

Educator Bully Prevention Guidelines

BullyBust.org

by: Jonathan Cohen, President of the National School Climate Center (NSCC)

An Overview:

Bully-victim-witness behavior takes place within the larger context of the norms, goals, values, interpersonal relationships, teaching, learning, leadership practices that shape the character and quality of school life or what is often referred to as school climate.

A sustainable positive school climate is the foundation for learning and positive youth development and includes:

- **Norms**, values, and expectations that support people feeling socially, emotionally, and physically safe.
- **People** who are engaged and respected; the school community working together to develop, live, and contribute to a shared school vision.
- **Educators** who model and nurture attitudes that emphasize the benefits and satisfaction gained from learning.
- **A school** community that contributes to the operations of the school and the care of the physical environment.

Most bully prevention efforts are not helpful because they are short term, fragmented and focus only on the bully and/or the victim. In addition, too often adults in school communities are bullies. Adult bullying is rarely talked about. When students see adults bullying other adults and/or students, it powerfully undermines the schools bully prevention efforts. **Effective bully prevention efforts need to be an ongoing effort** that involves everyone in the community. In fact, everyone in the community is involved in the sense that we are all witnesses to bully-victim behavior. When we – directly or indirectly – are a witness to bully-victim behavior adults and students make a conscious or unrecognized decision to be a bystander or an upstander. Bystanders are people who either “do nothing” or even, actively encourage the bully. In either case, they collude with and support bullying and victimization. On the other hand students and adults alike can make a decision to be an upstander who – directly or indirectly – says “no” to bully-victim behavior.

Bully-victim behavior is a serious public health problem. Research from the Health Resources and Services Administration’s (HRSA) National Bullying Campaign shows that **up to 25%** of U.S. students are bullied each year. As many as 160,000 may stay home from school on any given day because they are afraid of being bullied. The growing trend of **cyber bullying** penetrates the home via computers and cellular phones. At least **one out of three** adolescents report being seriously threatened online, and **60% of teens** say they have participated in online bullying. A growing body of research has underscored that bully-victim behavior is toxic;

it undermines **K-12** students' capacity to learn and develop in healthy ways. In fact, when students bully and/or are victimized repeatedly, it dramatically increases the likelihood that they will develop significant psychosocial problems over time. And, there is recent research that has shown that witnesses to bully-victim behavior are adversely affected as well.

Cyberbullying certainly presents new and challenging issues for educators to understand and address. Unlike "person to person" bully-victim behavior, Cyberbullying is often more difficult to see and hear about. And, even when school community members learn about Cyberbullying, it may be difficult to know who the bully is.

Effective bully prevention efforts necessarily involve shaping norms, expectations and our beliefs about what is acceptable behavior. Prior to the 1980's most educators considered behavior – "good" or "bad" – that occurred outside of school to be the responsibility of parents and the student. If a student "misbehaved" after school hours, it was not the school's responsibility. Many educational leaders continue to adopt this framework.

One of the most important preventative steps that educators can take is to support meaningful discussions and decision-making about what is "acceptable behavior" for members – students and adults – of your school community.

School leaders – educators, parent and student leaders – can take a series of steps that we will outline below that supports socially responsible upstander behavior as a norm and expectation. When we help children and adolescents to understand and believe that bullying is toxic and that we all have a responsibility to help others, we are not only supporting student learning and positive youth development. We are supporting the very foundation of democracy.

We will now outline a series of guiding principles that support effective bully prevention and pro-upstander efforts in K-12 school communities¹ before a bully-victim incident, at the moment or right after a moment of bully-victim behavior; and, after a bully-victim incident.

• Before an incident

- Preparing for bully-victim behavior is one of the most critical steps that school leaders need to take to prevent bully-victim-bystander behavior. Just as we can and need to prepare for physically dangerous moments, schools can and need to prepare for socially and emotionally dangerous moments, like bully-victim behavior. Implementing a comprehensive bully prevention and pro-upstander effort involves six key steps:

1) Developing a shared vision about what kind of school community do we want our community to be?

¹ These guidelines grow out of the National School Climate Center's (formerly, the Center for Social and Emotional Education) work with schools over the past decade as well as *Making Your School Safe: Strategies to Protect Children and Promote Learning* (by J. Devine & J. Cohen, Teachers College Press, 2007), *Breaking the Bully-Victim-Bystander Cycle Tool Kit: Creating a Climate of Safety and Social Responsibility* (by W. Eyman & J. Cohen, National School Climate Center, 2009) and the *BullyBust* prevention awareness campaign. Additional support materials, activities, and resources are available at: www.schoolclimate.org/bullybust

What is your vision – as a student, a parent or guardian and also as a member of the school staff – of an “ideal school”? When school leaders have meaningful conversations with members of the community about this basic question, what typically emerges is that students and adults alike give voice to wanting and needing to feel safe (socially, emotionally and intellectually as well as physically), supported, engaged and helpfully challenged. This creates an important foundation to begin considering “where are we now?” and “where do we need to do to narrow the gap between our vision and current reality?”

When students and adults consider what kind of school they want theirs to be, they always give voice to wanting and needing school to be a place where people feel safe. Feeling safe is a basic human need. Establishing a shared vision about what people need and want creates the foundation for comprehensive bully prevention and pro-upstander efforts.

Developing a shared understanding and definitions for bully-victim-witness behavior is another important initial step in effective bully prevention/pro-upstander efforts. It is important that all members of the school community understand and appreciate that there is virtually never a bully and a victim without a witness: on and off line. Being clear about what we mean by bullying behavior helps educators – and students and parents/guardians – to differentiate this from teasing and normative “in-out group” behavior.

Scholars and researchers usually use the following definitions:

Bully: A person or group that uses superior physical, social, intellectual or psychological power to hurt, threaten or intimidate another person or group of people. There are many forms of bullying: Physical bullying - Poking, pushing, hitting, kicking; Verbal bullying - Yelling, teasing name-calling, insulting, threatening to harm; Indirect bullying - Ignoring, excluding, spreading rumors, telling lies, getting others to hurt someone; and, Cyber bullying - Sending or posting hurtful, embarrassing, or threatening text or images electronically.

Victim: The person or group that is the recipient of the bully’s behavior.

Upstander: A person who decides to **act** to interrupt bullying. Upstanders can directly talk to and address the bully or go to tell someone else (e.g. a teacher).

Bystanders: The person or group that observes or hears about bully’s behavior. There are two subgroups of bystanders:

1. **Active Bystanders** support the bully with words, gestures and actions.
2. **Passive Bystanders** support the bully by doing nothing to interrupt the bullying.

Developing a shared vision about what kind of school you want yours to be begins to mobilize the whole school community to learn and work together. It really does take the “whole village” to protect children and promote social, emotional and civic as well as intellectual learning. This first step creates the foundation for safety and learning.

For educators another important aspect of thinking about what kind of school they want theirs to be includes considering what the consequences for bullying behavior should be before there is an incident. There are several reasons why this is important. First, too often educators react in punitive ways to bully behavior and we forget that bullying is a signal that the student is troubled. In given situations, very negative consequences –

punishment – may be appropriate. But, most students who bully are signaling that they are in trouble and in need support and help. Second, Cyberbullying may result in legal child pornography proceedings. Internet child pornography laws were developed to protect children from adult pedophiles. When an adolescent sends a pornography image to a peer it may be foolish or even, downright mean but it is not breaking the spirit of the child pornography laws as they were intended. This is one of the many complicated issues that Cyberbullying raises. It is only helpful – in fact, terribly helpful – for school leaders to consider these issues and how they believe it is most appropriate to respond before an incident.

2) Assessment:

Assessment helps your team to learn about current bully-victim-witness behavior. More often than not, school communities do not fully appreciate how serious a problem bully-victim-bystander behavior is. The most common school climate finding that has emerged from the National School Climate Center’s school climate assessment work with thousands of schools is that the adults (school personnel and parents/guardians) believe that bullying is a mild to moderately severe problem. But, in most school’s students report that this is a severe problem!

Measuring school climate is an important step for all school communities to consider. When we use a valid, reliable and comprehensive tool like the *Comprehensive School Climate Inventory* (CSCI) (<http://schoolclimate.org/programs/csci.php>) we are not only establishing a ‘baseline’ that can help us understand the impact of our efforts, but we are harvesting data that can be used to powerfully promote student, parent/guardian and school personnel learning and engagement.

Remember, what is measured is what counts! When we measure school climate, we are recognizing the essential social, emotional, ethical and civic as well as intellectual dimensions of student experience and our school improvement efforts.

We recommend that schools begin with a comprehensive school climate assessment, like the *Comprehensive School Climate Inventory*, that recognizes student, parent/guardian and school personnel ‘voice’ as well as the four major areas of school climate: safety, relationships, teaching and learning and the environment. Although safety is a fundamentally important need, how safe people feel necessarily overlaps with and is affected by the nature of our relationships and the process of learning and teaching. We have discovered that it is most useful for school leaders and communities to initially develop a comprehensive understanding of your schools strengths and needs. To the extent that bully-victim-passive bystander behavior is an issue and/or other safety related problems emerge as a problem, further assessment may be helpful. For example, violence audits that identify “hot spots” or areas and times of bully-victim behavior can help pinpoint needs for specific interventions, like making teachers visible in the hallways when students change class or addressing unsupervised time in bathrooms and the school yard.

Before beginning systematic assessment, it is useful to think about how you will understand the findings and then how you will “dig deeper” and create an action plan that becomes a formal part of the school’s improvement plans. For detailed information, guidelines and tools, contact our Center to learn about the *School Climate Implementation Road Map* (www.schoolclimate.org/climate/roadmap.php).

3) Leadership

Each Principal will decide how he or she wants to communicate that a sustained, comprehensive bully prevention/pro-upstander effort will become an important component of school life: to effectively prevent toxic bully–victim behavior and to promote essential skills, knowledge and dispositions that provide the foundation for social responsibility. What is essential is that this message be clearly and authentically communicated to the whole school community. Naturally, this needs to include Cyberbullying as well as ‘face to face’ bully-victim behavior.

Adults in the school are models for the types of behaviors they expect to see in students. Therefore, adults must first address any bullying issues at their level and become positive “living examples” of upstander behavior before they can implement an effective bully prevention effort for students.

4) Classroom and Advisories

Meaningful learning and teaching with students occurs in small groups (classrooms and Advisories) as well as one-on-one relationships. Classroom and Advisories are the optimal settings to support students developing a shared understanding and vision about bully-victim-witness behavior and then develop and practice Upstander-related skills.

For elementary and middle school students, it is helpful to introduce the notion that students can and need to practice upstander behavior for 5 to 10 minutes several times a week. For example, the teacher can ask for someone to talk about a bully-victim incident that they have seen in recent days, without mentioning anyone’s name. The teacher asks the student to become a ‘director’ of a short enactment: (i) the moment is enacted (role plays); and, (ii) then the teacher asks the students to ‘rewind’ and show/demonstrate how they would be Upstanders who (directly or indirectly) respond to the bully-victim behavior. It is important that the teacher normalize the fact that there is a range of reasons why students may not have been an upstander (e.g., they were too scared or too rushed and/or did not know what to say in the moment). Depending on how the first role-play evolved, the teacher may decide to invite the student or students to “start again and show what you wished you would have done or how you might do it differently next time?”

There are four major and overlapping ways that teachers can be intentional and helpful social, emotional, ethical and civic teachers in general and bully prevention/pro-upstander teachers/learners in particular:

1. **Being a living example** of upstander behavior in particular and a thoughtful adult social, emotional, ethical and civic learner in general. This is a foundational dimension of social, emotional and civic education: our behavior. It is well known that children and adolescents listen to our actions more than our words. As an educator and/or a parent/guardian, what does your behavior “teach”? What are the core social, emotional, ethical and civic lessons that you want to teach?
2. **Classroom Management:**

How we manage classrooms, hallways, the cafeteria, buses, playgrounds and our neighborhood sends very powerful messages to students. To what extent do we use punishment and/or bullying and/or a restorative justice model of classroom management? Student discipline and motivation are perhaps the greatest concern for secondary classroom teachers. Too often teachers feel that they are “putting out a series of fires” or reacting to behavioral problems and are not able to teach and support student learning. Too often we have only learned to administer punitive forms of discipline. Over time, punitive forms of discipline do not reduce misbehavior but instead tend to breed resentment and further

misbehavior. Restorative justice focuses on relationships and the needs of the victims. It includes the victim, the offender and the community. And, it recognizes the harm done to the community and focuses on restoring relationships (e.g., social, emotional and civic learning).

3. **Explicit social, emotional and civic curriculum:**

There are **two ways** that teachers can infuse explicit social, emotional and civic learning into the curriculum:

(1) using evidence-based curricular programs

(2) infusing social, emotional and civic learning into existing curriculum and Advisory activities

- Using evidence based curricular programs: There are a range of evidence-based programs that grow out of character education, social-emotional learning and risk prevention/health promotion efforts that teachers can elect to use. For a listing of programs that have been evaluated by a range of federal and other organizations see: www.schoolclimate.org/guidelines/teachingandlearning.php.
- Infusing social, emotional and civic learning into existing curriculum and Advisory activities. There are a range of ways that language arts, social studies, history as well as physical education teachers can infuse bully-victim- witness themes into their learning objectives and learning activities. To access more bully-prevention activities and curricula, visit: www.bullybust.org and click on the “Partner School Program.”

4. Pedagogy: There are a range of pedagogic methods that powerfully promote social, emotional and civic learning including cooperative learning, service learning, conflict resolution/mediation, and moral dilemma discussions.

(For more detailed guidelines about classroom and Advisory based activities, see: www.schoolclimate.org/guidelines.)

5) *Individual Efforts*

Students who chronically fall into the role of bully and/or victim are signaling that they are “stuck” and in need of understanding, support and/or intervention. Bullying is unacceptable behavior. However, this does not mean that the student is ‘bad’; this behavior signals that the student is feeling inadequate. Bullying behavior is a signal that the person is not feeling adequate and does not have more helpful ways of coping with these feelings.

Educators, parents/guardians, and mental health professionals need to help one another for two reasons:

(1) **recognize** students who seem to chronically fall into the role of bully and/or victim and

(2) **develop** a psycho-educational and/or psychotherapeutic plan that will address these problems.

Typically, chronic bully-victim behavior is more than a classroom teacher can and should address alone. Mental health assistance is needed. It is important for school, family, and mental health leaders to consider the following essential questions:

- What systems are in place that support educators, parents/guardians, and mental health professionals in communicating with one another about students who seem to be, or are, becoming a chronic bully and/or victim?
- When a student is identified as possibly being a chronic bully and/or victim, how do educators, parents/guardians, and mental health professionals learn together about the student (e.g., their history, current patterns at home, with peers and at school) and possible interventions that will be helpful?
- How can and should we include the student in this process in ways that will foster learning and healthy development?
- To what extent has the school developed policies and practices that support a comprehensive system to address barriers to learning and teaching and reengage students who have become disengaged?

6) Strengthening School-Community Partnerships:

It really does take the “whole village” to raise healthy children. There are a range of ways that effective bully prevention and pro-upstander efforts can and need to extend to families and community leaders.

Parents and guardians need to understand and, hopefully support the bully prevention/pro-upstander efforts described above. This is often challenging. There are range of reasons why school-family partnerships flounder. Many parents or guardians are single parents who have more than one job. Language barriers are another common challenge. And, some school leaders are less rather than more welcoming. However, it is well known that if teachers are communicating one set of “lessons” or goals and parents another, children will often listen to their parents. Parents can access specific tips to address bullying and help promote upstander behavior at: www.bullybust.org.

Comprehensive bully prevention/pro-upstander efforts can and need to extend beyond families to the larger community. Leaders from the faith-based, business, political, media and health and mental health sectors of the community as well as law enforcement staff are all essential partners to these efforts.

Summary:

It is essential that school leaders develop comprehensive bully prevention/pro-upstander efforts before there is a bully-victim problem. Most schools have not done this. And, then when there is problem educators are only reacting and “putting out fires”. In fact, this is the norm today. Most school communities label bullying as “bad” and have not developed proactive guidelines and strategies that support everyone in the community thinking about how they can and need to be an upstander as well as to identify – and help rather than punish – students who chronically “fall in the role” of bully and/or victim.

Students, for example can make a pledge to be upstanders (www.schoolclimate.org/BullyBust/) and join a growing group of K-12 student leaders from across the country to stand up to bully-victim behavior. Educators and parents can and need to consider what kind of children/students they want their sons, daughters and/or students to be when they graduate from high school. When adults are “living examples” of upstander

behavior they are powerfully helping to protect students and promote learning.

At the moment: what do we do?

- Stop the bully-victim behavior.
- Recognizing and supporting the victim, the bully and witnesses right after an incident: As detailed below, there are a range of ways that we can and need to listen and (i) recognize the needs of people involved and (ii) address their needs. (See the section below for details about ways that we can helpfully support victims, bullies and witnesses in the minutes, hours and days after an incident.

FAQ:

What is the first thing that I should do if I see bully-victim behavior?

There are four first steps: (1) Stop it; (2) bring the bully (or bullies) and the target(s) to a quite safe place where they can be separated and can be talked to and with; (3) alert the principal or whoever he or she has designated to be in charge of these moments; (4) talk to the bully (or bullies) and the target(s) separately. Learn about what happened.

Doesn't bullying happen all the time? It seems like you are making too big a deal about all of this?

Bully-victim-bystander behavior does occur all the time. And, it is true that for many years, adults have often labeled this as “boys being boys” or “girls being girls”. However, it is important to make a big deal about this. Bully-victim behavior is a real public health problem. When bullying and victimization occur over time, it powerfully undermines students’ ability to learn and develop in healthy ways. This is big deal!

What is most important to do or say to the target of bullying right after it occurs?

Listen in a caring way and understand what happened and what feelings and thoughts this has triggered. Listen, listen and listen. As much as we want to “solve” this and “make it better” for the student(s), listening and understanding is the most important first step. This supports students feeling less alone, less overwhelmed and less scared. It will also help you to begin to understand how deeply this has affected the student.

What do I do if I begin to become anxious that the student is so upset that I may not be able to handle this?

Just as we need to listen as “deeply” as we can to the student, we also need to listen to ourselves. This kind of anxiety may signal that the experience of being targeted has “touched” a core of other related or unrelated problems. In any case, whenever we feel this kind of anxiety it is really important that we talk to a school counselor/mental health professional. Educators and mental health professionals can and need to be partners. When in doubt, consult with a mental health professional or an educator who you really trust in this area.

What is most important to do or say to the bully or bullies right after it occurs?

Listen in a caring way and understand what happened. In these moments, it is very easy for adults to feel angry and “blaming” towards the bully or bullies. And, if they really do have more power than the target and have used this to hurt the victim – socially, emotionally and/or physically – they will need to take responsibility for this. There should be adverse consequences for bullying. However, it is important to remember that

bullying signals that the student(s) are troubled themselves and bullying represents an unhelpful – and unacceptable – way of coping with their own troubles. Bullies are often students who are targets of bullying at home and/or in their neighborhood. Or, they are struggling with very negative feelings about themselves for any number of reasons (e.g. difficulty with learning or social relations).

Should I contact other educators when I see bully-victim behavior?

There is no simple “should” here. If for any reason, you are inclined to do this, by all means let your colleagues know. Whether we “should” be anxious about what to do or not, we often are in these moments. When in doubt, it is always a good idea to ask for help and/or to confer with colleagues we trust.

What about the witnesses? After we have dealt with the bully and target of the bullying, how should we handle all the other students who have witnessed this?

This is an important and practically complicated question. In the past, educators have tended to only focus on the victim and the bully. In recent years, there has been a growing awareness that students who witness bully-victim behavior are adversely effected as well.

One of the most important ways that we can understand and address the needs of students who witness bully-victim behavior is to periodically talk about this in Advisories and/or classrooms and/or assemblies. Given that bully-victim behavior is a serious public health issue, we suggest that this is an important topic to talk about. Some schools have had town meetings where a bully talks about his or her behavior. This can be a powerful and helpful step **if and only if** it is carefully coordinated with and supervised by mental health professionals.

Do you agree that Cyberbullying is going to be very hard to “see” or “know about” in the moment?

Yes. This is one of the important differences between Cyberbullying and ‘face to face’ bullying.

What are the other differences between Cyberbullying and face-to-face bullying?

There are many:

- The cyber bully has a much wider audience. Through web sites and the forwarding of email messages, the damage can be more far-reaching than most students appreciate.
- The target of Cyberbullying often feels less able to escape the tormentor. The target may also – understandably – feel even more powerless as they may not even know who the bully is.
- In an overlapping manner, the cyber bully can remain anonymous or impersonate others, thereby escaping identification.
- The cyber bully may be much less aware of the consequences of his or her actions.

After the incident:

(1) Be an upstander:

When you see bully-victim behavior, take steps to stop it! This can include talking directly to the bully and/or seeking help from others (e.g. teachers, school safety agents and/or administrators).

Students can learn about the range of ways that they can be upstanders from BullyBust:
<http://www.schoolclimate.org/bullybust/upstander.php>.

(2) Supporting the target of bullying:

Being bullied can be wounding and traumatic. Although we typically do not see an actual physical wound, students need to “clean” the social and emotional wounds that bullying can cause. And, the way that caring adults can promote the healing process is by supporting the student to give voice to the range of feelings and thoughts that they have about the experience. Listen, listen and listen in caring ways. When students give voice to how they feel and what they think about the experience of being bullied, it is the equivalent of “cleaning a wound”. “As painful as it can be for students to talk about these experiences (and as painful as it can be for adults to listen to this), it is much more complicating and problematic when these feelings, thoughts and memories go “underground” and are not talked about.

Adults need to listen, listen and listen in caring ways. Sometimes caring adults want to help “solve” the problem and/or tell the student “this will be ok”. Initially, it is most helpful to just understand and empathize.

FAQ -

What should I do if I to become anxious when I am listening to the victim talking about his or her experience of being bully?

Anxiety, like a stomachache, is a signal. What is important is that we pay attention to this feeling and consult an educator or mental health professional that we trust. Sometimes talking with them about the situation can be very helpful in and of itself. And, in other instances this may helpfully lead to recommending that the student have a chance to confer with a mental health professional?

After I have talked with the victim and he or she has begun to settle down, what should I do then?

Ask them what they need and want, and let them know that feelings about being bullied sometimes “come in waves” that is unexpected. What is most important is that students know that it is ok - and terribly helpful! – to give voice to whatever they are feeling and thinking.

When I hear about a student being bullied, I often find myself getting very angry with the bully. I want to punish him or her? What do you think about this?

These are very understandable and common reactions. However, as upsetting, frustrating and unacceptable as bully behavior is, the bully is not “bad”. Bullies are typically people who are troubled for any number of reasons and use bullying as an unhelpful – and unacceptable! – strategy to feel better.

(3) Supporting the bully:

It is easy for adults to become angry towards students who bully. We often label bullies as “bad” kids. In fact, bullying is a profoundly unhelpful and “un-ok” way of coping with problems. Bullies need help. Typically, bullies are children or adults who have been and/or are being bullied at home and/or in the neighborhood and/or are struggling in any number of ways (e.g. academically, socially and/or emotionally). Being a bully can provide a short-term sense of power. But, a growing body of research has shown that students who chronically bully are troubled and in need of psychological/psychiatric help.

(4) Supporting witnesses:

Recently, there has been a growing awareness that it is not only victims and bullies who are adversely effected by this behavior, but witnesses are as well. It is important that students who witness bully-victim behavior have an opportunity to talk about this if they want and need to.

Resources:

Eyman, W. & Cohen, J. (2009). *Breaking the Bully-Victim-Passive Bystander Behavior: Creating a Climate for Learning and Responsibility*. New York, NY: National School Climate Center (www.schoolclimate.org)

Glossary:

Upstander: An "upstander" is someone who recognizes when something is wrong and acts to make it right. When an upstander sees or hears about someone being bullied, they speak up. Being an upstander is being a hero, we are standing up for what is right and doing our best to help support and protect someone who is being hurt. In many ways, this is another word for being socially responsible.