

BULLYING & HARASSMENT BACKGROUND

What's bullying? What's harassment?

"Bullying is not easy to define. Sometimes it involves hitting or kicking. But threats, teasing, and taunting are more common and can be more damaging."

-- *Bullying at School: Advice for Families* (1997)

Bullying is the precursor to harassment, which, all too often, is the precursor to violence.

Do we infringe on students' and teachers' 1st amendment rights when we prohibit bullying and harassment?

No. It is very possible to protect people's freedoms of speech and religion without subjecting other people to a hostile climate. (See "*Balancing Students' Rights.*")

Teachers, regardless of their personal values, have a paramount duty to behave respectfully toward every child and family. Students are somewhat more free to express disapproval or of dislike for other students' lives, but it is reasonable, and constitutionally defensible to say, "*If the subject comes up in a class discussion or if you write for the school paper, feel free to speak up. But don't use the public forum of the halls or the cafeteria to provoke or humiliate people. Don't get up in somebody's face. Don't threaten a person or spread rumors about them. Don't follow them or make them the butt of your jokes. Express beliefs appropriately; don't violate someone else's right to a safe school.*"

Bullying is:

- Commonly not reported to adults
- Commonly witnessed by peers, a public humiliation with bystanders

Forms it takes:

- Physical (hitting, kicking, spitting, theft of belongings, grabbing of body parts)
- Verbal (telling insulting jokes, name-calling)
- Psychological (spreading rumors, ostracizing)
- Based in stereotypes and other bias:
 - ♦ sexual, including anti-gay [*sissy; slut; you kiss other girls!!!; he's a little fag; bitch*]
 - ♦ racial or religious [*hey white boy; grabbing the hijab (veil) off a Muslim girl's head*]
 - ♦ ability-based [*retard; don't make us work with him, he's weird* (said of a multiply disabled young man)]
 - ♦ xenophobic [*go back where you came from; why don't you learn English?*]
 - ♦ economic class [*where'd you get that outfit, Value Village?*]
- Possibly bias-based:
 - ♦ looks or speech [may be based on sexual, racial, anti-gay, ability or xenophobic bias; may not]
- Not bias-based, per se, but rather about such things as:
 - ♦ body size, height, haircut
 - ♦ studiousness, good grades
 - ♦ a response to the target's social awkwardness [*he annoyed me*]
 - ♦ a response to the target's provoking behavior [a child who's been targeted long-term may "act out" as a defense mechanism]
 - ♦ retribution

Why people bully:

- They believe the peer group finds the behavior attractive, exciting.
- They want social status, to fit in, to distance self from an ostracized peer, to publicly defy authority.
- They may believe stereotypes and fear or disapprove of certain kinds of differences.
- They don't/won't believe it does real harm.
- They don't believe adults will know or care; they don't expect consequences.

The short and long-term consequences of (or at least associations with) bullying and harassment, include:

- **Among victims ...**
 - ♦ 2 to 3-fold increased likelihood of having missed whole days of school in the past month due to fear,¹
 - ♦ frequent changing of schools, increased likelihood of dropping out altogether²
 - ♦ loneliness, social isolation^{3,4}
 - ♦ increased likelihood of drug-use and other self-endangering behavior, at least among those harassed for being perceived as gay⁵
 - ♦ suicidality (thoughts, attempts, medically serious attempts)⁶ and, in rare cases with other contributing factors, suicide⁷
 - ♦ rage and, in rare cases with other contributing factors, homicide⁸
- **Among offenders ...**
 - ♦ 4-fold increase of future criminal behavior (60% of former bullies had at least one conviction by age 24)⁹
 - ♦ poor academic achievement¹⁰
 - ♦ increased likelihood of drug-use and other self-endangering behavior¹¹
- **Among bystanders ...**
 - ♦ they report participating less in class, trouble concentrating in class and cutting classes,¹²
 - ♦ they report feeling self-conscious, unsafe, afraid¹³
 - ♦ a sense of not owning the school that probably can lead to increased vandalism, tardiness, absenteeism

What can we, as education professionals, do about it?

On-going Assessment (Where are we? How do we know if we succeed?):

- (a) Gather already-collected data (climate survey, 1999 Teen Health Survey, etc.).
- (b) Conduct school-wide assessment activities in which students:
 - write and talk about a baseline of your building's climate
 - observe, count and report on what they see in various locations, withholding names, but reporting observations including individual students' isolation
- (c) Report back creatively, so that all staff, students and families know the baseline.
- (d) Establish a system for recognizing students' isolation as well as students' being physically or verbally bullied.
- (e) Look for evidence of success, such as:
 - an increase in "telling" (students will have confidence that adults can help and that they don't have to put up with bullying)

- a decrease in aggressive behavior in classrooms, hallways, gym, etc.
- greater adult consistency in dealing with incidents across the entire building (including classified staff) ... i.e. Can they all describe what adults do when they observe incidents?
- longer term: reductions in vandalism/graffiti, theft, carrying of weapons, absenteeism, etc.

(f) Periodically revisit a and b.

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Prevention (How do we make our school the kind of place everybody wants to be?):

- (a) Discuss your personal commitment as a principal to a safe, nurturing building with students every year and setting up learning experiences that encourage their buy-in.
- (b) Discuss with students “why it is so hard to tell,” distinguishing between “tattling/narking” and “telling/reporting”.
- (c) Make yourselves extremely “tellable” in multiple ways, for instance:
 - times when every student writes about recent incidents, so nobody is being the only “tattletale” or “nark”
 - drop boxes for urgent anonymous alerts
 - adults listing all the things they’d be willing to hear about
 - lists of ways to handle situations, including who you can tell
 - **crucial:** adults following through so that there seems to be success if one “tells”
- (d) Discuss bias in the curriculum at every grade (“prejudice” & “respect” at younger ages, “stereotypes” & “racism” and all the other specific forms of bias at older ages).
- (e) Discuss bullying in the curriculum at every grade (“meanness” and “feelings” at younger ages, “harassment” and “hate crimes” and the history of inhumanity at older ages).
- (f) Teach social skills. Both bullies and victims are inclined to have fewer social skills than their peers.
- (g) Adequately staff locations where bullying has occurred in the past.
- (h) Model respect for and appreciation of diversity, for instance:
 - adults listening and learning from students, families and staff with different life experiences from yours
 - signs/posters that indicate your opposition to racism, homophobia, sexism, xenophobia, etc.
 - adults story-telling about their own learning process, their work to overcome their own prejudices
 - adults apologizing when they do something that someone finds hurtful
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Intervention (How do we handle bullying/harassment?):

- (a) Take every complaint seriously (see *“Responding to Concerns and Complaints”*).
- (b) Investigate incidents vigorously, including interviews with bystanders.
- (c) Counsel/educate the offender(s) when bias seems to be a factor (about the limits of free speech at school and about the targeted group).
- (d) Progressively discipline offender(s), with equal consequences for every form of bias-based bullying.
- (e) Keep the target and the bystanders informed and follow up with the offender(s), the target, and the bystanders regarding retribution.
- (f) In the case of chronically victimized and/or isolated students don't wait until a specific trigger incident to launch peer support systems (see *“An Overview of the ‘No Blame’ Approach to School Bullying”*)

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¹ 1999 *Seattle Teen Health Survey*, Seattle Public Schools and the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

² Safe Schools Coalition of Washington, *They Don't Even Know Me: Understanding Anti-Gay Harassment and Violence in Schools* (1999)

³ Nansel, T. et al, Bullying Behaviors Among U.S. Youth: Prevalence and Association with Psychological Adjustment, *JAMA*. 2001; 16:2094-2100.

⁴ Olweus, D. , *Bullying at School: What We Know and What We Can Do*. Oxford, England: Blackwell; 1993.

⁵ 1999 *Seattle Teen Health Risk Survey*

⁶ *ibid*

⁷ Safe Schools Coalition of Washington, 1999

⁸ “Why violence? The Secret Service's findings on school shootings” March 6, 2001, Kathy Slobogin, CNN Education and Family Correspondent

⁹ Olweus, D., 1993

¹⁰ Nansel, T., 2001

¹¹ *ibid*

¹² Safe Schools Coalition of Washington, 1999

¹³ *ibid*