

'Mr. Peace' encourages Elyria elementary students to beat bullying with courage, kindness

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Kevin "Mr. Peace" Szawala speaks to students of Ely Elementary School, 312 Gulf Road, about bullying, Sept. 15.

[Kevin "Mr. Peace" Szawala](#) has a positive message and he wants all youth to follow it.

"Turn to your neighbor and tell your neighbor why your best friend is your best friend," Szawala told students Sept. 15 in a gymnasium at Ely Elementary School, 312 Gulf Road, Elyria.

The youngsters chatted with each other about their favorite friends during "Stop the Bull," an assembly about bullying.

Szawala, of Novi, Mich., asked the first through third graders to share some of the reasons they became friends: they're nice; they like the same things; they're funny.

"How come nobody told me it was because of how much money they have, or how much money their parents have, or the types of clothes they wear?" Szawala asked. "When it comes to best friends, they see you for your heart first.

"If you treated everyone as your best friend, do you think we would have bullying? No," Szawala said.

"We might still get into arguments and fights, but we would work it out."

Friendship sometimes requires courage to buck the group. Szawala said he regrets not sticking up for a friend after a soccer match when they were in second-grade.

Years later, Szawala said he and his friend talked through the experience as men, and aired the hurtfulness of it. He said he acted the way he did because of fear of standing with his friend against the group.

Szawala defined bullying as something negative that is done over and over on purpose to exert power over another person.

A bully could be motivated by jealousy, wanting to be the center of attention or by being on the receiving end of bullying.

"Hurt people hurt people," Szawala said, adding he wears bracelets from students who said he touched their hearts. "It takes a couple seconds to place a mark on someone's heart by saying something mean to someone else.

"It also takes a couple seconds to say something nice to someone and place something nice on their heart."

With too many black marks placed on a heart, the heart becomes black, he said, adding forgiving people brings healing.

"Healed people heal people," Szawala said.

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