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# Youth Bullying Prevention Practice Brief

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## DESCRIPTION OF TOPIC

Bullying is a form of interpersonal violence that impacts everyone involved including youth who bully, youth who are targets of bullying, and bystanders who witness the abuse of others (Juvonen, Wang, & Expinoza, 2010). Bullying is most typically defined as a situation where harm is done, an unfair match exists, and the actions are repeated overtime (Carney, 2008). Bullying behaviors can be physical (e.g., hitting, tripped, shoved), verbal (e.g., name calling, fun being made of them), social/relational (e.g., marginalized and excluded, rumor spreading, being made to do something the target did not want to do), and/or electronic (e.g., cyberbullying through social networking). See <http://www.stopbullying.gov/> for additional information.

In the United States, approximately 15% to 23% of all elementary and 20% to 28% of secondary school students report being bullied within a 6-month to 1-year period (National Center for Education Statistics, 2011 <http://nces.ed.gov/pubs2013/2013329.pdf>). Other research results have shown that 70–80% of students reported being involved in bullying at one time during their school career (Graham, 2011).

## LAW AND POLICY

Currently, 49 of 50 states in the U.S. have passed bullying legislation due to increased public awareness of the long-term consequences associated with this form of interpersonal violence (Nickerson, Cornell, Smith, & Furlong, 2013). There is considerable variation within various state laws regarding specifics of behaviors that represent an act of bullying. For a comprehensive view of all state laws and/or policies, see the interactive map at <http://www.stopbullying.gov/laws/>. The U.S. Department of Education 2011 publication *Analysis of State Bullying Laws and Policies* is a useful document for comprehensive information about state legislation <http://www2.ed.gov/rschstat/eval/bullying/state-bullying-laws/state-bullying-laws.pdf> (Stuart-Cassel, Bell, & Springer, 2011).

Many school districts have responded to their ethical and legal responsibilities to prevent and deter bullying and to create a safe and supportive learning environment. In addition to state law, decisions made by the U.S. Department of Education and outcomes of various legal cases including the U.S. Supreme Court decision *Monroe v. Davis County Board of Education* (526 US. 629, 1999) have provided the perspective that not preventing peer harassment may constitute a violation of the antidiscrimination laws and deprive youth of their right equal access to education (for more detailed information see Office of Civil Rights Dear Colleague Letter <http://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocr/letters/colleague-201010.pdf>).

## RISKS AND CONSEQUENCES

Anyone can be targeted by students who bully; however, research has shown that an overrepresentation of students who are bullied have physical, developmental, intellectual, emotional, and/or sensory disabilities (Rose, Monda-Amaya, & Espelage, 2011), identify as LGBT, and/or are socially isolated (<http://www.stopbullying.gov/at-risk/factors/>). For additional resources on creating a safe environment for youth at risk of being bullied, see <http://www.stopbullying.gov/at-risk/groups/special-needs/index.html> and <http://www.stopbullying.gov/at-risk/groups/lgbt/index.html>. The negative consequences associated with bullying include physical, biological, psychological, emotional, cognitive, learning, and social problems for all involved. Significant consequences of bullying include debilitating anxiety, depression, substance use, health complaints, truancy, and low academic achievement. See <http://www.stopbullying.gov/>

## PREVENTION STRATEGIES

The ultimate goal of bullying prevention programming is to create a positive, safe environment where students feel connected to their school and able to learn without fear of personal safety. Researchers' findings provide valuable information, which can inform prevention efforts (see Nickerson, Cornell, Smith, & Furlong, 2013). Currently, six important bullying prevention recommendations are proposed for North American education policy makers that include recommendations to: 1) assess the prevalence of bullying, 2) develop a schoolwide antibullying policy, 3) provide schoolwide staff training, 4) implement evidence-based prevention programming, 5) build strong leadership support, and 6) use effective disciplinary practices (Nickerson et.al, 2013, p.268).

Bullying occurs within a broad context that includes individual, school, family, and community factors (Swearer, Espelage, Koenig, Berry, Collins, & Lembeck, 2012). A comprehensive sustainable approach (Tofi & Farrington, 2011) - versus a stand-alone, short-term approach - is the suggested framework for addressing bullying prevention in the schools (<http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/bullying.pdf>). A comprehensive prevention program takes into consideration all of the factors listed above and includes student, staff, family and community involvement.

Research provides valuable evidenced-based information for bullying prevention efforts, but practical success requires thorough critical consideration when planning, choosing, and implementing programming in each school setting (see Hazler & Carney, 2012 for a comprehensive discussion of these considerations). Important components of a comprehensive prevention program include: 1) a social-ecological perspective, 2) enhanced psychological identification with others, 3) reduction of social isolation, 4) and ideas that are implemented in five sequential prevention stages. These components will be briefly discussed.

**Social-ecological perspective** - Success in bullying and violence prevention programs comes with the widest diversity of community members being involved in planning and implementing program activities. This diversity of people, cultures, community resources, knowledge, and opinions is needed for developing agreement on common goals and methods, which create the sense of togetherness that promotes effective team implementation efforts.

**Psychological identification with others** – Abusing a person becomes more difficult when you identify with the person's feelings, thoughts, and attitudes, or in other words, you have empathy. Gaining an empathic understanding of others is a major theme in all phases of bullying prevention programs.

**Reduction of isolation of people and ideas** – Incorporating new ideas, actions, and people into prevention efforts is needed to break the cycle of bullying. Choosing alternative actions steps, communicating with others about what is happening, and gaining valuable information that changes understanding all help targets and bystanders gain new perspectives on how to deal with abusers and where sources of support can be found. Abusers are also more likely to change their behaviors when they gain new perspectives about the impact of their actions on others as well as discovering the personal and social benefits of more productive social interactions.

**Five sequential prevention stages** are suggested to develop a sustainable bullying prevention effort that secures a safe and supportive learning environment. These sequential stages include:

1. **Initial awareness building within the school community** – Students and adults in the school, home, and community need to gain the knowledge and empathic sensitivity to bullying as it touches everyone on some level. An awareness of bullying creates the physical energy and emotional motivation to carry out the planning and implementation of successful prevention efforts. There will be wide variations in personal knowledge, experience, and beliefs related to bullying that all need to be heard and integrated into the fabric of the program.
2. **Policy development** – Rules of behavior based on commonly agreed upon values must be turned into reinforcement policies for appropriate actions, enforcement guidelines for inappropriate actions, and policies for assessing outcomes. It is critical that the rules and policies be based on the fullest possible diversity of school community participants and ideas so that everyone will have a strong sense of ownership.

3. **Skill development** – School community members require training and practice in the social skills needed to effectively act on their new information, motivation, and policies around bullying. This is the curriculum-based aspect of prevention that includes both information and practice.
4. **Continuing investment** – Many programs create immediate energy and teach information and skills, but then falter over time once that initial energy dies away. Various ways to keep the investment going through assemblies, written materials, celebration of productive actions, and discussions of the issues are required to maintain the teamwork atmosphere as the climate changes.
5. **Assessment & adjustment** – Those responsible for maintaining the prevention effort (e.g., school counselor, administration, prevention committee) must attend to the impact the curriculum is having within the school as well as other changes in people and the environment in order to keep the efforts relevant. Assessment of program implementation and outcomes on a planned regular basis is what allows school personnel to identify progress, adjust the focus of attention, and revise programmatic efforts to meet the needs of changes in the environment.

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