

Make Your School a Bully-Free Zone

Adults must create school, community, and home environments where there is respect and acceptance of all people.

By Maureen Costello

When parents think of bullying at school, the first image that comes to mind may be a large child shoving a smaller, younger child in a schoolyard. But bullying is rarely so obvious these days. The most common forms of bullying can go unnoticed, and can do far more lasting damage. This fact presents a challenge to parents and educators working to create a bully-free environment in their schools. Fortunately, there are concrete, effective steps parents and educators can take to prevent bullying—and prevention is the best solution.

Recognize the signs and causes of bullying

What causes bullying? A genuine conflict between students is distressing, but it is not bullying. Bullies seek power and almost always bully a child who is not likely to fight back and who is perceived to be different or “less than.” The victim may come from a nontraditional family, practice an unfamiliar religion, wear unusual clothes, or have some unfashionable physical or emotional traits.

Bullying takes several forms, including snatching belongings from a classmate and making retrieval a “game,” taking someone’s dessert at lunchtime, and issuing put-downs like “that’s so gay” or “that’s retarded.” Other forms can be gossiping about someone’s clothes, deliberately ignoring or excluding someone from an activity, and ridiculing or teasing. Teasing, gossiping, and attacks on character can occur in person, but the Internet has made it much easier for bullies to operate anonymously and, therefore, more cruelly.

All adults should learn to recognize the clues that can identify a bullying victim. These signs can include a child who is

- Always alone
- Leaves school with torn, damaged, or missing clothing, books, or other belongings
- Has unexplained cuts, bruises, and scratches
- Seems afraid to be in school, leave school, ride the school bus, or take part in organized activities with peers
- Avoids the cafeteria
- No longer seems interested in school work or suddenly begins to perform poorly
- Appears sad, moody, teary, or depressed
- Complains frequently of headaches, stomach aches, or other physical ailments



Model respect and encourage empathy

A parent or teacher can use everyday examples that can help a child grasp the idea that people are more alike than different. For example, apples vary by color and taste, but they are all apples. By the same token, some children might have families that look different from the families of other children, but nonetheless, they are still a family and deserve respect.

Adults can provide the best example by modeling respectful and friendly behavior. Talk to children, find out their names, and say something affirming to them, even if it’s something as simple as, “Great smile!”

It is especially important for adults to model friendly behavior when they see children who are off by themselves. The isolated child who does not fit in easily is a common target for bullies, and befriending them is a way to help make them less vulnerable. It is common for children to shun victims because they do not want to be picked on, too. However, a dad who says, “Oh, let’s say hello to Michael, he’s all alone,” and models a friendly conversation is helping his own child overcome such fears.

Another very important step is to develop empathy in children by encouraging them to see things from other people’s perspective. An everyday situation, whether it is positive or negative, can be a great opportunity for an adult to ask a child questions that develop empathy, such as, “Louis is just learning this game. I wonder how he feels now that he hit the ball,” or “Your new classmate just moved here from a very hot country. I wonder what she’ll think when we have our first snowstorm,” or “I wonder what it’s like to use a wheelchair.” This exercise can get children into the habit of looking at situations from a classmate’s perspective, which can deter bullying behavior.



PTA's role in bullying prevention

PTA members have an important role to play in creating a school climate where bullying is not tolerated. They should know the school's policy on bullying and meet regularly with administrators to discuss concerns. It is also helpful to meet with administrators to determine what role PTA members and other concerned parents can play in establishing a positive climate. If the school does not already have a school climate committee, ask administrators to form one and include parent members. Also, ask the school to include parent representatives in any anti-bullying staff training and consider offering the same training through the PTA to the larger school community.

Since PTA members are frequently in the school, they can model positive behaviors to the student body. They can also help identify social divisions within the school and work with the school to address them. PTA members can hold diversity fairs where students and families can meet each other and overcome feelings that they or others are different—a major factor in bullying—by learning about each other's cultural traditions.


PTAs also can organize parent volunteers to help out as recess, hall, and lunchroom monitors. These volunteers can watch what children are doing and saying, interrupt teasing, and help students be allies to victims of bullying.

How to interrupt bullying

Unfortunately, no effort so far has completely eliminated bullying. Therefore, it is important to prepare students to respond to bullying. Experts recognize there are three roles in all bullying: the bully, the victim, and the bystander. The bystanders are the key. Their response can set the tone that either allows bullying to occur or sends the message that bullying is unacceptable.

Adults must teach students through their words and behavior that everyone has a right and a duty to interrupt bullying. Students can tell the bully to stop picking on another student, and if possible, ask other students to interrupt the bully with them. Students should comfort the victim and offer their companionship or friendship to keep the student from feeling isolated and open to more bullying. Students should practice how to respond when they witness bullying.

If students are not comfortable interrupting the bully, they should know that they can always alert an adult. Adults at the school should guard against the temptation to minimize bullying as another part of growing up, and they must not question whether a child is telling the truth when they report being bullied or seeing bullying take place.

Adults must create school, community, and home environments where there is respect and acceptance of all people. When a school is defined by respect and acceptance, it is difficult for bullying to take root and flourish. Children must be taught early and often that we are all different in some way, but that we all deserve equal respect. 

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Variety Is the Spice of Life— and Understanding

Recognizing differences can promote understanding that can prevent a student from bullying classmates with characteristics that make them stand out from the rest of the student body.

A mother recently shared a story that illustrates how recognizing differences encourages understanding, during a walk in the park; this parent was embarrassed when her four year old pointed to a veiled Muslim woman and loudly asked why she was dressed like that. Resisting her first impulse to shush her and send the message that curiosity is impolite, the mother said, "I don't know. Let's ask." The woman had overheard the conversation and was happy to talk to the mom and child.

A blogger for Teaching Tolerance demonstrated the power of recognizing differences by recounting the experience of teaching a class with only one African-American student. The topic for that day's class included a reference to African Americans. All eyes turned to the student.

Rather than ignore the reaction, the teacher saw a teachable moment and said, "I'll bet that happens a lot to you around here." The white students in her class began—possibly for the first time—to think seriously about being the "only one." At the end of the class, the African-American girl told the teacher, "You're the first teacher I've ever had here who called it out like that. Thanks."

Resources

Mix It Up

www.mixitup.org

A national program by Teaching Tolerance that encourages students to step out of their cliques by sitting next to someone new in their school cafeteria for just one day

Connect for Respect

PTA.org/Planning_Tools_for_PTAs.pdf

National PTA's initiative to encourage PTAs to lead conversations in their school communities about bullying and to develop solutions they can implement collaboratively

Other PTA Resources on Bullying

PTA.org/bullying.asp

Articles, position statements, tip sheets, case studies, and links to outside resource