

The ABCs of Bullying Prevention

By Dr. Kenneth Shore

Dealing with Bullying Incidents

No matter how diligent teachers are in trying to prevent bullying, incidents are likely to occur. If they do, you can take various steps to deal with those incidents and avoid their spinning out of control. Some of those strategies are discussed below.

Know your school's bullying policies. Before deciding how to respond to an incident, be sure to review your school's policies and procedures for dealing with bullying. Those policies might be in the school's code of conduct or in a separate document. If you have trouble finding them, check with the principal.

Take reports of bullying seriously. Follow up on all reports of bullying, even those that appear minor. Bear in mind that an incident that appears small to you could loom large to the student. Make sure to not dismiss the incident with a "boys will be boys" attitude, or tell the victim that he must fight his own battles. Assess the student's degree of distress and factor in your knowledge of his reactions in determining how to respond. Be especially attentive to shy students who come to you.

Act quickly. If you learn that a student is being emotionally or physically harassed, take immediate action to ensure her safety and security. The longer the abuse goes on, the greater the emotional impact on the student. Putting an immediate end to the behavior is important, not only to protect the student but also to send a message to other students that you will not tolerate bullying and will do whatever is necessary to ensure that your classroom is a safe haven.

Try to deal with the problem privately. Whether dealing with the bully or the victim, try to avoid a public airing of the issue. The victim might feel humiliated by having the bullying discussed in front of his peers. The bully might feel the need to "save face" by escalating her aggressive behavior if she's challenged by a teacher in front of her classmates. That could give rise to a public power struggle that easily can spiral out of control.

Inform the principal. That is particularly important if the incident is serious or ongoing. The principal likely will want to contact the parents of both the bully and the victim, as well as take disciplinary action with the bully. He or she also might want to inform other school staff, such as guidance counselors and paraprofessionals involved with the students involved.

Support the victim. Ask the student who was bullied what happened and then listen sympathetically to her response, making sure to convey that you take her concerns seriously and understand her distress. Reassure her that she did the right thing by talking with you and that she is not to blame for the bullying. Emphasize that the bully was the one who behaved inappropriately. Let the bullying victim know that you might need to inform other staff of the incident, but that the school will do its best to ensure the bully-

ing does not happen again. Encourage the child to tell you of future bullying incidents and make sure to respond assertively if she does. If it appears that a child is being bullied in part because she is isolated from her peers, help her connect with classmates.

Help the victim develop coping skills. If time allows, you might want to help a bullying victim develop effective ways of responding to the attacks. In particular, you might want to teach him how to assert himself with the bully without being aggressive. The goal is to help the student project a greater air of confidence without incurring the wrath of the bully. Toward that end, consider role-playing with him, suggesting what he might say or do to deflect the taunting. Often the best response for a student who is being taunted is a brief but direct "I-message," such as "I don't like what you're saying and I want you to stop" -- and then walk away. If he can respond that way, he is less likely to be targeted in the future. Although a victim might be able to defuse bullying with those strategies, it is critical that he understand that he is not responsible for resolving the bullying problem and that he should not hesitate to seek help from an adult again if the suggested strategies don't work.

Try to connect with the bully. You likely will want to discipline bullies in some way. But just as a bully needs discipline, he also needs support and guidance. You might find that a sympathetic, understanding approach elicits kinder, gentler behavior from the student. Try taking the bully aside and talking with him in a non-threatening manner. Listen attentively without condoning his behavior. Try to find out what motivated his behavior. It might be that he wrongly perceived hostility from another student. Or that he was trying to gain status with his peers. Once you can identify what motivated the bullying, try to provide appropriate guidance and emotional support. You might, for example, offer other explanations for the victim's behavior or help the bully figure out how to gain attention in more appropriate ways. Ask him how else he might have responded, while offering some suggestions of your own.

Monitor the situation. A student who has engaged in bullying is likely to do it again. Similarly a student who has been bullied is at risk for being victimized by other students. As a result, it is important for you to pay close attention to students who have been bullied and those who have done the bullying, and ask other staff to do the same. Make sure to check in with the victim periodically to find out if he is experiencing any further bullying. Let both the bully and the victim know that you and other school staff will be monitoring the situation closely. Their awareness of your vigilance will help discourage the bully from tormenting his classmates and provide some comfort to the victim.