

The ABCs of Bullying Prevention

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A Bullying Prevention Program

Bullying is a pervasive school problem that can have serious consequences for students. Fortunately, it's a problem that schools can do something about.

Research indicates that when schools implement a comprehensive program of bullying prevention, they can significantly reduce the problem of bullying. In fact, studies by Professor Dan Olweus, a Norwegian psychologist considered the world's foremost authority on bullying, show that bullying incidents can be cut in half by implementing a school-wide anti-bullying program. Bullying prevention programs, moreover, also hold the promise of doing more than preventing bullying. Schools that implement those programs also might see a decrease in other anti-social behavior, including vandalism, fighting, theft and truancy.

For a bullying prevention program to be effective, it must be comprehensive in the true sense of the word. All adult members of the school community, including administrators, teachers, counselors, psychologists, nurses, coaches, paraprofessionals, secretaries, bus drivers, custodians and after-school staff, should participate in the program, because all are in a position to witness acts of bullying.

A bullying prevention program must, of course, deal with individual students, but it also must address the school culture. Toward that end, it is important to take steps to promote a climate of cooperation and caring. Schools can help deter bullying by reinforcing acts of kindness and communicating values of tolerance, respect and responsibility.

Schools that are committed to implementing comprehensive bullying prevention programs should take the following steps:

Establish a committee to develop a school bullying policy and coordinate bullying prevention activities. The committee might be an already existing group, such as the school safety committee, or it might be a one established for just this purpose.

Survey students about bullying. An important part of a bullying prevention program is to understand the dimensions of the problem in your school. A useful way of obtaining that information is to conduct an anonymous survey of students.

Establish a clear policy prohibiting bullying and then communicate that policy to students, staff and parents. The policy might be incorporated into the school's written code of conduct; it should -- at minimum -- include a definition of bullying, a clear statement that bullying of any kind is prohibited, a description of the possible consequences for bullying, and instructions for students who witness bullying.

Provide close and adequate supervision of areas where bullying is likely to occur. Bullying often takes place outside the classroom -- in the hallway, at the bus stop, on the playground, in the locker room, cafeteria, and bathroom, for example.

Provide training on bullying for teachers and other school staff. School personnel need training on recognizing the signs of bullying, knowing what to do when incidents happen, and learning how to prevent bullying.

Through school-wide activities, raise student and staff awareness about bullying. School-wide anti-bullying activities help remind students about school policy regarding bullying and the importance of supporting their classmates. In addition, they help generate energy for the program.

Integrate bullying lessons and activities into the classroom curriculum. That might include conducting a lesson about bullying, asking students to read a book about bullying and following up with a classroom discussion, or having a classroom meeting focused on the issue of bullying.

Empower bystanders to support the victims of bullying. Although school staff members often are unaware that bullying is taking place, typically other students are not only aware of the incidents, but are present when the incidents occur. Those bystanders to bullying can play a crucial role in helping to address the problem.

Involve parents in the program. Parents need to be informed of school policies regarding bullying, and they need to be encouraged to reinforce that policy with their children. Schools also might survey parents to elicit their views and knowledge of bullying in school. Parents also need to be informed if their child has bullied, or has been bullied by, another child.

Pay special attention to students who are at risk for being bullied. Students are more likely to be bullied if they're isolated from their classmates, in special education programs, speak English as a second language, have a physical characteristic that makes them stand out from their peers, or are new to the school.

Take reports of bullying seriously and act quickly. Encourage staff to respond to all reports of bullying that come to their attention. An incident that might appear minor to a teacher can loom large in the life of a student.

Respond to bullying incidents with a combination of disciplinary and guidance strategies. If a bullying incident happens, it's essential that school staff work with all the students involved, providing the bully with appropriate discipline and guidance, and providing the victim with emotional support and help with developing coping skills to deal with future incidents.