

Everyone can remember a time when they experienced bullying. And that's just the problem. The wounds can be felt long after the acts and can have lasting effects on our lives.

The Problem

Fortunately, the days of “kids will be kids” and “what hurts you only makes you stronger” are fading fast. There's too much research that tells us how serious the issue is. Cyber-bullying—the use of technology in bullying—expands the reach and the extent of bullying. Ignoring the issue doesn't make it go away. When adults in the school system ignore bullying or feel that bullying is expected or acceptable, then higher levels of bullying will exist¹.

Bullying has generally been shown to be most prevalent in middle school²; however, research has suggested that bullying peaks during school transition (i.e., between elementary and middle school and between middle and high school) as youth are negotiating new peer groups and use bullying as a means to achieve social dominance³.

According to the National Association of School Psychologists⁴, over 160,000 students miss school each day due to fears of being bullied. It stands to reason that bullying detracts from academic achievement, and research supports this negative outcome⁵.

This Curriculum

What we can do to address this problem is to provide time for students to discuss bullying and harassment. That's the intent of this curriculum. We know that educators are already overwhelmed with a huge amount of required curricula, and so we've streamlined the lessons that we've found to be effective with students. Each grade level, six through ten, offers six lessons. They are best delivered in sequence and begin with setting guidelines to provide a safe environment for students to discuss these sensitive issues. Without “setting the stage” and creating group guidelines, lessons can lead to unsafe conditions in which students become more vulnerable in front of their peers.

The bonus is that allowing students to talk and share in a classroom also has proven to increase their learning. Students involved in bullying and victimization are less academically engaged⁶; that makes sense with what we know about brain research. A brain that is fearful and on guard is not a learning brain.

From our own experiences with students, we've found that when we are willing to invest the time, we get a lot of “bang for our buck.” Students are happier to be in places where they are valued and safe from torment, and adults are happier too, because they don't spend as much time trying to “make” students be nicer to one another and students are actually available to learn, no matter what the subject matter.

Lesson Format

The lessons have been written in a “workshop structure,” which encourages a facilitative style of teaching and creates a sense of community structure or ritual whose positive influence extends beyond the scope of the lesson. Each lesson includes:

- **Gathering** (usually 3 – 5 minutes)—An experiential activity or sharing that relates to the main purpose of the lesson and helps students focus on the learning to come. Gatherings are intended to be positive, community-building experiences.
- **Agenda Review** (3 – 4 minutes)—A brief review of what will happen during the lesson that lets students know what to expect. It is most helpful when the Agenda is written on the board or on chart paper.
- **Main Activities** (from 10 – 20 minutes)—Whole class or group activities that provide structured situations that focus on the lesson’s subject. Some lessons have more than one activity.
- **Debriefing** (3 – 5 minutes)—A recap that helps students review and internalize what has occurred. It is most important that a Debriefing occur, even if Activities need to be streamlined due to time. Without the opportunity for students to make meaning out of the material, they might not see the relevance of what has been discussed to their own lives.
- **Closing** (2 – 5 minutes)—A quote or exercise to provide closure to the lesson.

Of course, the amount of time devoted to any new learning depends on the facilitator and the students. Often we find that the beginning lessons prove to be much shorter than the time expected, because students are still learning to feel comfortable expressing their opinions. As the comfort level increases, students often want to talk more, and the facilitator can adapt the lessons to this need.

School Climate

These lessons should be one part of creating a positive school climate, the benefits of which have been identified through much research over the last thirty years. A positive on-campus environment reduces the frequency of many problematic behaviors at school, including bullying and harassment. Research has consistently identified an inverse relationship between specific components of positive school climate and bullying among students⁷. A positive climate contributes to more consistent attendance, higher student achievement, and other desirable student outcomes.

Research also documents the importance of school-wide prevention efforts that provide positive behavior support, establish a common set of expectations for positive behavior across all school contexts, and involve all school staff in prevention activities⁸.

Administrators, faculty, and staff need to understand and manage student social dynamics, and to handle aggression with clear, consistent consequences. Effective teachers not only promote academic success, they also build relationships, trust, and a sense of community in their classrooms. Additionally, it is crucial that the school seek to create and promote an atmosphere where certain conduct is not tolerated—by students and staff alike. In schools with healthy climates, students know what is appropriate and what is not. Cultivating a positive school climate will not only promote student achievement and success, it will decrease bullying and harassment.

What Students and Teachers Need to Know about Harassment

Many schools, districts, student clubs, and states have adopted guidelines for harassment and bullying. Part of a good prevention program includes providing students with this information. This is best done in the beginning lessons, which deal with identifying bullying and harassment. Students need to know that, should harassment be proved, there are often harsh consequences for the aggressors.

On October 26, 2010, the United States Department of Education published a “Dear Colleague” letter⁹ which explains educators’ legal obligations to protect students from student-on-student racial and national-origin harassment, sexual and gender-based harassment, and disability harassment. In part, it states, “I am writing to remind you, however, that some student misconduct that falls under a school’s anti-bullying policy also may trigger responsibilities under one or more of the federal antidiscrimination laws enforced by the Department’s Office for Civil Rights (OCR). As discussed in more detail below, by limiting its response to a specific application of its anti-bullying disciplinary policy, a school may fail to properly consider whether the student misconduct also results in discriminatory harassment.”

The statutes that OCR enforces include Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 (Title VI), which prohibits discrimination on the basis of race, color, or national origin; Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972 (Title IX), which prohibits discrimination on the basis of gender; Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 (Section 504); and Title II of the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 (Title II). Section 504 and Title II prohibit discrimination on the basis of disability. School districts may violate these civil rights statutes and the Department’s implementing regulations when peer harassment based on race, color, national origin, sex, or disability is sufficiently serious that it creates a hostile environment and such harassment is encouraged, tolerated, not adequately addressed, or ignored by school employees.

Is Your Classroom Ready for This Curriculum?

This curriculum emphasizes a student-centered approach that follows students’ thinking and concerns in ways that build on their own knowledge and connect their own life experiences to what’s happening in the larger society.

A curriculum of this type works best in a safe and caring classroom. In a safe classroom all students participate and all students feel that they belong. They know that their individual and cultural differences will be accepted and valued as much as the things that they share in common. Teachers show that everyone counts by balancing the emphasis on individual achievement with a commitment to the well-being of the whole classroom community.

In safe classrooms, students feel comfortable expressing their feelings and concerns. They know that they can make mistakes without being ridiculed, deal with their differences constructively, and disagree respectfully. The lessons in this curriculum work best in a classroom where each student can develop his or her own voice and where listening to peers matters as much as listening to teachers.

Before you begin, it is helpful to know what is occurring in the lives of the students in your classroom. Are students being bullied? Are there some who are targets and some who are perpetrators? Knowing this will help you to facilitate the lessons.

School-wide Commitment

*Implementing Bullying Prevention Programs in Schools: A How-To Guide*¹⁰ by Jones, Doces, Swearer, and Collier provides four important elements that an effective prevention program needs to have:

- ◉ A structured curriculum that provides youth with materials over at least several sessions and includes:
 - detailed information on how to implement each lesson
 - lesson materials
 - specific text for presenters
 - procedures for training teachers or other presenters.

One-shot assemblies or pulling a few bits and pieces from a program is not going to make a difference for your youth.

- ◉ The program teaches youth new skills. These should be spelled out in the program materials. Research shows that this is critical to helping youth change their behavior. Lecture-only programs do not do this.
- ◉ Activities must let youth practice these new skills in active ways. The programs that schools consider should include some combination of classroom discussion periods, engaging and thought-provoking activities, and role-playing.
- ◉ For bullying in particular, the program needs to take a whole-school or community approach to prevention. The best programs all offer training for school staff, involvement of parents, and assistance to help the school improve its response to bullying concerns and reports.

Bullying prevention programs will also address the specific needs of students and staff in recognizing, reporting and effectively dealing with bullying incidents. The most effective bullying prevention programs have Social and Emotional Learning components embedded in them. A very strong approach would be to implement both types of programs. Schools can think about SEL programs as a foundation upon which the bullying-specific content should be delivered.

The best SEL programs teach youth the following skills:

- ◉ **Self-regulation** (controlling impulses; focusing, sustaining, and shifting attention; listening to and remembering information; empathy training)
- ◉ **Perspective-taking** (appreciating similarities and differences; recognizing and identifying the feelings of others; understanding that feelings can change and are complex)
- ◉ **Emotion management** (recognizing and identifying one's own feelings; learning strategies for calming down strong emotions; managing stress/anxiety)

- **Problem-solving** (learning a process for solving problems; goal-setting)
- **Communication skills** (being assertive; being respectful; negotiating and compromising)
- **Friendship skills** (cooperation, including others, joining in with others)

Jones, Doces, Swearer, and Collier further state that the best bullying prevention programs should ideally include the above SEL skills and the following:

- Training for all school staff and parents on the “psychology” of bullying
- Training for all school staff and parents on procedures for how to effectively handle bullying reports, including the school’s process for and policies around dealing with bullying reports
- Training for teachers on how to deliver the program, including some training around managing relationships and behaviors in the classroom as well as monitoring their own behaviors that are modeled for students
- Training for “Coaches”—people who will work one-on-one with both the students doing the bullying and the students being bullied
- Guidance around establishing policies and procedures, even if it’s just a checklist for schools to make sure they are in compliance with district/state/federal laws
- Classroom curricula that:
 - Teach students what bullying is: how to recognize when it’s happening to you or someone else
 - Clearly state and reiterate rules, processes, and consequences regarding bullying
 - Teach students assertiveness and communication skills that will help them refuse bullying, whether it is happening to themselves or someone else
 - Teach students skills and strategies for being an effective bystander: supporting the person who was bullied, not joining in, reporting, defusing the situation if possible
 - Teach students skills and the process for reporting bullying, including who to report to
 - All skills must be practiced and reinforced
- Guidance around consequences of bullying:
 - Recommendations for appropriate and graduated consequences, including restorative justice (also sometimes called reparative justice) practice options and mental health interventions, when necessary

Implementation

These lessons have been taught in a variety of settings. Classroom teachers in academic subjects have found that beginning the year with pro-social activities helps to start the year on a positive note. However, there are many other possibilities: advisory, youth leadership programs, new school orientation, freshmen seminars, health education classes, humanities classes, special workshops for students, and out-of-school time youth programs. These lessons can also become a vital part of a peer education program, the potential of which is outlined in an appendix to this curriculum.

Students need a time and a place to discuss the effects of unwanted and unwelcome comments and actions. All students deserve adults in their lives who provide good models, are a listening ear, and who work with them to address the issues.

Bullying and harassment may never totally disappear, but when we intentionally teach how to recognize instances and have ideas on how to deal with them, schools can be safer places to live and learn.

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