

Bullying is often mistakenly perceived as only a problem between two individuals, but in reality it is a broader issue; it is rooted in social values that allow or even promote ostracism and victimization. Community organizations are well positioned to spearhead social change that can reduce this damaging behavior by addressing the underlying causes. The best ways to deal with bullying are to create a climate of inclusion and to promote the learning of appropriate social skills, so that positive behavior can emerge.

How to Reduce the Risk of Bullying

Waiting until one person is victimizing another, and then trying to intervene, is an inefficient way to deal with bullying behavior. Instead, community organizations can reduce the risk of bullying by conveying what is and what is not acceptable behavior. The most effective way to convey such measures is to provide positive behavioral alternatives, in addition to explaining the harm of undesired behavior.

PROMOTE A POSITIVE AND INCLUSIVE IDENTITY. Social exclusion is a major risk factor for bullying. When popular groups can isolate others who are different from themselves, the tendency is strong to see those others as less than human or as deserving to be humiliated. It is then much easier for potential bullies to inflict pain. Building an inclusive identity, through activities and accomplishments, reduces the risk of isolation as people get to know one another and recognize what they have in common.

PROMOTE PROSOCIAL BEHAVIOR ON BEHALF OF OTHERS. Modern culture and media are full of examples of people who gossip, condemn, and insult others in the name of entertainment. Fewer examples exist of people who speak out for the less fortunate or on behalf of those different from themselves. Community organizations can raise awareness of people who model prosocial behavior and create opportunities for community members to follow that model. The experience of advocating on behalf of someone else can create changes in self-concept, causing individuals to start to think of themselves as the kind of people who stand up for those who need help. And such changes in self-concept can lead to long-term changes in behavior.

DISCUSS BULLYING, AND ITS CONSEQUENCES, DIRECTLY. Bullying can cause serious damage, but not all members of society are aware of this fact. 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. Some people who bully others, or who have not learned about the harm that bullying can inflict, may dismiss bullying as a minor issue. But dismissing the harm done reduces the incentive to take positive action to reduce bullying, and can also result in blaming the victims for their own suffering. Community organizations that clearly convey the harm that bullying does can increase the motivation of members of society to take action.

BREAK THE ILLUSION THAT OTHERS AREN'T BOTHERED. People who observe bullying, especially children and adolescents, often falsely believe that they are the only ones bothered by what they witness. They may therefore find it difficult to speak up in the victim's defense. Allowing community members to talk about the harm caused by bullying, and to mentally rehearse speaking out, increases the likelihood that an observer will be able to act in a way that reflects his or her true moral values.

SUPPORT PROACTIVE POLICIES AND LAWS. It is important for individual organizations, such as schools, to address bullying directly when it occurs and to have clear expectations of the consequences for the behavior. However, policies focusing on punishment for bullies, especially "zero tolerance" policies, are not the most effective way to deal with the problem. Harsh punishment may only drive bullying behavior underground. It does not teach appropriate behaviors that can replace the antisocial actions. Community organizations, particularly those that partner with schools, can advocate for proactive policies that work to build character and improve social skills.

HELP EDUCATE PARENTS. 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. By initiating conversations with the public, community organizations may find it easier to convey this message to parents than do teachers and administrators, who may be forced to have the discussion in a potentially confrontational situation with parents.

TEACH CONFLICT RESOLUTION AND NEGOTIATION SKILLS. Building an inclusive identity for a community clearly does not mean that all people will get along or that all will want the same goals. Bullying and intimidation are tactics that individuals may rely on when they have no other skills in their behavioral repertoire to express frustration with group processes. Teaching skills (overtly, or subtly by example) such as cooperative problem solving, empathic listening, emotion management, and principled negotiation can provide these individuals with important tools to get what they want in a way that benefits them and those around them.

PROVIDE OPPORTUNITIES FOR CHILDREN TO MEET IMPORTANT NEEDS. 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 where the bully sees aggression as a way to get what he or she wants. Community organizations already work to address these needs, in ways that other segments of society cannot or do not. In this way, the work of community organizations is already a strong contributor to the fight against bullying behavior.

Creating a Civil Environment

Changing the social climate is the first and most important step in preventing bullying. It is also important to equip members of your group, and members of the community at large, with the tools to intervene in an active bullying situation. There are four steps that you can teach to members of the public to continue to reduce bullying incidents, and to reduce the impact of those incidents that do occur.

SIGN UP. Ask members of your own group to pledge not to bully others, and let them lead efforts to collect such promises from other community members. 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 reducing aggression. In addition, according to research, as an individual asks others to promise to refrain from bullying, that person's own commitment to the pledge deepens, and long-term behavior change is more likely.

STAND UP. Your group members can also promise to stand up for someone who is being bullied, or when they hear exclusionary language. Simple statements such as "That's not funny" or "Please don't use that language around me" don't require confrontation. But such statements are effective in countering the bully's assumption that the bystanders find the action acceptable, and have been shown to break off aggressive behavior.

SPEAK UP. Victims of bullying do not always report when they have been attacked, so training community members to help them with reporting can assist in remedying the situation. Teach children to report any bullying they witness twice, once to an authority present at the scene (such as a teacher) and once to their parents or other adults outside the school. Adults can make sure appropriate authorities are alerted and can also check in with the victim. A small gesture, such as asking if the victim is okay or expressing disagreement with the bully's actions, can help signal social support, which has been shown to decrease the negative aftereffects of the attack.

Adults can increase the impact of speaking up by praising the child who takes action to help others. 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. Community organizations can reinforce the importance of empathy and understanding for people of different backgrounds, appearances, abilities, and beliefs. More than that, group leaders can encourage members to take small steps to include others in their daily activities. As members of an organization come to understand how much exclusion and bullying hurt, and how their own small actions can have a big impact, they have the power to transform the social world around them into a supportive and nurturing environment.

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.