

10 Ways to Help Reduce Bullying in Schools¹

by Erin Hellwig

“Kids will be kids” is a famous saying suggesting that bullying is a normal part of growing up. Yet with beatings, death threats, and 24-hour harassment via technology, bullying has become a dangerous, life-threatening epidemic. Children cannot get away from it, which has led to many suicides. Schools are struggling to take a stand against bullying, and with parents, politics, and the media involved, educators have a difficult time pleasing everyone.

Bullying can occur randomly or regularly. It can happen daily, weekly, or monthly. In fact, one in 10 bullying victims are bullied daily, while one in five victims are bullied once or twice a month (Mahoney, 2012). The bullied student can rarely predict when the bullying will occur, and if the student can predict the bullying, often teachers and staff may not address the incident. In fact, staff may not even catch the first few acts of bullying. Schools need to find ways to reduce this problem. This includes having all teachers, staff, and administrators on board to prevent bullying from occurring. Here are some tips to help you reduce bullying in your school.

1. Have a Clear Definition of Bullying.

Bullying occurs at all grade levels. An entire school district needs to have the same language within all its schools in order to reduce bullying.² To start, the schools need to have a common definition of bullying. CPI defines bullying (2011) as being characterized by intentionally aggressive behavior that involves an imbalance of power and strength. It can be exemplified through physical, verbal/nonverbal, and/or relational means. It is a repeated offense, even when teachers observe it for the first time. Talking to the victim about what happened and whether there have been past occurrences is very important.

Staff should be able to distinguish between teasing and bullying. According to Sweeting and West (2001), teasing is reported more frequently than bullying because teasing is done to irritate or provoke another with persistent distractions or other annoyances. Bullying, on the other hand, is an imbalance of power. This is key. Bullied students are unable to defend themselves, which is what causes the imbalance of power. Bullying occurs in different forms such as threats, teasing, name calling, excluding, preventing others from going where they want or doing what they want, pushing, hitting, and all forms of physical violence (Mahoney, 2012). The severity of bullying varies from case to case.

With the growth of the use of social media among students, staff should be aware that cyberbullying is becoming more of a problem. Cyberbullying is the “use of any electronic device to harass, intimidate, or bully another” (Mahoney, 2012). This includes texts, emails, videos, and posts and messages on social media websites. Schools need to ensure that bullying prevention efforts are stressed when it comes to cyberbullying. According to the US Department of Health and Human Services, “All school staff need to be trained on what bullying is, what the school’s policies and rules are, and how to enforce the rules.”

2. Remove Labels: Address Behaviors.

When teachers and staff call a child a bully or a victim, they place a judgment on that child, which can then cause problems in the future for that student. When addressing students’ behavior, be nonjudgmental. First, find out what happened before deciding whether or not the incident qualifies as bullying (US Department of Health and Human Services). Looking at the specific behaviors that occurred is important so that they can be addressed at a later time. Keep in mind that each student involved in a situation comes from different circumstances. Everyone has baggage. There may be a reason that the child who engages in bullying behavior is acting this

¹ Crisis Prevention Institute, <http://www.crisisprevention.com/Resources/Article-Library/Nonviolent-Crisis-Intervention-Training-Articles/10-Ways-to-Help-Reduce-Bullying-in-Schools>, 2013.

² For specific Kansas statute and sample policies see the Safe Schools Resource Center at <http://www.ksde.org/Default.aspx?tabid=3878>.

way. To fix the problem, involve the student who is doing the bullying (US Department of Health and Human Services). She needs to know what her actions are doing to the student she's bullying.

Ensure that the person who is doing the bullying knows what behavior is wrong, why it's wrong, and what the consequences are for engaging in the behavior. If the behavior keeps occurring, the parents will need to be involved. Multiple staff members from various schools have reported that parents of kids who engage in bullying behavior come in saying that their children are victims because they've been accused of being bullies. But when teachers address *specific behaviors* such as disrupting the classroom or harassing other students, parents recognize that the behavior needs to stop.

3. Set Clear and Enforceable Rules and Expectations.

Age-appropriate rules allow a student to know what behavior is expected. When kids are younger, keep rules simple. When kids are older, shape the rules to help them meet their maturity level.

Scheuermann and Hall (2008) have a list of suggestions for writing rules within a Positive Behavioral Interventions and Support (PBIS) framework. The authors suggest that staff should:

1. State rules in positive terms,
2. Keep the number of rules to a minimum (3–5 depending upon age),
3. Set rules that cover multiple situations,
4. Make sure rules are age appropriate,
5. Teach your students the rules,
6. Set an example for rule-following behavior, and
7. Be consistent in enforcing the rules.

These guidelines for rules set a tone for the classroom. They can help the teacher have a well-managed classroom that is less prone to bullying behaviors (US Department of Health and Human Services).

The rules and the consequences for breaking the rules should be clearly stated. Students need to know what will happen if they engage in a certain behavior. This provides clear expectations.

Rules need to enforce respect, responsibility, and safety (Scheuermann and Hall, 2008). Rules should incorporate these vital components and apply to every situation every day to everyone. Remember, rules are there to keep students and staff safe.

4. Reward Positive Behavior.

When a student does something bad, it's easy to point it out, especially if the student always seems to be in trouble. What if you caught him doing something good? Would you point it out? Wright (2012) came up with the "Good Behavior Game" in which good classroom behaviors are rewarded during the instructional time of day.

Not many people choose to reinforce good behavior because good behavior is expected. This is a problem. When a child is always getting into trouble, then "catching them being good" is positive and reinforcing (Mahoney, 2012). Pointing out the good behavior acknowledges and reinforces that behavior. This way the student will be more likely to engage in the positive behavior again. Just like setting clear rules and enforcing those rules, reinforcing good behavior will give students clear expectations about what you want in a positive way.

The US Department of Health and Human Services recommends that schools "Try to affirm good behavior four to five times for every one criticism of bad behavior. Use one-on-one feedback, and do not publically reprimand. Help students correct their behaviors. Help them understand violating the rules results in

consequences.” Following these suggestions can help reduce bullying behaviors by helping students become more accepting of the positive and less likely to engage in negative behaviors.

5. Have Open Communication.

Communication is key to building rapport. When teachers have open communication with their students, their students will feel more open to talking to them about their problems—including bullying. Having classroom meetings is one way to build that communication. Classroom meetings provide a way for students to talk about school-related issues beyond academics (US Department of Health and Human Services). These meetings can help teachers and parents stay informed about what’s going on at the school and in the child’s life. Be sure to listen during these meetings. Empathic Listening is key. Students want to know that they’re truly being listened to. They need to feel welcome to talk to their teachers one-on-one, especially if they feel they’ve been bullied. Keep in mind that as a target, a student might not want to say something in front of the whole class or if the bully is in the classroom meeting.

Schools need to have adequate reporting systems as well. They need to encourage teachers and staff to report the incidents that occur. This way the school can provide a way to protect students and prevent these circumstances from occurring again. Reporting also helps track the individual incidents and responses so you can see if there’s a trend (US Department of Health and Human Services). By using this system, possible future incidents can be prevented. Make the reporting system easy to use and confidential, and encourage staff to use it.

Communication is not just verbal. A school can also provide nonverbal cues. These can include interior decorations like signs, it can include teachers and staff, and it can include the exterior of the school. The look of the school sends a strong message to students and parents about whether the school fosters a positive environment. If it does not send a good message, bullying is more likely to occur.

6. Engage Parents.

Many people are involved in children’s lives. They all have an impact. When these people work together, the biggest difference can be made in a child’s life. Communication with parents about their child’s behavior—whether their child is a perpetrator of or on the receiving end of bullying behavior—can be tricky. Thus teachers and staff need to build rapport with the parents of their students.

Keeping parents informed about their child’s grades, friends, behavior, and even attitudes in school is an important tool when addressing behaviors. Working together, parents and teachers can provide a consistent approach to introduce more productive and appropriate replacement behaviors. This makes the message more likely to sink in and stick with the child. It can even help the child recognize when another child is being bullied or is a bully (US Department of Health and Human Services).

In urban areas, some parents may have had a difficult time with schools in the past and may sense a lack of connection and trust in school staff. Staff should show parents how their school has changed or is changing, and that every student is given an opportunity to succeed. You can convey this message by sending invitations for different events or by having the parents play a specific and active role in their child’s life (Mahoney, 2012). To help engage hard-to-reach parents, look for meaningful motivators to draw them into the discussion.

7. Look for Warning Signs.

When bullying is occurring, there may be warning signs. Ask yourself these questions: Are you constantly breaking up the same kids? Do you get to the bottom of what goes on? Have there been changes in these children’s attitudes?

When a child is being bullied, he can show many different signs that indicate that bullying is occurring. Teachers may not witness every incident, but that’s why it’s necessary to involve other students, as well as parents. Does the child have unexplainable injuries, frequent headaches or stomachaches, changes in eating habits, difficulty sleeping, declining grades, loss of interest in school, loss of friends, lost or destroyed personal

items, decreased self-esteem? Does the child avoid social situations or talk of harming herself (US Department of Health and Human Services)? These are only a few of the warning signs that indicate that a child is being bullied. No child shows the same signs.

There are also signs that a child is bullying another. Does the child get into a lot of fights or have friends that bully others? Is the child increasingly aggressive or sent to the principal's office frequently? Does the child have new belongings, blame others for his problems, refuse to accept responsibility for his actions, or worry about his popularity and reputation (US Department of Health and Human Services)? These are only a few signs that indicate that a child is engaging in bullying behavior. In order to fully understand what's going on, you must communicate and work with the child's parents.

8. When Bullying Occurs, Clear the Scene.

Most of the time, teachers and staff break up incidents as they occur. It's important to separate the students involved so you can gather the facts. This allows the school to fix the situation while preventing it from occurring again.

Remember that there are often bystanders, and bystanders frequently encourage and reinforce bullies (Mahoney, 2012). It's often easier to first remove the bystanders and then to deal with the bully and the target. Once the crowd is split up, get the facts. Interview the bystanders. When you listen, show empathy. You don't know all of the circumstances. Remember to be nonjudgmental. That's how you find out what's going on. Get the story from several sources, including the aggressor, the target, and some bystanders (US Department of Health and Human Services).

Bullying is not going to end right away. Be persistent and consistent about stopping it, follow through with consequences, and follow up with the students after incidents (US Department of Health and Human Services). Show the kids that you really care, and you could become their trusted adult.

9. Monitor Hot Spots.

There are certain places where bullying occurs the most, and these are often areas where adults are not present—areas like hallways, bathrooms, playgrounds, and busses. When an adult is present, children feel safer, and bullying behaviors are less likely to occur. It's important for adults to be alert and to give their full attention when multiple children are present.

Statistics show that 47.2% of bullying occurs in a hallway or stairwell and 33.6% of bullying happens in the classroom (Mahoney, 2012). 20% of bullying situations occur on school grounds, on playgrounds, on school busses, when kids are walking to and from school, and in lunchrooms, gyms, and cyberspace (Mahoney, 2012). All of these places cannot be covered, so one way to stop behaviors is to have open communication. All staff must work together to keep these spots monitored.

10. Know Your State Law and District Policies.³

The US government also aims to ensure that students have the safest environments possible. That's why 49 out of 50 states currently have bullying laws in place (Bully Police USA, 2012). All staff should be familiar with their state laws and regulations regarding bullying. They should also know what their school district's policy is and whether it follows the state law.

The National Center for Mental Health Promotion and Youth Violence Prevention (2011) suggests that you find your law, find your district policy, match the law and the policy, educate district leadership on legal responsibilities, and ensure that your policy is being implemented properly. Train staff, educate parents, and ensure that the whole district is consistent when enforcing its policy (US Department of Health and Human Services). This allows everyone to be on the same page and helps students feel safe.

³ Ibid #2.

Bullying can be reduced. These tips will help decrease and prevent bullying in your school, and they'll help you ensure that your students thrive in safe and caring environment in which they're free to learn and grow.

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