

Creating a School-Wide Culture of Respect to Combat Bullying

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Much has been written about the causes, effects, preventions and interventions associated with the topic of bullying. Bullying behavior tends to peak during early adolescence, making it a high priority for middle schools. Although it takes many forms, bullying of any type must be considered an “anti-social behavior that can undermine the quality of the school environment, affect students’ academic and social outcomes, cause victims emotional and psychological trauma, and, in extreme cases, lead to serious violence.” (National Association of School Psychologists, 2002) In all cases it negatively affects student learning far beyond victims and perpetrators.

Under the mandates of No Child Left Behind, there is great pressure on schools to continually raise the level of achievement for all students. Students who feel intimidated or are in fear of being bullied are “unavailable” for learning. In order to negate the effects of bullying, researchers advocate school-wide programs that include the entire school community, promote and support a positive school climate, and include strategies for both prevention and intervention. It is critical that an environment is created where *all* members of the school community understand that respect is the cultural norm and that bullying in any form will not be tolerated.

Effective school-wide programs in all schools, but especially middle level schools, begin with dialogue that involves staff, parents, students and community. It is essential that each middle school collaboratively develop a program that is tailored to the unique needs of that school. This is critical due to the fact that bullying can take many forms and include both verbal and physical aggression. It often manifests differently in boys and girls. Individual schools need to determine their areas of greatest concern. Programs can then be collaboratively developed to meet those specific needs.

Essential to a comprehensive program is the need to develop a common definition of what constitutes bullying behavior in that school. This must be clearly understood by the entire school community. In addition, a consensus must emerge throughout the school so that everyone maintains and enforces the same expectations in a consistent, predictable and immediate manner. This school-wide development and acceptance of the norms of respect send a clear message to community, parents, staff and students that bullying is not an acceptable behavior and consequences will follow.

Successful programs often include training and support for staff. This might involve helping all adults who interact with students within the school community (teachers, paraprofessionals, bus drivers and administrators) to develop an awareness of bullying behaviors and increase their ability to recognize it, even in its most subtle forms. Another important component is that all adults must learn to take all complaints and concerns seriously and not ignore or dismiss any student or parent reports.

Additionally, as teachers and other adults develop skills to negate bullying behaviors they will more consistently utilize effective classroom management techniques, model desirable behaviors and reinforce positive behaviors in their students. Powerful lessons can occur when teachers reinforce expected behaviors by drawing parallels to events and literature within their curriculum or during Advisor/Advisee time. These discussions can provide the students not only with an increased awareness of bullying behavior but also an understanding of available solutions and alternatives that are available to them.

Parental involvement is a critical component to a successful anti-bullying program. School expectations for respectful student behavior should be provided to parents on a frequent and ongoing basis. They should be encouraged to stay involved with the school and to call with concerns for their child or others. As parents are often the first to suspect a problem or the only person the student

confides in, they are a school's first line of defense. As such, their input is essential in order to extinguish bullying behaviors.

When developing goals and objectives for the students within the school, there needs to be consideration given to providing support and intervention to three groups; victims, bullies and bystanders. Victims need to know that they are not at fault. Support to assist these students to identify their personal strengths and to increase their self-esteem is recommended.

Bullies need to be educated and counseled beyond mere consequences for their behavior. This is necessary to help them acknowledge their behaviors and increase their empathy and build awareness of the perspectives of others. Programs that include counseling and education promote self-control and anger management. Both the victims and bullies can benefit from social skills training.

Empowering bystanders may have the most far-reaching effects however, is often the most difficult achieve. Programs, discussions, literature and role-playing can help students see that silence empowers bullies and harms victims. In a climate of respect and trust, students are encouraged to share with trusted adults, knowing that they will be protected from retaliation.

It is the goal of exemplary middle level schools to create and maintain an inviting, supportive and safe environment for all. This requires a positive climate that values the ongoing input and communication of the entire learning community. It is also essential that dignity and respect be protected for the vulnerable of the stakeholders. As such, there must be a universally accepted belief that bullying is not an inevitable part of growing up.

While research has shown that even small changes can improve school climate and diminish episodes of bullying, the goal should be the commitment by all to prevent it entirely. Each middle school student should be able to say to a student new to his school who is teasing another, "That's not what we do here."

Gallo, Laura L. and Milsom, Amy (January 2006) "Bullying in Middle Schools: Prevention and Intervention." *Middle School Journal*, 37. (3), 12 – 19.

Langan, Paul (2004). *Bullying in Schools: What You Need To Know*. Townsend Press, Inc.

National Association of School Psychologists. (2002). *Bullying Prevention: What Schools and Parents Can Do*. Bethesda, Maryland: Author.

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