

# Fast Facts Bullying Prevention

In the last few years, incidents of violent retribution by victims of bullying have led to an increased awareness of the problem of bullying. Bullying prevention programs are schoolwide efforts designed to send a message that bullying will not be tolerated in school. Programs that are carefully designed and implemented can improve school climate by educating staff and students to recognize and respond to instances of bullying.

## How is bullying defined?

Bullying is most commonly defined as a student's being exposed, repeatedly and over time, to intentional injury or discomfort inflicted by one or more other students. This may include physical contact, verbal assault, making obscene gestures or facial expressions, and being intentionally excluded. Bullying implies an imbalance in power or strength in which one child is victimized by others.

## How prevalent is bullying and what characterizes it?

Surprisingly large proportions of students are bullied in schools. In the United States, up to 20% of students report having been bullied (Whitney & Smith). Most incidents occur in places with little adult supervision (e.g. playgrounds, hallways). Bullies are typically larger than their victims and have more positive attitudes toward the use of violence than other students; victims are less popular, often without a single friend in class (Olweus). Bullying victims tend to be more anxious and insecure than other students and often react by crying, withdrawal, and avoidance when attacked (Sharp). Unfortunately, such reactions may only reinforce the bullies' sense of power over the victims.

## What are the effects of bullying? What is the typical reaction to bullying?

Bullying has serious consequences not only for victims and perpetrators, but for the entire school. Victims report feelings of vengefulness, anger, and self-pity after a bullying incident (Borg). Left untreated, such reactions can evolve into depression, physical illness, and even suicide. In addition, students who engage in aggressive and bullying behaviors during their school years may take part in criminal and aggressive behavior after adolescence (Olweus). In classrooms exhibiting high numbers of bullying problems, students tend to feel less safe and are less satisfied with school life in general (Olweus & Limber).

Despite these effects, bullying is often tolerated and ignored. Teachers rarely detect bullying and intervene in only 4% of all incidents (Craig & Pepler). In addition, students' attitudes regarding bullying indicate the belief that bullied students are at least partly to blame for their victimization, that bullying makes the victims tougher, and that teasing is simply done "in fun" (Oliver, Hoover, & Hazler).

## How are bullying prevention programs implemented?

While some individual interventions for bullying have been successful in addressing bullying, the most effective bullying prevention programs are comprehensive in scope. Olweus argues that effective bullying prevention requires simultaneous efforts at the school (e.g., reshaping policy, holding a schoolwide convocation), classroom (e.g., class discussion, enforcing classroom rules against bullying), and individual (e.g., counseling) levels. Other promising interventions include assertiveness training for the victims (Sharp), family counseling for the bully's family (Oliver et al.), and the Shared Concern method, in which the bully and victim are brought together to resolve the problem (Duncan).

Through improved supervision, classroom rules against bullying, positive and negative consequences for following and violating rules, and serious talks with bullies and victims, bullying prevention plans strive to develop a school environment characterized by warmth and positive adult involvement. At the elementary level work-



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sheets, role plays, and relevant literature may be incorporated into existing curricula. Such measures send the message that “bullying is not accepted in our school, and we will see to it that it comes to an end.”

### **How effective are bullying prevention programs?**

Extensive research has shown that well-designed bullying prevention programs can reduce, eliminate, and prevent bully-victim problems and significantly improve overall school climate. In the year following a comprehensive intervention program, there was a 50% decrease in the numbers of bullying incidents, and reductions were also found in the intensity of bullying and in the number of new victims (Olweus). In addition, fighting, vandalism and truancy all decreased, while general student satisfaction with school increased.

Using a similar whole-school approach, the Sheffield Anti-Bullying Project also reported positive results (Elsea & Smith). Participating schools reported a 17% decrease in children bullied and a 7% decrease in the number of identified bullies. In addition, victims were more likely to report harassment. The Safer Schools-Safer Cities Project reported encouraging results using a community-wide violence reduction program. In nine of 14 participating schools, there were significant reductions in the levels of bullying over a two-year period (Smith).

### **What key components should be kept in mind in implementing a bullying prevention program?**

Since effective bullying prevention is a comprehensive effort, all bullying prevention programs recommend a bullying prevention committee at the school level and a coordinator of bullying prevention activities and curricula. A schoolwide bullying survey can be useful to identify the extent of the problem and to discover important issues that need to be addressed (Olweus; Whitney & Smith). Creating awareness of the problem may also require staff training: most bullying prevention programs recommend a half- or whole-day training session, educating staff about the program, about changes in policy, and about their responsibilities. Finally, many effective bullying prevention programs use buttons, posters, and mailings to maintain awareness and student interest in the program.

In summary, bullying is a serious matter involving a substantial number of students. Most bullying goes undetected or is ignored, leading to detrimental effects for victims, bullies, and school climate. Well-conducted, comprehensive bullying prevention programs can be effective in reducing the number of bullying incidents and in creating a climate that discourages bullying behavior.

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