

Focusing on Prevention...

How Teachers Can Prevent and Respond to Bullying Behaviors

There is growing educational concern about bullying, and teachers often need guidance on responding to student behavior that threatens another’s physical and emotional security. One of the best tools to address bullying is prevention—creating a school environment in which teachers address the needs of all students, foster social and emotional learning, and strengthen trusted relationships between students and adults.

Helping Students Recognize the Difference Between Normal Peer Conflict and Bullying

Navigating peer relationships is difficult and students often need support as they learn how to deal with normal peer conflict or bullying.

It is not bullying when two students of approximately the same status, size, or age (i.e., there is no imbalance of power) argue, fight, or disagree. Conflict resolution or peer mediation may provide the opportunity for students experiencing normal peer conflict to build skills in self-reflection and practice peaceful resolution of disagreements.

Bullying occurs when a student or group of students acts aggressively toward a peer or peers, and when the targeted student or students have less power than those who are targeting them (e.g., less popular, smaller, younger, etc.). This aggression can take many forms, including physical aggression (e.g., pushing, shoving, tripping), verbal aggression (e.g., teasing), or social aggression (e.g., exclusion or rumor spreading). Usually, for aggressive behavior to become bullying, it happens repeatedly, but a one-time incident that makes a target fearful can also be bullying. Do not wait until bullying happens repeatedly to intervene.

In the District of Columbia, bullying is further defined under the Youth Bullying Prevention Act of 2012 as the following: “any severe, pervasive or persistent act of conduct that can be reasonably predicted to:

- a. Place the youth in reasonable fear of physical harm to their person or property;
- b. Cause a substantial detrimental effect on the youth’s physical or mental health;
- c. Substantially interfere with the youth’s academic performance or attendance; or
- d. Substantially interfere with the youth’s ability to participate in or benefit from the services, activities, or privileges provided by an agency, educational institution, or grantee.”

Talk to students about what bullying is and how they can safely address it. Students should understand that bullying is unacceptable and should know how to get help.

Normal Peer Conflict	Bullying
Equal power	Imbalance of power
Happens occasionally	Repeated negative actions
Accidental	Purposeful
Not serious	Serious with threat of physical or emotional harm
Equal emotional reaction	Strong emotional reaction from victim and little or no emotional reaction from bully
Not seeking power or attention	Seeking power, control, or material things
Not trying to get something	Attempt to gain material things or power
Remorse - will take responsibility	No remorse - blames victim
Effort to solve the problem	No effort to solve problem

Reminder: Even if a conflict does not meet the definition of bullying, it can still hurt or harm the students involved. It is important to help students address their experiences and to provide the support they need, regardless of whether the behavior is bullying.

Knowing Who Might Be at Risk and How to Help

While some groups might be more at risk (e.g., students with disabilities; LGBTQ youth; or students of minority racial, ethnic, or religious groups), students who are not connected to a social peer group or who appear alienated from the community may need particular attention.

Students must feel seen and heard by adults to build trusting relationships where they feel willing to report when bullying happens.

- **Create open lines of communication** with your students and check in with them often about daily life. Talking to students about their interests can help them reflect on their strengths or things they like about themselves.
- **Encourage your students to do what they love.** Engaging in an activity or interest can boost their confidence and help them make friends with similar interests.

Students who feel acknowledged by an adult who cares about their day-to-day experiences may feel more empowered to seek advice or help on tough decisions when the need arises.

Modeling How to Treat Others with Kindness and Respect

A safe and supportive school climate can be the best bullying prevention tool. Your own classroom management can set the tone and model the behavior you want to see. By demonstrating the behavior you expect of your students, you can promote respectful, positive relations in the classroom.

Set the ground rules.

- Develop ground rules with your students, empowering them to create and enforce their own climate of responsibility and respect between classmates.
- Use positive language, such as giving suggestions on positive behaviors that students could do, rather than telling them what *not* to do.
- Support school-wide rules, including those in the student handbook and code of conduct.

Consistently reinforce the rules.

- Be a positive role model and follow the rules yourself. Demonstrate respect for your students and encourage their successes.
- Set clear expectations by making your requests simple, direct, and specific.
- Reward good behavior and do so more often than you criticize bad behavior.
- Avoid public reprimands; use one-on-one feedback to address issues with a student.
- Help students correct their behavior by reinforcing your expectations and laying out the consequences for rule violations. For example, you might say, "I know you can stop [negative action] and go back to [positive action]. If you choose to continue, then [consequence]."

Reminder: While a trusted adult is important, this might not be you. If you are concerned for a student's well-being but do not have a close relationship with that student, seek support from others who may be able to assist.

Supporting All Students Involved in Bullying

Prevent future bullying by addressing the needs of all students when dealing with existing behavior. Support both the student who is aggressive and the student who is targeted (or feels targeted). Changing the behavior of the aggressor requires an understanding of their behavior motivation. Supporting the student who is (or feels) targeted ensures that they can feel safe.

Address bullying behavior.

- Make sure the student understands what the problem behavior is and that bullying is taken seriously.
- Work with the student to understand why he or she bullied. Sometimes students engage in negative behaviors like bullying in response to other traumatic experiences, or to better fit in with peers.
- Use consequences to teach, such as involving the student who bullied in making amends. Build empathy.

Support students who are bullied.

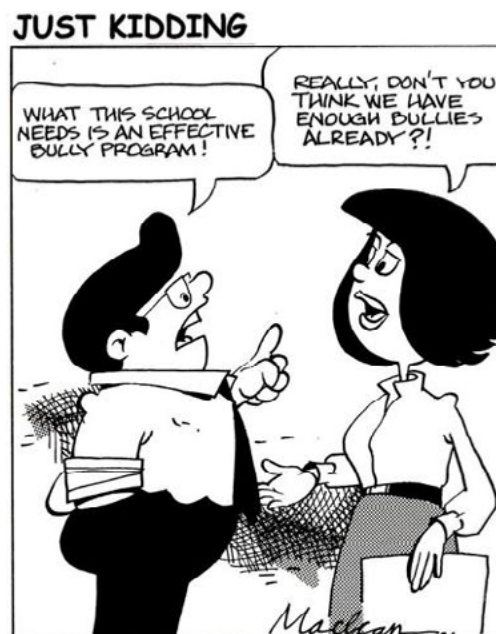
- Listen to and focus on the student.
- Assure the student that bullying is not their fault.
- Give advice on what to do. You could even role-play how they might react another time.
- Work together to resolve the situation and protect the bullied student. Providing support may involve input from the student, parents, and others within the school.

Remember: Bullying is a behavior, not a student. It is important to respond to the problem behavior, not the child as a problem.

Seeking Additional Support or Resources

Your school has a point of contact—ask for support, training, and information. You can find your school's point of contact and its bullying prevention policy by visiting <https://ohr.dc.gov/page/knowyourpolicy>.

For additional tips for schools and families on preventing and responding to bullying, visit www.stopbullying.gov, the U.S. government's central repository for information on bullying. The website also includes a section for kids with informative bullying prevention webisodes.



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