

Teachers play an important role in the prevention of bullying behavior and in the amelioration of its impact on victims. Teachers are also positioned to help parents understand how bullying can best be addressed.

Of course, any individual teacher will be most effective in addressing bullying if he or she has the support of the administration and works in a district with a coherent policy about bullying. This document offers suggestions for prevention and intervention strategies that can be used by schools as well as by individual educators as they strive to create a positive environment for all students.

### *Addressing Misconceptions about Bullying*

One way that teachers can prevent bullying is by being clear to parents and community members about the best way to deal with bullying. Many people hold mistaken assumptions about bullying that can lead to ineffective intervention strategies.

**MISCONCEPTION: The main cause of bullying is that some kids are just aggressive by nature.** Like all forms of aggression, bullying can occur for a number of reasons, including to gain material reward, to get approval from peers, or to express emotional pain. What is common to all bullying, however, is that it takes place in a situation in which the bully sees aggression as a way to get what he or she wants. If the situation does not allow bullying to be a means to those ends, then bullying is much less likely. For example, when students are taught to speak out against bullying, potential bullies quickly learn that they will not gain the approval they seek through this course of action, and will seek it through other behavior.

**MISCONCEPTION: Victims of bullying bring it on themselves, by being weak.** While teachers are unlikely to endorse this notion, parents of children who are bullying others may believe it to be true, as a way of justifying their children's behavior. Certainly no child deserves to be bullied, nor do children cause others to bully them. There are some characteristics that victims of bullying share, such as social withdrawal, but these similarities are much more likely to be the result of bullying than the cause.

**MISCONCEPTION: BULLYING ISN'T A BIG DEAL.** Bullying can cause serious damage. Victims experience loneliness, low self-esteem, and depression. In extreme cases, victims may be at heightened risk of suicide. Other effects include school avoidance and risk of dropping out, as well as lower levels of academic achievement and

school engagement. Peer victimization is a stressor on an individual's emotional and cognitive resources, which interferes with the ability to adapt to and engage in challenges at school.

**MISCONCEPTION: Bullying isn't that common at my school.** It is easy for bullying to escape notice, especially because victims often do not report being bullied. Indirect forms of aggression such as cyberbullying make it harder to recognize when someone is being victimized. In addition, bullies may choose to conduct physical and verbal attacks in "hot spots" in the school, chosen specifically because supervision is minimal.

**MISCONCEPTION: Bullying is a normal part of growing up.** Parents of children who bully may claim that bullying is normal behavior, or even that it is a beneficial part of growing up (for instance, by teaching children to be "tough"). In some cases it may be claimed that physical aggression is an important part of masculine identity, or that relational aggression is intrinsic to feminine identity. None of these statements are true; neither boys nor girls require the experience of victimizing others in order to develop into functional adults. However, downplaying victimization by referring to it as an expected part of life increases the negative impact on the victims, who often struggle with questions about whether they deserved to be aggressed against.

**MISCONCEPTION: The best way to deal with bullying is to punish the bully.** Bullying does not happen in isolation, and cannot be successfully addressed only by looking at a bully and a victim. The best way to deal with bullying is by creating a climate of inclusion, and by building children's social skills, so that bullying is no longer a useful strategy to achieve goals. While it is important to address bullying directly when it occurs, and to have clear expectations of the consequences for the behavior, harsh punishment may only drive bullying behavior underground. It does not teach appropriate behaviors that can replace the antisocial actions.

## Importance of the Teacher's Response

When dealing with a child who has been bullied, the teacher's reaction is a crucial signal to the child about whether he or she deserved to be victimized. A teacher who listens with empathy, conveys to the child that he or she did not cause someone else's behavior, and follows up to gain a clear understanding of the situation sends an important signal of support. Such support can significantly reduce the negative psychological effects that a victim experiences after an attack.

Teachers can do a great deal to help prevent bullying in their daily classroom interactions with relatively small, but deliberate, actions. Where teachers foster a sense of closeness with students, victims are more likely to disclose bullying incidents and experience less intense negative emotions. In addition, students who feel connected to their school environments are less likely to bully others.

A teacher who creates a positive social climate for students by teaching and modeling skills in negotiation and conflict resolution, discouraging cliques and ostracism, and fostering respectful interaction among class members is creating the optimal climate for reduced risk of bullying. Where students have a strong sense of identity as a member of the school community and are encouraged to speak up to defend those who are different or alone, bullying is much less frequent.

## Creating a Civil Environment

Well-enforced antibullying rules and peer-reporting systems, as well as programs designed to support students dealing with bullying or victimization, are valuable tools for schools, and can be considered the first layer of bullying prevention. However, such policies often focus on what not to do, and as such are a suppression strategy rather than an intervention to promote prosocial behavior.

In addition to having a set of clear policies in place, a school will see beneficial effects when it allows students to engage in discussions about the consequences of bullying. As part of these discussions, there are four specific steps that teachers can ask students to take:

**SIGN UP.** Teachers can ask students to make a pledge that they will refrain from bullying others. This step may seem too simple to be effective, and indeed it is not the case that signing a no-bullying pledge will cause all bullying to stop. However, research shows that

a public commitment to a specific behavioral change increases compliance with the new behavior, and making a communal pledge also reinforces the idea of a shared identity that is important to a civil school climate.

**STAND UP.** The role of bystanders in a bullying situation is powerful, yet frequently overlooked. A student who speaks out, even saying something relatively mild such as "That's not funny" or "Leave her alone," conveys a sense of social disapproval to a bully that can break off an attack. It also signals to the victim that he or she is not alone, and that others recognize that what is happening is wrong. Such support can be a powerful aid to the victim.

**SPEAK UP.** Teachers can instruct children to report any bullying they witness twice, once to a staff member and once to their parents or other adults outside the school. Victims of bullying often do not report what is happening, limiting the opportunities for adults to provide assistance. By reminding children to speak up twice, there is more opportunity for adults to notice patterns and to intervene.

Teachers can also take the opportunity to praise the child who speaks up for his or her role in stopping negative behavior. Children and adolescents often falsely believe that they are the only ones bothered by what they witness, and may therefore find it difficult to speak up in the victim's defense. Allowing children and teens to talk about the harm caused by bullying, and to mentally rehearse speaking out, may serve to change their assumptions about what "everybody else" believes. Praising a child who shows the courage to speak up in defense of someone else increases the likelihood that that child, as well as others who observe the praise, will speak up in the future.

**OPEN UP.** A culture of social exclusion within a school is a major risk factor for bullying. When students believe they are permitted, or even tacitly encouraged by community norms, to ostracize those who are different from themselves, bullying increases. Under these circumstances, bullies find it easier to think of victims as less than human, or as deserving to be humiliated. Teachers can encourage students to develop empathy and understanding for people of different backgrounds, appearances, abilities, and beliefs. More than that, teachers can encourage students to take small steps to include others in their daily activities. Teacher praise is a powerful reward for students, especially in the younger grades. So when teachers praise a student who reaches out to someone who is on the margins of the classroom's social world, that teacher is helping all students to build a social climate that is safe, nurturing, and supportive of learning.

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The Alverno College Research Center for Women and Girls takes scholarly research out of the world of academia and into the real world where it can inspire, transform, and support initiatives that improve the lives of women and girls in Wisconsin and beyond. For the complete document *Bullying: A Prevention Toolkit*, with more extensive summaries of current research, resources for further reading, and action items for parents, teachers, and community members, please visit [Alverno.edu/research](http://Alverno.edu/research).