

APPENDIX 4

For School Personnel:

Providing Support to Children who are Bullied

Children and youth who are bullied need clear messages of support from adults. Although we want children to be strong and assertive so that they can stand up to those who bully, adults must realize that many children aren't ready to do this. Adults play critical roles in helping students who are bullied and creating a healthy, safe climate in the school and community.

HOW TO INTERVENE TO STOP BULLYING: TIPS FOR ON-THE-SPOT INTERVENTION AT SCHOOL

As adults, we may feel uncertain about how to handle bullying when we see or hear it happening. Or we may respond in ways that don't make the best use of the opportunity to teach a young person the difference between appropriate and inappropriate behavior. We could end up inadvertently promoting, rather than reducing bullying. Here are some tips to help respond more effectively on-the-spot and make the best use of the "teachable moment" with all students at school.

1. WHEN YOU SEE OR HEAR BULLYING HAPPEN:

- *Immediately stop the bullying.*
Stand between the child(ren) who bullied and those who were bullied, preferably blocking eye contact between them. Don't send any students away, especially bystander(s). Don't ask about or discuss the reason for the bullying or try to sort out the facts now.
- *Refer to the bullying behavior and to the relevant school rules against bullying.*
Use a matter-of-fact tone of voice to state what behaviors you saw/heard. Let students know that bullying is unacceptable and against school rules (e.g., "Calling someone names is bullying and is against our school rules" or "That was bullying. I won't allow students to push or hurt each other that way.")
- *Support the bullied child in a way that allows him/her to regain self-control, to "save face," and to feel supported and safe from retaliation.*
Make a point to see the child later in private if she/he is upset, but don't ask what happened now. It can be very uncomfortable to be questioned in front of other students. Let his/her teacher(s) know what happened so they can provide additional support and protection. Increase supervision to assure the bullying is not repeated and does not escalate.
- *Include the bystanders in the conversation and give them guidance about how they might appropriately intervene or get help next time.*
Don't put bystanders on-the-spot to explain publicly what they observed. Use a calm, matter-of-fact, supportive tone of voice to let them know that you noticed their inaction or that you are pleased with the way they tried to help, even if they weren't successful. If they did not act, or responded in aggressive ways, encourage them to take a more active or prosocial role next time (e.g., "Maybe you weren't sure what to do. Next time, please tell the person to stop or get an adult to help if you feel you can't work together to handle the situation.")
- *If appropriate, impose immediate consequences for students who bully others.*
Do not require students to apologize or make amends during the heat-of-the-moment (everyone should have time to cool off). All consequences should be logical—that is, connected to the offense. As a first step, you might take away social opportunities (e.g., recess, lunch in the cafeteria). Let students who bully know you will be watching them and their friends closely to be sure there is no retaliation. Notify colleagues.

- *Do not require the students to meet and “work things out.”*

Unlike conflicts, bullying involves a power imbalance that means this strategy will not work. Trying to find a way to “work things out” can re-traumatize the student who was bullied and does not generally improve relationships between the parties. Instead, encourage the student who bullied to make amends in a way (after follow-up with an adult) that would be meaningful for the child who was bullied.

2. INDIVIDUAL FOLLOW-UP AND SUPPORT

Even if you make good use of the “teachable moment” when bullying occurs, you will still encounter situations where staff members will need to provide follow-up interventions. Follow-up is time-consuming and may not be appropriate in every case of bullying. In addition, staff members providing follow-up are likely to need specialized skills or training—as well as enough time to investigate problems, to administer appropriate discipline, or to provide support or therapeutic intervention.

- Provide follow-up interventions, as needed, for the students who were bullied and for those who bullied. Determine what type of situations and level of severity of bullying incidents require follow-up intervention from adults and designate who should intervene in various circumstances.
- Notify parents of children who are involved, as appropriate.
- Bullied students need to process the circumstances of the bullying, vent their feelings about it, and get support. Some may need assistance reading or interpreting social signals, practicing assertive behavior, building self-esteem, or identifying friends and classmates who can give them support.
- Students who bully may need help taking responsibility for their behavior, developing empathy and perspective-taking abilities, and finding ways to make amends. They also may need help to learn how to use power in socially appropriate ways (e.g., focusing their energy on causes they care about).
- When there are suspicions of bullying, gather more information by talking with bystanders privately. Intensify observation and supervision and offer incentives or positive consequences to active, helpful bystanders to increase involvement by students. Bystanders need opportunities to discuss and practice responses outside of the heat of the moment in order to be successful. The more options they have, the more successful they will be.

HOW YOU CAN HELP CHILDREN WHO ARE BULLIED

- Don’t do further damage by lending too much support in public. Youth are concerned about what their peer group sees and knows. It may be more helpful to lend your supportive words and gestures in private.
- Spend time with the student. Learn about what’s been going on. Listen. Get the facts (who, what, when, where, how) and assess the student’s feelings about the bullying. Is this the first time they’ve been hurt by bullying, or is this something that’s been going on for awhile? Recognize that this discussion may be difficult for the student. Tell him or her that you are sorry about what happened. Assure the student that it’s not his or her fault.
- Praise students for their courage to discuss the bullying with you. Explain how helpful they are being by providing this important information, not only for themselves, but also for the rest of the school.

- Ask students what they need to feel safe. Those who are bullied may feel powerless, scared, and helpless. Give students a voice. Follow through to grant their requests, when possible. Emphasize the confidential nature of your discussion, and be clear about who will and will not be given this information. Get additional facts about the incident(s) from other adults or students, so bullied students don't feel they will be easily identified as the sole reporter of the abuse. Protect the targets of bullying in conversations with the students who bully. Don't reveal their identity, if possible. Rather, explain that you've learned about the bullying from a number of sources, including other adults.
- Communicate with colleagues about the bullying incident. Other staff members who have contact with the students who were bullied can also lend support and assistance. Tell them to step up their observations to be sure that the bullying has stopped, and be sure that they communicate progress or further incidents to all the appropriate staff members.
- Don't force meetings between students who are bullied and those who bullied them. Those who are bullied may need distance from the offenders. Such meetings can cause much further harm. Forced apologies don't help.
- Provide as much information as you can about what your "next steps" are. Information is helpful for the student to regain a sense of safety and control. Urge the student to report any further incidents of bullying, involving the same or different students.
- Encourage and support students in making friends. One of the most important bullying prevention tools is helping each student at school to have a good friend to be with and talk to.
- Explore how students' parents may be of support to them. Many children keep incidents of bullying to themselves and don't tell their parents. Explain that if their parents know, more support may be available. Talk with parents about your concerns.
- Make a referral, if needed. Bullying can be traumatic. Assess, or have another professional assess, how much support and assistance students may need. Talk with your school counselor about a counseling or mental health referral. Err on the side of offering more services, rather than less. Bullying is no longer viewed as a rite of passage that all children just have to put up with. It is a form of abuse that can cause psychological, physical, and academic problems for children who are bullied.
- Make sure you follow up with students who have been bullied. Let them know that you are a resource and that you plan to "check in" with them in two to three days, and beyond.

MISDIRECTIONS IN BULLYING PREVENTION AND INTERVENTION

In recent years, increasing numbers of educators, health professionals, parents, and other adults who interact with children and youth understand the seriousness of bullying. A number of proven and promising prevention and intervention strategies have been developed. Unfortunately, a number of questionable intervention and prevention strategies also have been developed in recent years:

1. ZERO TOLERANCE POLICIES

A number of schools and school districts have adopted "zero tolerance" or "three strikes and you're out" policies towards bullying, in which children who bully others are suspended or expelled from school. These policies (also called "student exclusion" policies) raise a number of concerns:

- They affect a large number of students. Recent surveys of elementary and middle school students indicate that approximately one in five students admit to bullying their peers periodically. Even if policies are limited to physical bullying, the numbers of affected children are still significant.

- Threats of severe punishments, such as suspension or expulsion, may actually discourage children and adults from reporting bullying that they observe.
- Bullying can be an early marker of other problem behaviors. Children who frequently bully their peers are at risk for engaging in other problem behaviors such as truancy, fighting, theft, and vandalism. Children who bully are in need of positive, pro-social role models, including adults and students in their regular school. Although suspension and expulsion of students may be necessary in a very small minority of cases to maintain public safety, these practices are not recommended as a broad-based bullying prevention/intervention policy.

2. CONFLICT RESOLUTION/PEER MEDIATION

Conflict resolution and peer mediation are common strategies to deal with conflicts among students. Many schools also use peer mediation and conflict resolution to address bullying problems, but this is not recommended. Why?

- Bullying is a form of victimization, not conflict. It is no more a “conflict” than are child abuse or domestic violence.
- Mediating a bullying incident may send inappropriate messages to the students who are involved (such as, “You are both partly right and partly wrong,” or “We need to work out this conflict between you.”). The appropriate message to the child who is bullied should be, “No one deserves to be bullied and we are going to do everything we can to stop it.” The message for children who bully should be, “Your behavior is inappropriate and must be stopped.”
- Mediation may further victimize a child who has been bullied. It may be very upsetting for a child who has been bullied to face his or her tormenter in mediation.
- There is no evidence to indicate that conflict resolution or peer mediation is effective in stopping bullying.

3. GROUP TREATMENT FOR CHILDREN WHO BULLY

Another strategy that some schools use to address bullying behavior involves group therapeutic treatment for children who bully, including anger management, skill-building, empathy-building, or seeking ways to build their self-esteem. Although these interventions are well-intentioned, they often are counter-productive. Students’ behavior may further deteriorate, as group members tend to serve as role models and reinforcers for each other’s antisocial and bullying behavior.

4. SIMPLE, SHORT-TERM SOLUTIONS

Often, school administrators and their staff adopt a short-term, piece-meal approach to bullying prevention. Bullying may be the topic of a staff in-service training, a PTA meeting, a school-wide assembly, or lessons taught by individual teachers. Although each of these efforts may represent important initial steps in the adoption of a comprehensive, long-term bullying prevention strategy, they likely will do little to significantly reduce bullying problems if implemented in a piece-meal way. What is required to reduce the prevalence of bullying is a change in the climate of the school and in norms for student behavior.

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