

No Kidding

By Lynn Cassidy

“Just kidding” is an expression many of us have heard after a cruel statement. What this phrase often means is: “I can say whatever hurtful thing pops into my mind and then say, ‘just kidding’ to erase the responsibility for the emotional harm done.”

As a teacher and school counselor, I often heard bullies who would say very mean things to another child and then excuse it with “Just kidding!” He or she would actually believe that this phrase could erase the emotional impact of the mean or thoughtless expression that preceded it. Not so! The phrase does NOT erase the mean spirited words that precede “just kidding.” If one is really joking, one can usually feel the humorous intent or see it in the person’s eyes. Children are often very good at reading these body cues, like a twinkle in the eyes or a slight curve at the corners of the mouth.

Children and adults often need to be told exactly how their words affect another person. It is not a very easy thing to do, especially if the person delivering the hurtful speech is in a position of power. The power differential is what makes it difficult for a victim to confront an abuser, whether the harm was intentional or not. We saw this awareness increase recently with the “Me, Too” movement. Many women came forward many years after an incident that they perceived as sexual harassment. Women in the workplace often experience crude comments, sexual advances, or lewd jokes. Although there are definitely varying degrees of inappropriateness, varying degrees of egregious behavior, none of the harm can be excused with “I was just kidding” or “What’s the big deal?”

The common experience between a victim of a bully on the schoolyard and a victim of sexual misconduct in the workplace is the power differential. A victim, no matter what the age, is often afraid to speak up because of the retaliation that he or she will face. For a child, it may be the fear of retaliation and physical harm. For the woman and sometimes man, a sexual assault by an employer can feel equally threatening, because if one speaks out, one could lose a job, or be blackballed into submission in other ways. It is important that individuals and organizations take a serious look at the ways in which they treat one another, encouraging respect and honesty. Sexual harassment policies have been written and rewritten, but if employees do not feel that they will be taken seriously and that they can feel safe in reporting wrong-doing, then nothing will change. At least, it appears, there is an increase in public awareness of the issues and the collective consciousness is shifting towards respect and equality, “no kidding!”