# Bullying Prevention and Intervention

Even if you aren't receiving complaints, bullying is occurring in your school. Address it before something worse happens.

BY TED FEINBERG

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**A**lthough bullying was once dismissed as an ordinary part of growing up, we now know that it is an insidious antisocial behavior that traumatizes millions of students each year and undermines the fabric of school life for millions more. Most principals understand the global realities of the problem—that an estimated 15% to 30% of students nationwide are either bullies or victims; that bullying encompasses a spectrum of aggressive behaviors ranging from overt acts of physical violence to far more subtle, yet equally destructive, patterns of verbal or relational cruelty; and that bullying is often a common thread linking a school's most troubling issues, including suicide, substance abuse, increased absenteeism, and academic failure.

The greater challenge lies in recognizing bullying in their school. Teachers and administrators frequently underestimate the extent and effect of bullying and, as a result, fail to prevent or stop it. In part, this is fueled by indifference— nearly 25% of teachers report that they do not think it necessary to intervene in bullying—and by the

surreptitious nature of the behavior. Adolescents are masterful at shielding their social—and antisocial— lives from adults. Moreover, although students know bullying is painful, they often are not clear that bullying is wrong or preventable, so they do not report it.

Changing these perceptions is paramount. Failure to stop bullying implies tacit approval of the behavior, enabling bullies and condemning victims and bystanders to feel further victimized by the system. Principals can help their staff members and students take an honest look in the mirror and create an environment in which bullying is never tolerated and all students feel safe and valued.

## Principles of Prevention and Intervention

Like many areas of children's learning and development, effective bullying interventions are grounded in universal prevention that reinforces protective factors and reduces risks for all students. Many successful programs are based at least in part on the work of Norwegian researcher Dan Olweus (1997), who developed an approach that targets

the context in which bullying occurs (including adult and bystander attitudes) and the behavior of victims and bullies. The approach has shown to reduce bullying by 50% and includes:

- A schoolwide foundation that offers universal interventions; a value system based on caring, respect, and personal responsibility; positive discipline and supports; clear behavioral expectations and consequences; skills development; and increased adult supervision and parental involvement.
- Early interventions that target specific risk factors and teach positive behavior and critical-thinking skills at the classroom level, including lessons, discussion, and parent meetings.
- Intensive individual interventions that provide bullies and victims with individual support through meetings with students and parents, counseling, and sustained child and family supports.

The goal is to create a culture in which adults stop all bullying immediately, all students learn positive behaviors and become a part of the anti-bullying solution, and the needs

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*For further information on issues affecting students' learning and development, visit the NASP website at www.nasponline.org.*

of individual students are met. Mental health plays a crucial role in this process. Principals should work with their school psychologist or other trained mental health personnel to develop and implement a program that best suits their schools' needs. To be successful, bullying programs should incorporate all of the following recommendations in some capacity.

## Lay the Groundwork

***Coordinate with other schools in your district.*** Students will do best if they receive consistent bullying prevention training throughout their schooling as they move through grade levels and among schools.

***Assess the extent of the problem.*** Administer separate schoolwide surveys to students and staff members to identify prevalence, attitudes, knowledge, gaps in perception, and specific areas or aspects of the problem that you may need to target, such as locations or times when bullying occurs most often and particular concerns such as sexual harassment or "cyber bullying."

***Establish a coordinating team.*** This group will help develop and implement schoolwide activities. Select individuals who are knowledgeable about the issue and respected in the school community and who are good communicators and consensus builders (include a mental health professional, parents, and students). A separate specially trained team should provide intensive interventions to individual students.

***Involve the entire school community.*** Be prepared for some initial resistance. Staff members may not see a need for a program or may feel overwhelmed at the thought of adding yet another objective to the year. Students may be skeptical if bullying has persisted for a long time. Parents may be concerned about diverting resources from the core curriculum or unconvinced that all students, including their child, will benefit by learning anti-bullying skills. Elicit regular input and provide consistent information to all groups.

## Build a Schoolwide Foundation

***Develop a code of conduct.*** Development should involve the entire school community, including students and their parents. It should reinforce the values of empathy, caring, respect, fairness, and personal responsibility, and must clearly define unacceptable behavior, expected behavior and values, and consequences for violations. In addition, the code should apply to adults and students, reflect age-appropriate language, and be prominently placed throughout the school.

***Establish and consistently enforce consequences for bullying.*** Consequences should be understood by all students and should combine sanctions with supportive interventions that build self-management skills and alternate positive behaviors.

***Build students' sense of responsibility for the school community.*** Personal responsibility comes with a sense of ownership. Students should help develop the code of conduct, determine where and how it is displayed, contribute to schoolwide activities, and participate in peer mediation and conflict resolution.

***Distinguish between "ratting" and "reporting."*** Most adolescents are reluctant to turn in their classmates. They usually do not want to get their peers in trouble—particularly if the bully is popular—or be known as a "rat." Ensure confidentiality and establish a nonthreatening way for students to report bullying of themselves or classmates. Identify which staff members handle bullying issues, but make it clear that students can contact any trusted adult.

***Train all school personnel.*** Some teachers will need specific training on bullying prevention curriculum, but all school personnel (including bus drivers, coaches, and after-school program supervisors) need to know how to identify and respond to bullying as well as how to model and reinforce positive problem solving. They should know symptoms of victimization, how to reach out to victims, and the protocol for contacting the appropriate staff members or a student's parents.

***Ensure cultural competence.*** To be effective, communications, curricula, and interventions must reflect the cultural needs of students and parents. Students who are not fluent in English may have difficulty communicating a problem and may

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**Anti-Bullying Programs**

**The Olweus Bully Prevention Program**
http://modelprograms.samhsa.gov/pdfs/FactSheets/Olweus%20Bully.pdf

**Bully-Proofing Your Middle School**
www.sopriswest.com/swstore/product.asp?sku=454

**PeaceBuilders**
www.peacebuilders.com

**PATHS (Providing Alternative THinking Strategies)**
www.channing-bete.com/positiveyouth/pages/PATHS/PATHS.html

**RCCP (Resolving Conflict Creatively Program)**
www.esrnational.org/ms/prevent/msrccp/msrccp.htm

**SecondStep**
www.cfchildren.org/program_ss.shtml

# A Clear Case of Bullying

The mother of a seventh-grade student calls to report an incident during the after-school program. According to her son, the supervisor left the room for a while and four boys began to harass a student named Adam, joking about "slam dunking" him into the trashcan. They chased him around the room as the other kids looked on, some laughing. Before the boys could catch him, Adam jumped in the trashcan himself. This prompted the students to laugh harder and call him a loser. Upon returning, the supervisor reprimanded the students and made them do homework the rest of the afternoon. The mother was concerned because of the lack of adult supervision and potential harm to Adam. Her son, on the other hand, blamed Adam, claiming that he was "really annoying" and always doing "stupid stuff."

Teachers have noted that Adam sometimes misreads social cues and uses inappropriate methods (talking too loudly or making off-the-wall comments) to get the attention of his peers. However, no one—not even Adam—has reported other students bullying him.

The after-school program is run under contract by a community organization, not school employees. The school has a responsibility, however, to ensure that adults working with students in any cocurricular program or activity reinforce the school's code of conduct and are trained to recognize and stop bullying.

## Observations

This would clearly be seen as bullying behavior.

• There is an *imbalance in power.* Adam is unpopular, outnumbered, and without allies. He may have done something to provoke the bullies or they may have simply viewed him as a deserving and easy target based on past experience. Adam lacked effective self-protection strategies and only reinforced his "loser" image by jumping in the trashcan on his own.

• The bullies *intended to cause harm,* although it is not clear if the greater "thrill" was from being *able* to humiliate Adam or from showing off in front of the other students.

•The event occurred within a *permissive context.* There was no adult present and the bystanders did not empathize enough with Adam to intervene, did not understand that the behavior was wrong, or lacked the skills to stop the bullies.

## What to Do

Talk to all parties involved: the after-school program director, Adam, the bullies, and, if accounts differ, the bystanders. Reinforce with everyone that the behavior is unacceptable. Reassure Adam that *no one* has the right to bully him and that you will stop it. Confer with staff members to determine any pattern of behaviors (e.g., do the four boys only pick on Adam or do they target other students?). Meet with Adam's parents to explain the situation and review what you are doing to address the bullying and help Adam develop more effective internal (skills) and social (friends) resources. Let the bullies know that continued hurtful behavior against Adam or any student will be immediate justification for a conference with their parents, as well as more severe disciplinary actions. Consequences should redirect the bullies' desire for power through a more pro-social outlet and include a constructive, *educationally relevant* retribution that contributes to school community.

be reluctant to do so. Written information should be translated into relevant languages.

**Increase adult supervision.** Adults should be visible and vigilant in such common areas as hallways, stairwells, cafeterias, and locker rooms. In particular, school employees should be aware of students' behavior on buses and on the way to and from school for students who walk or ride bikes.

**Conduct schoolwide bullying prevention activities.** This brings the community together, generates energy around the program, and conveys the consistent message that bullying is wrong and that everyone has a role in prevention. Consider an all-school assembly, a communications campaign, or a creative arts contest highlighting caring community values.

## Make Early Interventions

**Teach specific skills and values in the classroom.** Target those areas identified as universally important to students, (e.g. empathy, impulse control, or taking a stand). Address skill acquisition and application and their roles in academic and social success, emotional awareness, seeing others' perspectives, alternative thinking strategies, and problem solving. Instructional strategies include adult role modeling, discussion, and practice. Integrate skills into other curricula whenever possible.

**Teach conflict resolution and peer mediation.** Teaching students

## What to Consider

### Context

- How does the after-school program reinforce the school's code of conduct? Are the staff members properly trained? What is the protocol for leaving students unsupervised?
- What is the protocol for informing school employees when a problem occurs during an cocurricular activity?  Do students know where to find another adult after hours if necessary?
- What other strategies could the supervisor have used to restore order and reinforce positive behaviors for all of the students?
- What resources can school staff members offer to support the after-school program's effort to provide a safe, caring environment. Can targeted skills and attitudes be integrated into program activities?
- What process is in place to assess implementation of anti-bullying strategies in any cocurricular program?
- Is there adequate communication with parents reiterating codes of conduct and behavioral expectations?

### Students

- Was this an isolated event or do these boys engage in a pattern of bullying? Is there a ringleader or does the group act in concert? What are their specific thinking errors (e.g., blaming Adam)?
- Are there other circumstances that trigger the bullying behavior outside the after-school program? Can these circumstances be modified? Is there adequate adult supervision?
- What are the specific skills deficits and strengths of the students involved? Are there related school activities that can reinforce these strengths?
- Which adults has Adam identified as someone he trusts to go to for support? Are there students who share Adam's interests and with whom you might help him develop positive social relationships?
- Does the apathy of the bystander students reflect attitudes of the general student body or is it contextual? What schoolwide strategies can reinforce students' empathy and ability to draw on their strength in numbers?

### What Worked

The mother recognized a problem and called even though her son was not the victim. It is important to thank parents who do this and reinforce their role in ensuring a safe school environment for all students.

how to solve their own problems can redirect potentially negative or passive behaviors to positive problem-solving and leadership skills. This also gives students a greater stake in promoting a positive school environment.

***Hold parent meetings.*** Parent involvement is crucial. Group discussions convey what students are learning, teach parents how to reinforce those skills at home, and support the parents' role in fostering a caring school community. Meetings at the classroom level also help build connections among parents and teachers.

### Provide Individual Interventions

***Establish a protocol for intervening in or investigating a bullying incident.*** Adults should separate the victim and the bully. Meet with the victim first, then the bully, then bystanders. Name the behavior, reiterate the rules, and review expected behaviors. Determine if there is a pattern of bullying, the appropriate consequences, and the need for further interventions for the bully or the victim. Increase observation of the students involved and contact their parents, as necessary.

***Determine the impetus for the behavior.*** Interventions should address underlying causes. Bullies and victims may need additional skills development or reinforcement on how to apply the skills they have. It may be necessary to focus on the subculture of a group of students

who bully as a unit. Students may also be exhibiting signs of more serious problems, such as depression, an anxiety disorder, or being victimized at home.

***Reinforce alternative behaviors.*** Ask students to address the thoughts and circumstances that preceded a bullying incident. Guide them in determining more appropriate strategies to express their feelings or resolve conflict. For bullies, this may mean identifying their thinking errors and reinforcing calming and impulse-control strategies. Victims may need help with strategies to avoid provoking a bully, reading social cues, or walking away. Bystanders may need to learn how to reach out to vulnerable peers and to diffuse bullying when they see it.

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***Work with parents.*** Parenting style and family issues often contribute to bully and victim behaviors. Sustained student and family counseling may be necessary to help parents learn new approaches to discipline, communication, and positive interactions with their child.

***Address off-campus bullying.*** The code of conduct should include off-campus student behavior, particularly if it involves other students from the school. Students and parents should be encouraged to report such bullying. A growing concern in this arena is "cyber bullying"—when students harass their victims via e-mail or student-run webpages. This is particularly harmful because students may do and say things anonymously that they would not do otherwise, the messages can be transmitted to scores of people instantaneously, and the messages can be very difficult to eliminate. Schools can help to contact the relevant authorities (e.g., Internet service providers) to track down the source and stop the abuse.

**An Ounce of Prevention**
Implementing a comprehensive anti-bullying program may seem like one initiative too many, given current budget realities, staff shortages, and strains on existing resources and class time. But ignoring bullying is far more costly than addressing it, in terms of both expended resources and diminished outcomes. Effective prevention efforts mobilize a school's most vital resource—the students—to be a school's most powerful force in fostering a caring culture in which all students can grow and learn. It is a wise investment. **PL**

**Reference**
❏ Olweus, D. (1997). Bully/victim problems in school: Facts and intervention. *European Journal of Psychology of Education, 12* (4), 495–510.