

PREVENTING BULLYING

NINE WAYS TO BULLY-PROOF YOUR CLASSROOM

By Kenneth Shore
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In recent years, bullying seems to have become more serious and more pervasive. Research indicates that 15% to 20% of all students are victimized by bullies at some point in their school careers. Clearly, bullying is a problem that schools must recognize and address.

What Is Bullying?

Bullying has three distinguishing characteristics: it is intentional, it takes place more than once, and there is an imbalance of power between the bully and the victim. In short, bullying is one-sided.

Bullying is not the same as a single incident of teasing. Rather, it is an abuse of power by one person over another. It is also different from the normal conflicts of childhood. While all acts of bullying are aggressive, not

all aggressive acts are bullying.

Bullying can happen face to face or behind one's back. It can be done by an individual or by a group. Bullies are more likely to be male, but an increasing number of girls are harassing their classmates. Girl bullying, however, often differs from that done by boys. While boys are more likely to attack their peers verbally or physically, girls are more likely to bully indirectly by spreading rumors about their victims, excluding them from activities, or persuading others to reject them.

The Effects of Bullying

Being taunted or attacked physically can be one of the most painful experiences of childhood and can leave lasting psychological scars. Victims may experience anxiety, low self-esteem, depression, and

Kenneth Shore, a school and family psychologist, has written several books and developed a bullying prevention program titled The ABC's of Bullying Prevention. Condensed, with permission, from NJEA Review, the official journal of the New Jersey Education Association, 82 (May 2009), 10-13.

even suicidal thoughts. They may view school, where most incidents of bullying take place, as an unsafe, anxiety-provoking environment and may be afraid of attending. Some may even refuse to go to school rather than face the ordeal of bullying.

Bullying also affects students who witness the incidents. It can give rise to fear and anxiety, distracting students from their schoolwork and impeding their ability to learn. Students who witness their classmates being victimized wonder, "Am I going to be next?" The possibility of being bullied may cause these bystanders to live in a state of fear and focus on little else.

The Teachers' Role

Fortunately, schools have strategies to prevent bullying. These strategies are most effective when they are part of a comprehensive prevention program implemented at the district, school, and classroom levels. Research indicates that schools can cut bullying by as much as 50% with a comprehensive schoolwide prevention program.

Teachers are at the core of any bullying prevention program, and many of the lessons students need to learn that discourage bullying must come from the teacher—through guidance to individual students or through instruction to the whole class by integrating anti-bullying lessons into the curriculum.

Signs of Bullying

It is unrealistic to expect that teachers will notice every bullying incident. Incidents often occur outside the classroom. In addition, victims often fail to report incidents because they are not confident teachers will take their concerns seriously or they fear retaliation. As a result, bullying sometimes escapes detection. This makes it all the more important that teachers be on the lookout for behavioral signs suggesting that a child is being bullied, such as:

- frequent school absences
- anxiety or fearfulness during class
- difficulty focusing
- unusual sadness
- withdrawal from peers
- a decline in academic performance
- not eating lunch
- avoidance of certain school areas
- clingy behavior
- frequent visits to the school nurse
- torn clothing or bruises.

Bully-Proofing Your Classroom

The most effective way to deal with bullying is to prevent it from happening in the first place.

1. Foster a climate of cooperation and caring. You can help prevent bullying by the tone you set in your classroom. Send an anti-bullying message by reinforcing

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acts of kindness and communicating values of tolerance, respect, and responsibility. The most effective way to foster a caring attitude is to model this behavior yourself by relating in a warm, sympathetic way with your students without talking down to them. Following are strategies for promoting a cooperative, caring climate:

- Avoid sarcasm or put-downs of any kind. If you are taking a child to task for misbehaving, talk in a firm manner and get your point across without being rude or impolite.

- Incorporate into your lessons activities that promote understanding of students who are different.

- Consider using cooperative learning projects in which students must work together to attain success.

- Give out courtesy awards to younger students for such actions as helping a classmate with an assignment, comforting someone who is upset, inviting a new student to join in a game, or coming to the defense of a child who is being bullied.

- Establish a box that students can place notes in complimenting their classmates for something they said or did. At the end of the week, read these notes to the class.

- Name a "student of the week" and then develop a poster about him that includes posi-

tive comments from classmates.

- Have a class meeting periodically in which students gather in a circle and compliment or express appreciation to a classmate. Allow only positive comments and make sure that all students are acknowledged at least every other meeting. Get the ball rolling by being the first to talk about an act of kindness by a student.

- Have a courtesy display on the bulletin board. When you observe an act of kindness by one of your students, describe the act with the student's name on a 3 x 5 card or a heart-shaped piece of paper and tack it to the display. Encourage students to tell you about actions of classmates for posting on the display, or have them write out the cards and submit them to you. This may give rise to a chain reaction of compliments that has a contagious effect on your class.

2. Catch the bullying student being kind. Make a special effort to find something positive to say about students who are prone to unkind behavior, even if it is a small gesture. For example, praise a student if you see him/her acting in a caring or helpful manner to a classmate. Describe the specific behavior you observed as you praise him or her. Do this publicly (unless you think it would be embarrassing) to encourage others to engage in similar acts of kindness. As an example, you might say to a student: "Seth, it was so nice of

you to sit with Julio after he hurt himself on the playground. That was a very caring thing to do.”

3. Hold a classroom meeting early in the year to discuss bullying. This is an activity that all teachers can do, even with students as young as five or six. Just discussing the problem of bullying will raise awareness of the issue and help to decrease bullying incidents. Revisit the issue of bullying at periodic class meetings throughout the year.

Begin the meeting by showing your class a video or have them read a story about bullying. Follow up with a class discussion. Seat students in a circle so that everyone can see each other. Begin by making some key points:

- Describe what you mean by bullying, and offer examples.

- Make it clear that bullying behavior of any kind is unacceptable and not permitted in school while stating an underlying value, namely, that all children are to be treated with respect.

- When explaining your classroom rules, make sure that “No bullying” is among them. (Post these rules next to the clock so students see them often.)

- Inform students of what they should do if they are bullied or they see a classmate being bullied.

- Tell students that you will take reports of bullying seriously and there will be consequences

for students who engage in this behavior.

After making these points, engage students in an age-appropriate discussion to help them understand how bullying can be hurtful. Some possible topics:

- Ask them to talk about times they have been bullied (without mentioning names) and to describe how it felt. In this way, you are helping to promote empathy, an important element in preventing bullying.

- Volunteer your own school experiences when you or a classmate were bullied.

- Ask the class why they think students bully. The reasons they offer may deter some students from acting in this way.

- Discuss the importance of supporting classmates who are targets of bullying while stressing the importance of informing an adult.

- At the end of the discussion, tell your students that you are available to talk with them privately about any specific concerns they have. Tell them the best time to do this.

If you are not comfortable holding a classroom meeting, invite a school counselor or psychologist to conduct the meeting with you. You may also want to attend a staff development workshop on this topic.

4. Role-play social situations with your students. Have students

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assume the roles of bully, victim, and bystander and give them common social situations where bullying might occur and have them act them out. Following are situations students may role play:

- a student calls you a name
- a student cuts in front of you in line
- a student takes the ball away from you on the playground
- a classmate doesn't let you join in a game during recess.

After the role play, have students talk about how they felt and what they might have said or done differently. In this way, students can try out their own responses and hear what their classmates might say and do. Let students consider whether their response is likely to get their point across without angering or provoking the other student. If younger students are unable to role play these situations, act them out using puppets, then engage them in a discussion.

5. Closely monitor students who are at high risk for being bullied. Children are more prone to be bullied if they are withdrawn from their classmates, stand out in some way (for example, they are short, overweight, or have an accent), attend special education programs, speak English as a second language, or are new to the school. Students who are isolated from their classmates are particularly vulnerable to being bullied.

You can reduce their chances of being a victim by helping them become more connected to and involved with their peers. Integrate them into activities (especially on the playground), pair them with students who are likely to be accepting, and make sure they sit with other children during lunch.

6. Inform other school staff about potential bullying situations. If you become aware of a bullying incident, inform other personnel, including special subject teachers and paraprofessionals, who come into contact with the students so they can monitor their behavior.

7. Present classroom lessons that have a bullying theme. Integrate bullying into your academic lessons.

- Read a book to your students about a child who is bullied, or if old enough, have them read it aloud. Then, lead students in a discussion of how a victim of bullying might feel, why bullies might behave that way, how the victim might respond to the bully, and how other children might help the victim.

Books about bullying can be comforting to students who have been victims and can spark ideas how they might handle a difficult social situation in the future.

- After talking about what bullying is and is not, present some scenarios and ask students whether or not they meet the definition of bullying. ►

- Have your upper elementary or middle school class design a survey about bullying and then have your students complete it anonymously. Have students tally the results and present them in the form of bar graphs, using percentages. In addition to raising awareness about bullying, this will help them practice and apply math skills in a meaningful way.

- Draw a large picture of a child on the blackboard. Then ask your students to describe the characteristics of a bully as you write them on the picture. This exercise will help to communicate what is appropriate and inappropriate behavior and also convey what children think of bullies in the hope that it will discourage potential bullies.

8. Closely supervise areas where bullying is likely. Bullying often takes place in areas of the school that have minimal supervision, such as the playground, the lunchroom, the bathroom, and even the back of the classroom. While some of these areas are outside of your control, help prevent bullying by being especially vigilant and visible during less structured activities.

For example, you may deter bullying in the hallway by standing in your classroom doorway as students are changing classes. Also, scan your classroom regularly during unstructured activities to detect possible peer problems.

9. Encourage bystanders to bullying to take action. While you may not always observe bullying incidents, the likelihood is that some of your students will. These witnesses can help reduce bullying behavior by telling the bully to stop what he is doing, distracting the bully by getting him to focus on something else, reaching out to the victim in friendship or support, and most important, by informing a school staff member. Tell students that doing nothing is saying to the bully that it is okay to hurt other students. Also, make the point that if they laugh at the bully's behavior or go along with his actions they are contributing to the bullying.

Because students may be reluctant to inform an adult for fear they will be seen as a tattletale, it is important to stress that telling an adult about bullying is vastly different from tattling on a student. Point out that telling is what you do to get someone out of trouble and tattling is what you do to get someone in trouble. Make sure students know that if they do come to you with a report of bullying, that you will keep their name anonymous. One way of doing this is to have a box in your classroom where students can deposit notes about any concerns they have. It is best if the box is not restricted to issues of bullying so that students who submit bullying concerns cannot be identified. ■

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