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Does Bullying Really Begin in Preschool?
A 360-degree view of bullying behavior – Ep. 23

[00:00:00]

Kimberly: Have you ever had that feeling in your gut that there's something you should be worried about, but you can't quite figure out what it is? For young children, that happens all the time. They feel all the big emotions grown-up feel, anger, frustration, fear, but they don't have the experience to identify the feeling or figure out where it came from, much less manage it on their own, so they tell us how they feel through the way that they behave.

In other words, behavior is the way young children communicate. Our job as grownups is to figure out what they're trying to say, help them learn to handle the difficult moments that are going to be a part of life. Welcome to The Hidden Language of Children, a podcast devoted to helping grownups decode the meaning behind children's behavior.

I'm your host, Dr. Kimberly Bell, Chief of Clinical Practice, Training and Innovation at the Hanna Perkins Center for Child Development in Shaker Heights, Ohio. At Hanna Perkins, we understand a child's behavior is communication, and we work with adults to [00:01:00] understand it, too, so they can enjoy parenting more while helping their children grow into resilient, caring, and confident people.

As usual, I'm here with our producer, Bob Rosenbaum. What are we talking about today, Bob?

Bob Rosenbaum: Thanks, Kim. We're talking about bullying today. So when I was in school, and, and it's been a very long time, bullying was basically viewed as a schoolyard problem. It was a phase, something the bullies would grow out of, and something everybody else had to endure, or if it was bad enough, something that you could end by punching the bully in the nose. We know better today. Studies have demonstrated how the effects of bullying can last a lifetime. Among victims, it more than doubles the rate of anxiety disorders and the risk of suicide, even into middle age. It's also been connected to physical health issues and lower earning potential throughout adulthood. As bullies grow older, they're far more likely to be involved in domestic violence, drug use, [00:02:00] and criminal behavior, and the physical toll on adults who bullied is comparable to the physical toll on their victims. So Kim, simple question with a big answer, I know. Where does bullying come from?

Kimberly: I think what I want to say right at the top, what we're going to attempt to do today is help people to understand both the internal experience of the victim, but also the internal experience of the bully. And I know there's a lot of big feelings around this topic, and so people can feel like if we try to understand the bully too much, that we are victim blaming or something along those lines.

I want to say that nothing we're going to say today replaces accountability. It's just that beyond expulsion or suspension, I'm a very firm believer in the impact of treatment regardless of the age of the child.

And that's what we're going to focus [00:03:00] on. So we're not saying that understanding replaces consequence and accountability. Bullying starts really much younger than we typically see the behavior. I mean, we can see bullying behavior as young as three years old.

But sometimes what is happening in the internal development of the child doesn't come out as bullying until much later. And by much later, I mean when the child begins to separate from the parents and they are out in the world managing their insides all by themselves.

Bob Rosenbaum: We're talking middle school, high school, which is typically when people think about bullies.

Kimberly: Well, yeah, even elementary school though. In elementary school, you are away from your parents for an extended period of the day, and you have to manage and regulate your emotions essentially on your own in a large social atmosphere.

Bob Rosenbaum: So what are, what are the [00:04:00] behaviors that we could talk about then that you might see in a three or a four-year-old that for a three or a four-year-old, they're totally normal behaviors. It doesn't mean you don't want to help correct them. But what are some of those behaviors?

Kimberly: OK, so at three years old, one incident of biting when angry does not a bully make, right? It's more about the consistency and the frequency, but do not be surprised that three-year-olds can say very mean things to each other. If they have heard mean things, then they know what a mean thing is.

They may not understand why exactly it hurts people's feelings, but they have enough observations of the world to echo things that they have either seen or that they have heard. And that is really the start of it, right? We are looking at early development and what moves from the outside experience to become the child's internal world.

[00:05:00] So there are several things that have to happen. One, the child has to have the ability to, all children, by the way, have to have the ability to calm themselves down when angry. So if they come from a place where their anger is met with more anger, the result of that is potentially a grown-up or an older sibling that squashes their feeling through power, control or intimidation,

then you are setting up a perfect stew for 1) not learning how to regulate calmly; 2) observing that the way to get a situation that is scary under control is to be the most powerful one in that situation, right?

And 3) fear. But what's ... so that's the learning portion of it, but what's developing on the inside is this [00:06:00] really powerful force around shame and humiliation. As you are growing up, there isn't anything that feels much worse than feeling like you are basically wrong, broken tiny, small, inadequate, any of those words you want to put into it.

And that is an incredibly uncomfortable feeling to live with. You with me so far?

Bob Rosenbaum: Yeah. Yeah.

Kimberly: OK.

Bob Rosenbaum: Really quickly, what are some examples

of things that happen at home, for instance, that might give kids that feeling?

Kimberly: If there is one parent who is abusive to another parent in word or deed, so emotionally abusive or physically abusive. If the child's age expected anger and rage is met with "I'll give you something to cry about," or is met with physical violence or, "Don't you ever talk to me that way, [00:07:00] I'm bigger than you."

Anything that sends that message really can create a sense of shame and humiliation.

Bob Rosenbaum: Don't be mad at me...

Kimberly: Well, you're not allowed to be mad at me because you are small and helpless.

Bob Rosenbaum: Got it.

Kimberly: Yeah? Or, "Oh my God, look at you trying to be big." Y- you know, that kind of, um, sarcasm, don't care for it. Because that's, that's part of that humiliation thing. There are just so many other ways that we can help parents manage big behavior, and I'm not saying a child might not be born temperamentally with really big feelings, and it feels like dominance is the only way to get that temperament under control.

But there are lots of ways we can help parents with a child who has a really difficult temperament. But if you are at a loss and you find yourself using dominance, fear, or physical punishment as a way of containing your child, then what happens is that child does not [00:08:00] learn internal regulation.

They're relying on outside to stop that from happening.

Bob Rosenbaum: There's also other stuff that goes on in preschool though that doesn't necessarily have to deal with big anger or feelings of shame. For instance, you know, the mean girls thing can start pretty early.

Kimberly: My best friend...

Bob Rosenbaum: yeah, or,

"you're not allowed in our playgroup."

Kimberly: Yes

Bob Rosenbaum: Or, "Your hair is ugly. Who did your hair?"

Kimberly: Mm-hmm

Bob Rosenbaum: Those kinds of things aren't necessarily behaviors that, that come from being abused at home.

Kimberly: No, n-

Bob Rosenbaum: Those are, those are normal kinds of behaviors that we have to help toddlers learn not to exhibit, right?

Kimberly: Right. But the question underneath it is the same. It's that those questions are going to be there, and the, how the teachers respond to it and how parents respond to it has a huge impact because, yes, even those triads where, "This is my best friend. You're not allowed in. We're [00:09:00] excluding you," has a lot to do with what's going on on the inside of the child who's engaging in early bullying behavior.

They don't know how to manage their own insecurity. When we talk about the developmental phase of a three and a four-year-old, we talk about developing this sense of being impactful in the world. I am of consequence, and if you feel like you're not sure if you're OK, " Is, is my gender OK? Is my hair OK?

Is my skin color OK?" you're going to go to school and you're going to ask questions about that. Now, sometimes kids have words, and they can ask the question, "Why are you this color? Why am I that color? Um, you have short hair. I have long hair." Those curiosities are all asking the same question, which is, "Am I OK?

Relative to you, am I OK?" But [00:10:00] if those questions can't be answered or the child can't speak them and doesn't have the words for it, sometimes they'll go up and pull the hair of the child. Or they will exclude a child that they might be a little bit jealous of. And, and I think parents pick up on that.

Unfortunately, saying to a child, "Well, they only do that because they're jealous of you," doesn't resolve the emotional containment issue, right? It doesn't ... Just because somebody's jealous of you, it doesn't make it OK if they're pulling your hair.

Bob Rosenbaum: I, I always thought that "they're doing that because they're jealous" sounded like a simplistic explanation. As you're, as you're describing it here, I guess it really is essential. It, it's the underlying concern about inadequacy.

Kimberly: Yeah. It's not like inadequacy has been internalized at a very young age, but it is a question at a very young age, right? And so I think when we say jealous, we're thinking about a much more complex form of jealousy. It's noticing [00:11:00] differences and not feeling solid enough in yourself to tolerate those differences.

And so differences are scary because differences may mean better than you. And so we, yeah, we have to help children as they grow up. Not even a part of like bully prevention, but just normal development, is helping them know and understand that they are right and perfect just the way they are, regardless of what that looks like.

Bob Rosenbaum: So what you call as being helpful to normal development is also preventative for bullying, that if you can help children understand these feelings,

Kimberly: Mm-hmm.

Bob Rosenbaum: Children learn to keep their hands to themselves when they're having such a feeling and find some more constructive way to express it you're not only helping them develop normally, you're helping prevent them from bullying behavior later on.

Kimberly: Correct. Correct. And but also the children who have more noticeable differences, whether they're smaller than the [00:12:00] kids their age, you know, or they're in a minority in terms of how they look or what their ethnicity is, those kids really point out the differences and can become targets for bullying.

And we have to have help them as well feel confident and strong in their own developing identity, in who they are, in their size, in their, you know, what are their strengths, as opposed to focusing on whatever it is that kids are saying to them because what kids are saying to them is very quickly and easily internalized if they don't have the voice of the parents in their head telling them that that's not true.

Bob Rosenbaum: OK. There are some kids who, let's face it, you can look at them and know this child is more likely to get bullied than some other kids might be, for whatever reason, and the differences that you've described, or they're just introverted or they're or very quiet or

very uncertain of themselves, whatever it [00:13:00] might be. And often attempts to help them kind of backfire. It kind of makes them feel like it's their fault.

Kimberly: Well, that's because we try to make them be something that they're not, right? Like punch 'em in the nose kind of a thing, there's this idea of if you stand up to a bully, they'll stop. And we see it in the movies all the time, and that's the magic cure, right? Is that somebody punches the bully in the nose, and then the bully's like, "Wah," and they reveal their vulnerability, and then they get past it, and the kid feels good about himself.

That's not reality, right? That's not reality because, by the way, the first person who hits is also getting suspended, so there's a, there's, there's a consequence to that behavior. But if we're going to talk about prevention before we talk about response, right, if we're going to s- stay in prevention, what all children need, the ones who are maybe likely to become bullies and the ones who are maybe likely to become victims, they all need the exact same thing.

They need words for [00:14:00] their feelings. The Hanna Perkins mantra, we move from body to mind. The more you have words, the less you need behavior. And so it is perfectly OK for a three-year-old, a five-year-old, a six-year-old to say, "Well, they have a nicer dress than I do," or, "Why is that person in a wheelchair?"

Or... those things should not be met with, "Shh, we don't talk about that," because those are curiosities, and that's when we can help children to understand, everybody is different, and everybody is right and perfect just the way they are, and that being shy or being quiet or being smaller is not a justifiable reason to be attacked.

And the solution isn't to become something you're not, which is somehow bigger and scarier, right? What we're trying to instill in kids is a confidence in

not internalizing the words that might be coming at them, right? [00:15:00] Like, "I'm not stupid," being able to say that. Like, "I'm not stupid. What are you talking about? That's just silly." You know? Like that, that mentality is what we're going for, and that's all about teaching emotional regulation, how to have a, an angry feeling, how to have a sad feeling, how to have a jealous feeling.

What does internal pride feel like? These emotional words and these emotional experiences have to come very young, first five, six years of life. That's ideal.

Bob Rosenbaum: We talk about those kids who, who are different and who are more likely to be the victims of bullying. Their self-esteem might not be where they need it to be to protect

themselves. That's just kind of part of what it's all about. Bullies have this way of finding the weakest person in the room. What, what do you do for the individual child?

Kimberly: OK, so now we're now talking about prevention, we're talking about intervention. We want [00:16:00] a child to be set up to be confident, but that doesn't mean that those external voices aren't going to be very powerful. So again, I don't want to eliminate the external.

I want to add to the external. So it is incredibly important that children are heard, that children know that there's a safe adult who's going to do something when something bad happens, what is my favorite Hanna Perkins phrase?

Children can get through anything that can be talked about. We want children to feel safe going to their teacher, going to their parent, going to the school psychologist and saying, "This is happening to me." And sometimes shame and humiliation, and the response they sometimes get from external adults, like kids-will-be-kids kind of behavior, makes it not a safe place to go, and they hold onto the experience for too long, and that develops into [00:17:00] shame, humiliation, and helplessness, right?

Bob Rosenbaum: No one's going to help me.

Kimberly: Nobody's going to help me. I am genuinely helpless. And we need to make sure, as a system, and family system, school system, that we address those concerns. I'm sure you remember from when you were in school, and I certainly remember from when I was in school, one of the things that you never wanted to be was a tattletale.

Bob Rosenbaum: Mm-hmm

Kimberly: And so how do you decide what's being a tattletale and what's not? And what I've often said to teachers is that we need to reimagine what a tattletale is. If a child is coming to you in the classroom and is saying I don't know, "Johnny is jumping up and down on the table," that child isn't feeling superior to Johnny, not on the inside.

They may be behaving like they are, but on the inside what they're saying is, "Hey, look, I'm barely holding it together myself right now, and if this [00:18:00] kid doesn't follow the rules, I'm very likely right behind him." Right? If they had sophisticated words, that's what they would say. "Please stop this from happening because I'm getting too excited or scared of my own inside feeling."

So there are different ways, as opposed to saying, "Don't be a tattle tale," and labeling it, there are different ways to say, "You can be the boss of yourself. I will go help Johnny, and Johnny's having a trouble, and you don't need to be a part of that trouble. You can just walk away, and you can be the boss of yourself."

That's very different. That's somebody who's giving that child a way to manage the inside feeling they're having from the jumping up and down. So then when a child comes and says, and again, as typical, we're focusing on very young children right now. When somebody comes over and says "I built a tower, and Johnny knocked it over." Is that bullying? It could be. We know two [00:19:00] things in this moment. We know that Johnny is having an internal experience that led him to kick the blocks over, and the child whose blocks were kicked over is having an internal experience about the attack.

And yes, it's super hard, but the job of the teacher, or, or the parents if they want to get the parents involved, or the school psychologist if that is a thing, a resource, is to address both sides, is to be able to say, "I am so sorry. Yes, it would make me very angry and sad if I put all that work into building that blocks and somebody came and kicked it over.

Would you like to tell Johnny that you are very sad because he did that?" And then we go get Johnny, and we say, "Johnny, there must have been something going on inside of you because you're not the kind of kid who just kicks over blocks. I wonder what you were feeling. I wonder if you can tell Joey what you're, what you were doing when you kicked over the blocks."

"Well, I wanted [00:20:00] to play with him, and he said no." By the way, I'm using these because these are everyday occurrences in our school, right? In any school. And that is what we call teaching three, four, five-year-olds conflict resolution. It starts very early. How do you identify your feelings?

What is an angry feeling? Was that a little, medium, or a big feeling? Was it really, was it really a kicking feeling? Did you need to have your body have that feeling for you? These are some of the pieces of language that we use at Hanna Perkins to help children understand that emotional regulation piece so that, A) they don't have to kick over somebody else's blocks when they're having a difficult feeling, and B) you can stand up for yourself by using your words and not your fists, by saying, "What you did hurt my feelings."

And then you have a containing adult who is helping resolve the conflict. How can we resolve this? Would you... And then the bully, [00:21:00] quote-unquote, can offer to help rebuild it. "Would you like to help rebuild the building? Would that be OK with you, Joey? Would it be OK if he helped you rebuild it so that you can both feel better about this?"

"Yes." "OK, great." And then the teacher keeps an eye on it to make sure it goes well. That's restitution. That is conflict resolution in a nutshell, and it happens multiple times a day.

Bob Rosenbaum: Yeah. Now, there's, there's a third element to bullying, and that's not the victim, it's not the bully, it's the audience.

Kimberly: Yes

Bob Rosenbaum: ... The other children who might be there and might be watching. And, you know, especially later on, they may be asked to take sides.

Kimberly: Because it makes you part of the in group. We're talking about in groups and out groups. And again, it all stems from differences and what differences are OK. Imagine, right? Let's say we're, we're going to be in the bully's shoes for a second again. Because it's, it's one thing to teach children to counteract bullying.

It's a whole 'nother thing if we could just [00:22:00] eliminate bullying as a behavior, right? So you'll hear me talk about interventions on the side of the developing bullying behavior because we could, we can create a lot of good if we can get rid of the bullying behavior itself. So, if you imagine what's happening inside the bully is, "I don't feel good about myself."

Now I see somebody who has a difference that I feel like I can identify with the bigger, stronger person, make them small so I can feel big, right? And I, I don't feel threatened by that person 'cause they're shorter or skinnier or quieter or whatever. And so I'm going to attack that person either verbally or physically.

Now, if I get cheers, laughter, some kind of in-group behavior, by the way, from the rest of the kids who've gotten very nervous and they don't want that behavior coming towards them, so they in turn identify with the bully. [00:23:00] But what that does is it gives the bully the audience of, "I am accepted when I do this behavior."

Some people may say it's reinforcing, and we can, we can say that word, but it's so much more than just a behavioral reinforcement. It's a feeling of, "these people like me," and that's very powerful. They like me and when I engage in this behavior, they give me a sense of acceptance. And so we have to do bullying interventions in large groups.

We, we need the bully to get help for their inside stuff, and if we have a vulnerable child, we need them to get help for their inside stuff. But we also have to address the community.

Bob Rosenbaum: How do you do that? What do you say? What are, what are the messages that the community needs?

Kimberly: Well you know, I hate to, I, I hate to put things on teachers so much because I know how hard their job is, and I respect them a great deal for the job that they do. But some of the most [00:24:00] successful teachers I've talked to are teachers who have a rule: In this classroom, everyone is safe. In this classroom, everyone is respected.

And so the teacher is respectful and holds high expectations for the children to be successful, and that's the beginning of creating a group in which these behaviors have zero tolerance. And, and that the classroom has a social-emotional component to it. I mean, that's my... If you were, if I'm creating my ideal world, there's a social-emotional component to that so that when you have a classroom or you have a grade where there are little cliques of bullies forming and other kids are

being victimized, instead of feeling helpless about it, that's the time to say, "Apparently what this group needs is some conflict management."

And then you come in and you do education on how to manage your feelings and on differences. And [00:25:00] hopefully we get to that. It has to be different based on your age group because the more children develop their independence, the more they rely on their peers and the less they rely on authority.

You have to be a certain kind of teacher to garner the kind of respect from, like, high schoolers to, to have that kind of impact. Do you know what I mean?

Bob Rosenbaum: Yeah. But the point, the point is though, you need more people in that group, in that audience who get uncomfortable when they see the bullying behavior to have the comfort to say, "We've been talked to about this. We know what's going on, and we're not going to help this person continue the mean behavior."

Kimberly: Yeah. And, and we, mm-hmm, yep, and we need kids who are willing to say, "That wasn't nice," or feel strong enough to say to the child if they've observed it, "You need to tell the teacher," or they're the ones that tell the teacher. We need to create [00:26:00] emotionally intelligent children.

Bob Rosenbaum: Yeah. I mean, the, the best bullying story or the best outcomes you see on bullying stories always end up on the news, and it's about the group of kids who

Kimberly: Mm-hmm.

Bob Rosenbaum: make a deliberate decision to be inclusive of that person who is being bullied or is likely to be bullied.

Kimberly: Yeah. Yeah, and that's where, again, you have the teachers, and then you have the parents, and then you have someone like me. You have a therapist on the front line who can work individually. Because no matter what a teacher does, if a child is having a certain experience at home or has a certain internal vulnerability, there might not be anything that that group-think is going to do.

There will always be a need for someone like me to be called on to help on an individual level. Right now, for the most part, in most school districts, there are zero tolerance policies for violence.[00:27:00]

And so if a child makes a threat of some kind of violence or, or deadly violence, right, serious violence, that child is often suspended pending being seen by a psychologist or a therapist who is then able to assess them and then write a letter to the school saying it's safe for them to come back to school.

I will admit that I have felt sometimes like, "Oh, come on, you could've figured this one out. This kid, this was a one-time issue, and it's fine, right? There's, there's a way to work with it." But in truth, I would rather they send me all of those kids than to go to the other extreme.

I think that bringing in help is something we have to get really comfortable with.

Bob Rosenbaum: So we've talked a little bit about the victims of bullies, and you know, the challenge that they face is not only being bullied, but that often the help they get is not that helpful. It's saying, "Well, act tougher or be stronger or be more outgoing." [00:28:00] And so we, we've talked through that a little bit.

We've talked through the third party, the audience. They need help getting swayed to the side, let's call it the side of good and,

Kimberly: Yes

Bob Rosenbaum: of, the side of kindness. Got the teachers or the adults in the room. It's not always in a classroom that this happens. So

Kimberly: Right, right

Bob Rosenbaum: let's just say the caregivers or the adults in the room. They need to be up to it. They need to be able to identify what's going on and work with all three of those parties: the bully, the victim, and the audience . So now let's, let's go to that other, that, that final piece of the puzzle. How do you help a child not become a bully in the first place? I mean, as, as we've talked about it, it becomes clear bullies are victims in their own right. It's, it's not fashionable to feel sorry for them. It's easy not to feel sorry for them, especially as they get older and older, but they too have, have not been well-served at some point.

Kimberly: [00:29:00] Well, uh, I think the truth is, is that a lot of those kids that show that behavior early on need some kind of individual help, and their family system needs some kind of individual help. What doesn't help is what I see sometimes, which is labeling kids. I don't like hearing us label kids as sociopaths or I don't even like conduct disorder.

I don't like oppositional defiant disorder either because those diagnoses never help me answer the question why.

We're making a determination at a very young age when there is so much work that we can do in therapy to help a child learn to regulate their emotions, learn to regulate their own sense of self-esteem. And if we just label them as the bad kid, "Oh, well, he's the bad kid. Oh, he's going to end up in jail someday," these are things that sometimes adults say about the bullies when they're young.

And then surprise, surprise, these are kids who [00:30:00] really tend to act out in middle school and high school. And then it's like, "See? We knew it." Have we really exhausted all of the levels of intervention that we can to help this child not sit inside that label?

Forever.

Bob Rosenbaum: OK. What, what have we left unsaid here?

Kimberly: I guess maybe I would just say this. If you have a child that you are concerned is a little bit of a loner, or you're worried is vulnerable to bullying because they are maybe a little less socially adapted, you know, maybe they don't make friends easily, one of the things that I think is interesting about research is that kids do not have to be popular to have good mental health later in life.

You need one or two good friends, and those one or two good friends can be really helpful if somebody's being mean to you, and they are your peers who can say, "Oh, just ignore them," you know. [00:31:00] "That's not true about you," or whatever. You don't need to be on a team if those aren't the kinds of things your child is into.

You just have to find your people, and it doesn't have to be a bunch, just one or two, and we find that that correlates with positive mental health later in life. So yeah, popularity isn't the answer.

Bob Rosenbaum: For educators who are listening to this episode, Hanna Perkins Center offers a bullying prevention curriculum for preschool and kindergarten-aged children. It's called My Mad Feelings, and is designed specifically to provide the kind of early intervention that we've been discussing today. It focuses on identifying and talking about the strong feelings that are a normal part of development, and that if left untended, will eventually be labeled as bullying.

We've heard from teachers that using the curriculum results in meaningful improvement in classroom behaviors, and we've heard from [00:32:00] parents that their own children have helped them become more open and comfortable talking about feelings for the betterment of the entire family. If you're curious whether My Mad Feelings would help the children in your preschool or kindergarten classroom, you can learn more about it at the Hanna Perkins website at hannaperkins.org, H-A-N-N-A-P-E-R-K-I-N-S.org.

Kimberly: I also want to say in terms of that reaching out for help thing, when I know when you and I talk about these things, we, we talk about best case scenarios, but I don't ever want parents to feel like they have too much guilt or shame to reach out and get help. Parenting is hard.

Parenting in today's world is hard. Being a child in today's world is hard, and I don't want our tone to ever come across as feeling like we're blaming parents for this. There are certain parenting things that are quite [00:33:00] obvious, but even if you have engaged in those types of parenting things that we're talking about, the yelling, the screaming, the hitting, w- we've seen it all before.

We've heard it all before. We really do just want to help families feel better, enjoy parenting. I'd like to erase any feeling of shame with regard to reaching out for help. So if you do have questions about anything regarding parenting or your child's development, we are happy to answer them here.

You can send us questions by email to thehiddenlanguageofchildren@gmail.com. Thank you for joining us. The Hidden Language of Children podcast is a production of the nonprofit Hanna Perkins Center for Child Development in beautiful Shaker Heights, Ohio.

Our producer: Bob Rosenbaum, as always; and Dan Ratner is our consulting producer. If you like this podcast, please subscribe to hear future episodes and share it with all of your friends and family. Again, we welcome your comments and your [00:34:00] questions. Our email is hiddenlanguageofchildren@gmail.com.

I am Dr. Kimberly Bell, and we will see you next time.