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WHILE they may mean well, not many school counsellors take bullying as seriously as they should, leading to cases of bullying that go unnoticed for too long and sometimes, with disastrous effects.

That's according to International Medical University (IMU) psychology lecturer Dr Nicole Chen who, spurred by last year's wave of fatal bullying incidents, will be giving workshops about bullying to school counselors in KL on March 1.

More workshops in other states are also being planned.

The workshops are being organised by IMU in conjunction with #StandTogether, a campaign by R.AGE and SP Setia to end bullying through an annual National Kindness Week in schools nationwide, every first week of April.

"It's not that school counsellors are intentionally ignoring these cases," said Dr Chen. "Most of the time, it's hard to differentiate between cases of bullying and teasing."

But by the time that difference finally makes itself apparent, the damage may already have been done. Along with a slew of mental health issues and risk of substance abuse, bullying also carries with it other effects like higher risk of suicide, and the chance of creating another bully.

Even victims themselves sometimes find it hard to tell when they are being bullied, said Dr Chen, when explaining why students are unlikely to report a bullying incident.

"To teenagers, the most important things to them are their friends," she added. "So if it's someone they know who's doing the bullying or laughing along, they might not think that there's anything wrong."

According to her, other reasons why students might choose not to report are fear of reprisal, distrust in authorities, and fear of losing friends, which is why it is more important than ever for teachers to take a more proactive role, rather than waiting for students to lodge a report.

Still, Dr Chen cautioned against rash punishment-based action

Teaching kindness

School counsellors need to watch for signs of bullying, and then handle those cases with kindness, said IMU psychology lecturer Dr Nicole Chen.

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which, according to her, does more bad than good.

"Corporal punishment may work for a while, but it's only short term," she said.

"Children usually resort to bullying because they're coming from a place of hurt. To hit them is to create another wound, and what happens is we end up teaching children that violence is a solution instead of dealing with the problem directly."

The problem, she said, can be many things. A broken family, a lack of attention, or being a victim of bullying themselves. Children need to learn early how to deal with their emotions in a way that is constructive, and this isn't taught through corporal punishment.

"That's why we were so drawn to the idea of the #StandTogether campaign," she said. "The only way to make lasting, positive change, is to first come from a place of positivity. We also liked the message that even though the solution starts in school, this isn't a school's problem alone."

That's one thing Chen said she wants to make clear – that counsellors can't and shouldn't be expected to do this on their own, and that the workshop isn't a one-time fix-all.

"This workshop will be a catalyst for change, the start of the beginning. First, counsellors need to understand how dangerous bullying can be before they take that message back to their schools, but other teachers and parents need to help as well.

"I say that this is a school-wide issue, but it's actually everyone's issue. We all need to get involved. We've been waiting for too long, we



Dr Chen (front row, fifth from left) believes that it's important to reach out to school counsellors because they are the ones who should be best-equipped to handle bullying cases in school.

can't afford to wait any more."

To ensure the campaign has a long-lasting impact, R.AGE and SP Setia have assembled some of the country's top organisations in child protection and education to develop its National Kindness Week programme. These partners include Unicef, Teach For Malaysia, Digi and student engagement company Study Hub Asia, which is project-managing the IMU workshop.

The #StandTogether National Kindness Week programme includes simple daily classroom activities to encourage a kinder, more positive culture among students and teachers. The programme has been made available for download free-of-charge.

Schools keen on implementing the programme, which will be run simultaneously in schools across the country on the first week of April, can sign up at www.standtogether.my.

Students who want to organise

additional activities during the week can also take part in the #StandTogether Competition. The 10 best proposals for Kindness Week activities or events stand to win cash grants of up to RM1,000, while selected schools will also win

celebrity visits from campaign ambassadors like Lisa Surihani, Jinnyboy, Jenn Chia, Arwind Kumar and more.

For details, contact the R.AGE team at alltherage@thestar.com.my.