



## Bullying—Not Just a Kid Thing

From “Students are just tattling” to “Boys will be boys,” myths about bullying abound.

*Doug Cooper and Jennie L. Snell*

*Bullying.* The very word conjures up bad memories for many adults. Whether they were the target of bullying, used bullying behaviors themselves, or witnessed bullying toward others, many adults vividly recall incidents that happened 10, 20, or even 40 years ago. Perhaps because of these powerful memories, caring educators want their schools to be safe, respectful, and bully-free. They are not alone.

In the wake of school shootings and lawsuits brought against schools by victims of bullying, 11 state legislatures—California, Colorado, Georgia, Louisiana, Minnesota, Nevada, New Hampshire, Oklahoma, Oregon, Vermont, and Washington—have mandated that schools take active steps to reduce bullying. Although specific actions related to these mandates vary by state, many schools are finding that the most effective approach to bullying prevention is one that is inclusive of school staff, parents, students, and the community. Such approaches must also be comprehensive, with aligned policies and a research-based student learning component.

Since the late 1970s, Committee for Children, a nonprofit organization dedicated to helping schools address students' social and emotional development, has been conducting research and developing programs for educators, families, and communities to prevent child abuse, youth violence, and bullying (see [www.cfchildren.org](http://www.cfchildren.org)). Committee for Children's researchers, program developers, and implementation specialists have learned from their work with many school districts to execute the early steps necessary for building a strong foundation to prevent bullying.

### Uncovering Myths and Misconceptions

Bullying is so closely linked to childhood that it can easily be thought of as simply a child's problem. It is not. Adults play a major role depending on whether they ignore or work to prevent bullying. People who bully take advantage of an imbalance of power, such as greater physical size, higher status, or support of a peer group. Their bullying may take the form of face-to-face attacks with physical aggression, threats, teasing about perceived sexual orientation, or telling someone in a mean way that he or she can't play. Bullies often use behind-the-back behaviors, such as starting and spreading malicious rumors, writing hurtful graffiti, or encouraging others to exclude a particular child. Often, adults fail to take active steps to address the problem of bullying because they have the following misconceptions.

*Everyone knows what bullying is.* Bullying can often be difficult to distinguish from normal conflict and rough play. A study of the ability of lunchtime supervisors to distinguish students'



March 2003

play fighting, or “rough-and-tumble” play, from true aggression found that the adult supervisors were more likely to mistake aggression for play rather than the other way around (Boulton, 1996). In fact, they made errors in one out of four episodes. Adults need help recognizing bullying.

*Boys will be boys.* Many people perceive bullying as physical aggression—hitting, poking, or pushing—committed by boys. Bullying, however, is not limited to physical aggression or boys. Girls engage in bullying behaviors as much as boys do (Craig, Pepler, & Atlas, 2000). Some studies show that girls engage in more subtle forms of bullying, such as malicious gossip and social exclusion (Crick & Grotpeter, 1995). Other studies show that both boys and girls engage in all forms of bullying behavior.

*Only a small number of children are affected.* Just about every student in a school can be affected by and suffer from the long-term effects of bullying. By conservative estimates, 10 percent of school students are chronic targets of bullying, although the number may be higher (Perry, Kusel, & Perry, 1988). In addition, a school climate and culture of fear can affect more than just the students who are victims. Bullying often occurs away from adults, but students frequently witness bullying events (Hawkins, Pepler, & Craig, 2001). As bystanders, students are confused about what to do, and they fear becoming the next target.

*Adults are already doing all they need to do.* This misconception is one of the most challenging to overcome. First, adults might not know about bullying incidents. Many students who are targets of bullying do not tell adults. Second, students don't believe that adults will intervene even when they do report bullying. Playground observations of bullying support students' perceptions that adults rarely intervene (Craig et al., 2000). But when asked, teachers believe that they often intervene to stop bullying. Many reasons may exist for this mismatch between students' and adults' perceptions, such as adults not seeing the bullying, students not reporting it, or students not being aware of the follow-through actions that adults take after students report it. Whatever the reasons, it's clear that students believe that they need more help from adults than they are getting.

*Students are just tattling.* Some adults dismiss students' reports of bullying as tattling. This perpetuates students' beliefs that adults don't take reports of bullying seriously. Students and adults need to recognize and understand the difference between tattling (trying to get someone into trouble) and reporting (keeping someone safe). To counteract this misconception, adults need to be committed to listening attentively when students report bullying. Adults should gather information, take action to provide safety and assurance, and provide timely follow-up, such as checking in with the student to see whether the bullying has stopped.

## **Developing and Implementing Strategies**

Uncovering bullying myths is an important first step. The next step is to develop and implement prevention strategies. Just as schools are familiar with installing smoke alarms, conducting fire drills, or developing earthquake and tornado preparedness procedures, schools should think through how to prevent bullying (Snell, MacKenzie, & Frey, 2002). Research shows that adults can reduce bullying among students by taking an active role in creating and implementing prevention techniques (Olweus, 1993). Even without an extensive study of the phenomenon, school staff members can ask what they can do *before* they have a bullying problem—or before it grows.

Because bullying has a hidden nature, school staff members should begin their bullying prevention efforts by examining less-structured areas of their school, such as playgrounds and hallways, to improve student behavior through supervision and established guidelines.

## **Make Playgrounds and Hallways Safe**

Recess provides students with rich opportunities for peer interaction and social skill development; recess play may even improve some students' ability to concentrate in the classroom (Pellegrini, 1995). However, students' reports and research observations show that bullying often occurs on the playground. Bullying also occurs in school hallways, on school buses, and in the cafeteria, because students interact informally in these locations, often with little supervision (Astor, Meyer, & Pitner, 2001). With bullying prevention in mind, adults should examine and make adjustments to adult supervision, established procedures, and guidelines for student behavior on playgrounds and in other less-structured environments.

*Improve supervision.* Although increasing supervision typically costs money, some low- or no-cost strategies make supervision more effective. For instance, provide training in "active supervision" for playground monitors and other staff who circulate through assigned areas. Give monitors a means of communicating, such as hand-held radios, to facilitate coordination across large spaces. Maintain an adequate adult-to-student supervision ratio. Encourage all school staff members to spend some time on the playground at recess to observe student behavior in an unstructured setting, to increase their awareness of common recess problems, and to provide support for the recess supervisors' authority.

Woodway Elementary in Edmonds, Washington, for example, provided training for all of the school's stakeholders, including classroom teachers, custodians, playground supervisors, and office staff. The principal also hosted parent training in supervising play as part of the school's curriculum night. At Chautauqua Elementary in Vashon Island, Washington, bus drivers received extra training and helped develop behavioral expectations for riding on the bus.

Standing at the classroom doorway when students are changing classes provides hallway supervision and allows a teacher to greet students by name as they enter the classroom. Staff can convey tremendous caring by being present in the hallway and engaging in brief, informal conversations during transitions.

*Develop specific routines.* Establish clear guidelines for behavior and implement a schoolwide system for tracking, handling, and communicating about problems and disciplinary infractions. Teach rules to new students so that they learn the expectations and skills necessary for success.

To improve student behavior at recess, for example, teach and practice with students the transition routines for the beginning and end of recess. Teach common playground games to students in physical education class at the beginning of the school year and as a refresher in the spring. Provide sufficient play equipment for students in all grade levels. Assign new students "recess buddies" to help them make friends. For students who are less interested in traditional playground games, offer a range of activities, such as drawing or reading in a designated quiet area.

*Incorporate social-emotional learning.* Balancing structured and unstructured playtime at recess provides students with the opportunity to practice and use their prosocial skills. Teach students ways to play fairly, form friendships, join group activities, include others, show respect, and manage emotions. Define each of these skill areas by helping students understand what each is, what each isn't, and what each looks like in action on the playground. Intervene and coach students when their behavior is inappropriate.

## **Implement a School Discipline Policy**

Another way of getting started in bullying prevention is to write an anti-bullying policy that links bullying to the school's discipline policy. An effective written policy

- Declares the school's commitment to creating a safe, caring, and respectful learning environment for all students.
- Gives a clear definition of bullying and concrete examples of specific bullying behaviors.
- States consequences of bullying in the context of a school's discipline code.
- Provides students, parents, and school personnel with a common, concrete framework for recognizing and responding to bullying.

The most effective policies include input from different groups within the school community, such as students, teachers, playground monitors, and parents. Effective policies use clear, simple language to ensure that all students, parents, and staff understand them. Place a copy in the school handbook and in the information packets provided to all students and their families, and sustain the anti-bullying message throughout the school year.

Developing a policy can be a labor-intensive process, but the result is greater personal investment in the school community by staff, students, and parents (Rigby, 1996).

### **Learn More About Bullying**

Learning more about bullying can help adults improve their ability to recognize bullying and to take action when it occurs. A school doesn't need to complete an extensive study of bullying before beginning to make school improvements, but it can simultaneously learn about bullying while taking preventive steps.

Thinking of bullying as a kid thing is a mistake. Students would solve the problem of bullying on their own if they had the skills, knowledge, and power to do so. But they don't have the power to correct the imbalance of power that characterizes bullying. Nor do they have the power to establish a strong foundation of bullying prevention in their school. They need the help of the adults in a school community.

Be vigilant and find ways for all the adult members of the school to work together to support one another's efforts in bullying prevention. Take a whole-school approach and work proactively both behind the scenes and in view of students to build a school climate and culture in which all members—students and adults—feel safe, respected, and included.

### **References**

- Astor, R. A., Meyer, H. A., & Pitner, R. O. (2001). Elementary and middle school students' perceptions of violence-prone school subcontexts. *Elementary School Journal, 101*, 511–528.
- Boulton, M. J. (1996). Lunchtime supervisors' attitudes towards playful fighting, and ability to differentiate between playful and aggressive fighting: An intervention study. *British Journal of Educational Psychology, 66*, 367–381.
- Craig, W. M., Pepler, D. J., & Atlas, R. (2000). Observations of bullying in the playground and in the classroom. *School Psychology International, 21*, 22–36.
- Crick, N. R., & Grotpeter, J. K. (1995). Relational aggression, gender, and social-psychological adjustment. *Child Development, 66*, 710–722.
- Hawkins, D. C., Pepler, D. J., & Craig, W. M. (2001). Naturalistic observations of peer interventions in bullying. *Social Development, 10*, 512–527.
- Olweus, D. (1993). *Bullying at school*. Cambridge, MA: Blackwell.
- Pellegrini, A. D. (1995). *School recess and playground behavior: Educational and*

*developmental roles*. Albany, NY: SUNY Press.

Perry, D. G., Kusel, S. J., & Perry, L. C. (1988). Victims of peer aggression. *Developmental Psychology*, 24, 807–814.

Rigby, K. (1996). *Bullying in schools and what to do about it*. London: Jessica Kingsley.

Snell, J. L., MacKenzie, E., & Frey, K. (2002). Bullying prevention in elementary schools: The importance of adult leadership, peer group support, and student social-emotional skills. In H. Walker & M. Shinn (Eds.), *Interventions for academic and behavior problems II: Preventive and remedial approaches* (pp. 351–372). Bethesda, MD: National Association of School Psychologists.

---

**Doug Cooper** ([dcooper@cfchildren.org](mailto:dcooper@cfchildren.org)) is a program developer and **Jennie L. Snell** ([jsnell@cfchildren.org](mailto:jsnell@cfchildren.org)) is a child psychologist and researcher at Committee for Children, 568 1st Ave. South, Ste. 600, Seattle, WA 98104. Both helped create *Steps to Respect: A Bullying Prevention Program*.

Copyright © 2003 by ASCD

---

[Contact Us](#) | [Copyright Information](#) | [Privacy Policy](#) | [Terms of Use](#)

© 2009 ASCD