.

"Those are steps in the right direction," Stephens said.

After analyzing her school's discipline data, Manning Oaks Elementary School Principal Sharon Reinig said she saw an opportunity to "really make a difference in our school and build awareness" around the issue.

The school hosted a daylong seminar led by bullying expert Mike Dreiblatt for students, parents and faculty in the surrounding area.

Reinig said she is already seeing positive results from the seminar including more students reporting incidences, which allow them to label the behavior and deal with it. They've also hung posters throughout the school encouraging students to follow Dreiblatt's suggestions and set out boxes for students to report any questionable behavior.

"We plan to keep this message before students," Reinig said. "It can't be a one-shot effort. It has to be ongoing and we're finding that children are more willing now to stand up and tell an adult what's happening."

Jannot and June Swift, both of whom have children at Hopewell Middle School, were among nearly two dozen parents who attended the Manning Oaks seminar.

"I'm much more in favor of being proactive," Swift, a mother of two, said. "I felt like the seminar was helpful, especially with giving kids the tools to recognize it and then defend themselves."

Dreiblatt, author of "How to Stop Bullying and Social Aggression," said that during the student sessions children predictably

said there were problems with name-calling, with people being left out and that there was some use of technology involved.

He said parents must take responsibility for knowing what their children are doing online and have common sense rules about using electronics. Dreiblatt said that if there is any question your child is being bullied, parents should look for differences in power.

"It's not just two girls arguing about a seat on the bus or two boys arguing about a soccer ball," he said. "Someone has more power, someone has less power and those with more power are abusing those who have less power. The difference in power could be there is five of us versus one of you or it could be we've been at the school longer and we have more status in the school."

Some telltale signs, he said, include mood swings or changes in personality, missing school supplies, no longer enjoying activities they once enjoyed or avoiding certain places they used to go.

How a child responds, Dreiblatt said, will determine whether bullying stops or continues. He said parents must train children for what they should do when it happens, but not get crazed or overly paranoid.

"We want to train our children to be able to resist bullying using strong body language, eye contact and tone of voice," he said. "That's what we did at Manning Oaks."

Jannot said that she and her husband tried to provide Ryan, a bright kid who liked to talk things out, with additional social skills.

For instance, she said that they suggested Ryan tell kids "to knock it off and turn around and walk away because if you just stand there, you're really just fueling the fire."

Helping her kids understand that bullying happens to everybody also helped, she said. In a few instances, Jannot said she had to seek help from the school assistant principal and the principal.

"They took our concerns seriously and were really a lot more receptive and accommodating than I anticipated, but the biggest thing I did was listen to Ryan," she said. "It was painful to watch, but he survived it."