

Responding to Reports of Bullying

Supporting and Restoring Students' Senses of Safety

The Youth Bullying Prevention Act (YBPA) requires all schools and youth-serving agencies in the District of Columbia to investigate all reports of bullying, determine whether they are consistent with the definition of bullying contained in the YBPA, and address the behavior to ensure that it does not continue. Best practice dictates that schools and agencies also immediately address the needs of the student who is being targeted, or who feels that they are being targeted. Even a student whose experience is not determined, after investigation, to meet the YBPA's definition of bullying may still experience trauma and require additional support.

This tipsheet is meant to be a guide for schools to develop plans that address harm experienced by students and create a safe environment to prevent future incidents.

Bullying as a Traumatic Experience

Adverse childhood experiences (ACEs), or traumatic events that occur in a child's life, are associated with several long-lasting negative outcomes that can affect the health and well-being of children. Bullying is considered an ACE by many researchers who study the long-term and collective impact of these experiences. Especially for those students who experience other ACEs, bullying can significantly impair their feelings of safety and security in schools. The amount of trauma that students experience as a result of being bullied will vary, but all students can benefit from additional support.

Schools can address bullying by applying the principles established by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Service's Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) related to trauma-informed practices. Specifically, schools should recognize and validate bullying as a traumatic experience, provide transparency and build trust, restore a sense of safety, and build resilience skills.



Step 1: Validate students' experiences.

- Reassure the student that you are there to support them, regardless of the outcomes of any investigation or the actions taken for other students. All students who report bullying should be provided with at least some level of validation that the school acknowledges their experience and wants to find ways to prevent it from continuing—even if their experience does not align with the definition of bullying established in the YBPA.
- Remember: even if a student's reaction seems irrational, their feelings are real to them. Refrain from minimizing students' experiences or encouraging them to simply move on.



Step 2: Provide transparency and build trust.

- **Be transparent about investigation findings.** Although schools are often restricted from sharing the full details about the action—or inaction—taken against other students, schools can and should keep the reporting student informed about the results of an investigation and how a determination was made. To reassure students that the school cares about their experiences, be clear that the bullying prevention policy is designed to ensure the best outcomes for all students and that the school has followed the policy.
- **Explain the steps your school can (and cannot) take to support the students involved.** Set expectations about what steps the school will take to address student behavior and provide support to students who have been affected.

- **Avoid making promises that are not realistic.** For example, promising to ensure that bullying stops completely is not always realistic. If bullying does occur again, this unrealistic promise can erode trust between the student and school staff. Instead, emphasize a commitment to keeping the student safe and developing a plan that works for the student.



Step 3: Restore a sense of safety.

- **Ask each student what they need to feel safe.** Although the school may not be able to implement all of a student's requests—especially when they involve actions against other students—engaging students as partners in developing a plan to keep them safe will promote buy-in. Schools may suggest strategies, but students should not be forced into plans they do not feel comfortable with or do not think will work.
- **Tailor strategies to the individual student.** No two incidents of bullying and no two students' needs will be exactly the same. Just because a strategy worked for one student does not mean it will work for another.
- **Prioritize actions that will not further isolate, stigmatize, or traumatize students.** Avoid actions that will identify a student who receives supports. For instance, whenever possible, implement changes across a classroom (e.g., changing everyone's seating plan) rather than for the targeted student alone.
- **Allow the student to choose which supports to implement.** Ensure that the student feels part of the decision making. Implementing supports without a student's buy-in can result in that student feeling further victimized.
- **Provide access to resources, both in and out of school.** For example, ensure that students have spaces to which they know they can go to avoid potentially harmful situations, and provide referrals to mental health services if appropriate.
- **Follow up with the student on a regular basis to ensure that efforts are working, and adjust plans as needed.** Set and stick to a schedule for checking in with the student and remind them you are there to help.



Step 4: Build resilience skills to prevent re-traumatization.

- **Identify trauma-related triggers.** Help students understand what behaviors and experiences may lead them to feel targeted or otherwise unsafe at school. This can help them assess a situation to determine whether they are truly at risk.
- **Develop strategies for managing physiological reactions to trauma-related triggers.** Helping students understand the body's stress response can encourage them to remain calm and better assess and react to a situation, as can working with them to develop skills to manage this response (such as mindful breathing).
- **Implement social and emotional learning programs and practices.** Helping students understand both their emotions and the emotions of others can prevent bullying from occurring and help students better respond when it does occur.