

Individual-Level Strategies

Interrupting Bullying & Harassment in Schools – Toolkit

By Gretchen Brion-Meisels, Ed.D., Eliza O’Neil, Ed.M., & Sarah Bishop, M.A., for the IDRA EAC-South

This section offers strategies to help support students who are directly involved with bullying behaviors and may need targeted, responsive strategies. In addition, it provides some specific ideas for how to support protected groups or students who are more likely to be targeted due to some aspect of their identity. This includes students with aspects of identity protected under federal civil rights policies and legislation, such as LGBTQ students, gender nonconforming (GNC) students and undocumented students.

Although universal prevention is critical to the prevention of bullying and harassment, certain students may need additional, targeted supports to reduce the likelihood of harmful interactions and to moderate the harm done when such interactions occur (Learning for Justice, 2017). These students may be at greater risk for being directly involved with bullying behaviors because of individual personality traits, and they may be members of marginalized or oppressed groups whose social position factors make them more likely to experience identity-based bullying and harassment.

In our society, many issues of power and inequity center around identity markers – both visible and invisible. As identity development is a central task of adolescence (Erikson, 1968), identity-based bullying behaviors become more prevalent in adolescence (Pepler & Craig, 2009; Swearer, 2011). This is particularly true in communities and schools where hierarchical language patterns permeate (e.g., the use of homophobic, xenophobic, racist or misogynistic language). The effects of identity-based bullying behaviors inflict suffering for students above and beyond the effects of generalized bullying behaviors (APA, 2018). Thus, it is particularly important for schools to outline policies and practices that mitigate the instances of identity-based bullying and harassment.

Factors that Might Make a Student More Vulnerable

Students who exhibit identities that are **different from the “norm”** based on race, ethnicity, nationality, religious orientation, socioeconomic status, gender, sexuality, weight, disability, or some other visual marker are more vulnerable to bullying behaviors than their peers (Swearer, 2011; Musgrove & Yudin, 2013).

Students who belong to (or are presumed to belong to) a social group that is marginalized or oppressed in the broader community (e.g., LGBTQ students in a community with high levels of homophobia) are more vulnerable to identity-based bullying than their peers (Swearer, 2011).

Students who **struggle with social interactions** may suffer more frequently as a result of bullying behaviors, though students with high levels of social skills have been shown to be more frequent sufferers of bullying behaviors as well (Swearer, 2011).

Students who engage in, or suffer from, bullying behaviors may be more likely to experience **emotional responses**, such as anxiety and depression (Kumpulainen, Rasanen & Puura, 2001; APA, 2018). Some students also report being bullied *as a result of* depression, anxiety or other mental health challenges.

Students who engage in, or suffer from, bullying behaviors may be more likely to **struggle in school** (Glew, et al., 2005); and students who struggle in school (socially or academically) tend to suffer more frequently from bullying behaviors.

Guidelines for Protecting the Wellbeing of Students

The effects of identity-based harassment and other bullying behaviors differ for students within demographic groups, as well as across them. Many students struggle to understand or talk about bullying or discrimination surrounding one aspect of their identity without talking about the disadvantages associated with another aspect of their identity. This multifaceted identity characterization is known as *intersectionality* (Garnett, et al., 2014). For this reason, it is important for schools to avoid categorizing students by oversimplified aspects of their identities and instead celebrate their complex and multifaceted selves.

It should be noted that, even within a group of students who suffer as a result of similar

Guidelines for Protecting the Wellbeing of Students

bullying behaviors and discrimination (e.g., undocumented students), there is great variation in both students' individual experiences and how they make meaning of these experiences. However, research can provide educators with some general guidelines for supporting students in vulnerable groups. Beyond this, we encourage school leadership teams to speak directly with students and collect data about identity-based bullying/discriminatory behaviors, specifically.

Below, we provide a set of individual-level strategies from which educators might draw to support students' wellbeing. These strategies work best when integrated into an explicit, multi-tiered effort to improve school culture and climate such that administrators, teachers, educational support providers, families and other community members are joining students in these efforts (Jones & Bouffard, 2012).

Strategies to Support a Student Suffering as a Result of Bullying or Harassment

Following are strategies outlined by PREVNet.

- Provide opportunities for connection and relationship-building. Listen to students and make your support clear. This might mean establishing your classroom or office as a safe space for groups of marginalized students.
- Model upstander behavior by calling out bullying behaviors when they occur.
- Integrate perspective-taking into curriculum and build positive awareness around "difference."
- Address the root of bullying behaviors and take the blame or responsibility off the victim.
- Provide opportunities for confidence building, e.g., opportunities to engage in activities that students feel "good at."
- Help students to build alliances with other "upstanders" at your school or in your community.
- If bullying behaviors are a recurring problem for a student, create a plan with that student, be persistent about the plan and follow-up regularly. Make yourself available to that student.

Strategies to Support a Student Engaging in Bullying or Harassment Behaviors

Strategies to Support a Student Engaging in Bullying or Harassment Behaviors

The goal here is not to replace one punishment with another. Rather, the recommendations below are meant to provide opportunities for students and adults to learn and grow through the development of social skills and problem-solving strategies.

First, establish high expectations for student behavior. This is one of the most effective ways to support their academic progress. With clear and consistent classroom expectations, students will know what is expected of them. They are able to take responsibility for their behavior as well as their learning. Teachers can more easily observe and encourage positive behaviors.

For example, instead of calling out a student who doesn't seem prepared for class, a teacher might individually thank students who are prepared for the day's lesson. This will signal to other students that it's time to get ready for learning. Additionally, teachers can address off task behaviors without judgement by referring to the agreed-upon classroom expectations and using a form of questioning to allow students to redirect their own behavior. Rather than admonishing a student that doesn't appear to be following instructions, a teacher might have the following exchange: Ask the student what they are currently doing, what directions were they given or what are the expectations of the class, and then allow the student time to return to the assigned task. Pre-established privileges and consequences allow students to monitor their own behavior and learning. They need multiple opportunities to practice self-management.

Second, school staff, teachers and administrators must establish effective means of communication with students and families about behavioral and academic expectations. Positive reinforcement at home helps to teach and model the use of appropriate problem-solving and social skills. This helps students maintain consistent expectations for interactions with peers, teachers, and families or caregivers. Open and respectful communication about behavior and academic habits also encourages honest discussions when concerns do arise. Students' capacity for self-management increases through teacher feedback, peer and family support, and other community building activities. When students feel they are secure in their environment, they spend more time engaged in the learning process and experience more positive interactions with others.

Third, there must be deliberate use of social and emotional learning supports, including counseling. The need for these supports was magnified by the COVID-19 pandemic. It is crucial to provide students with multiple opportunities to discuss their

Special Considerations for Specific Identity Groups

experiences, including the unique stressors many experienced due to the pandemic. For example, the U.S. Department of Education's Return to School Roadmap (<https://sites.ed.gov/roadmap>) offers suggestions on classroom activities that include journaling exercises, group discussions, and writing letters about how the pandemic impacted students. Other outlets include artwork, music and poetry. Social and emotional learning encourages students' self-awareness and mindfulness, develops our empathy for others, and builds emotional safe spaces for students to learn. Social-emotional supports and counseling are strategies that hold promise at addressing the underlying causes of how students engage at school.

Fourth, the use of corporal punishment and other forms of exclusionary discipline practices should be prohibited as they negate any of the positive intervention strategies listed above. Corporal punishment and exclusionary discipline, like suspensions and alternative school placements, create school environments that are harmful for students, teachers, families and the community at large. These approaches isolate students, fail to address the underlying needs that may be causing bullying behaviors, and weaken the relationships that are necessary for strong and positive school climates.

See stopbullying.com for additional strategies for supporting all students involved to make sure the bullying doesn't continue and its effects can be minimized (Stopbullying.gov, 2017).

Special Considerations for Specific Identity Groups

It is important to note that bullying and harassment often occur based on perception, regardless of the student's actual identity. For students who identify with specific marginalized groups, the results of identity-based bullying can be particularly harmful.

While we cannot provide an exhaustive list of strategies to address identity-based bullying here, we encourage schools to think carefully about the root causes of the harmful interactions that are occurring and the community or cultural narratives that may underlie these issues. Regardless of the type of identity-based bullying that may occur, it is important for schools to do the following.

- Provide opportunities for students to learn about the patterns of racism, classism, homophobia and xenophobia that permeate U.S. history and still have effects today.
- Address stereotypes and implicit bias by providing opportunities for students to learn

Special Considerations for Specific Identity Groups

about the strengths of different communities, their positive contributions to society, and diversity within groups.

- Be clear and consistent about stopping identity-based bullying when it occurs.
- Be sure not to place the responsibility for “educating others” on students who are already marginalized. Similarly, be sure not to blame these students for their own oppression. For example, it is critical to have discussions about biases associated with one's race rather than simply discussing racism.
- Provide students with access to information about their social identities, as well as role models that reflect their social identities.

In addition to these general recommendations, here are some identity-group, specific recommendations.

LGBTQ Students. Remember that families (or even local laws) may not be supportive of LGBTQ students. Visibility can be dangerous, even in the context of students accessing support. **Recommendation:** Ensure that “safe” spaces truly are safe. Train faculty to understand how to provide authentic support for students.

Students with Disabilities. Federal laws protect students from having their disability status revealed to other students. **Recommendation:** Provide students with opportunities to learn about physical, emotional and cognitive disabilities *preventatively* so that this does not have to be discussed around a particular student in the classroom.

Students who are Overweight or Underweight. Interventions and prevention strategies that target obesity can increase the prevalence of bullying behaviors and feelings of body dissatisfaction. Universal health prevention programs work best. **Recommendation:** Educate teachers and students about the various multi-level factors that contribute to excess weight, including the social and structural determinants of excess weight in order to reduce reductionist thinking that excess weight is a moral failure or solely based on individual “choices.” A powerful resource for teachers: HBO’s *Weight of the Nation* segment on weight stigma that highlights empirical evidence and personal stories (2013).

Students of Color. Reactions to single episodes of race-based bullying that do not acknowledge larger patterns of cumulative racism in society can be harmful and misleading. Adults should be coached in seeing these acts as connected to the history of racism in the United States and not isolated incidents. Biases associated with one's race are often invisible, but it must be acknowledged as part of the problem. All stakeholders should be supported in identifying instances of race- and ethnicity-based harassment.

Recommendation: Create inclusive and celebrative curricula that weave issues of race and racism throughout. Be sure to provide strong models of the goodness and positive contributions of people of color to the history of the United States, as well as our society currently.

Students Who Are or Whose Families Are Undocumented Immigrants. Visibility may be dangerous, even in the context of accessing support. Local laws are often not supportive or protective of civil rights, and discretion is advised. **Recommendation:** Explicitly help students understand why anti-immigrant rhetoric will **not** be tolerated in the context of school. Provide space for students to grapple with the civil rights issues underlying this rhetoric.

Strategies to Support Bystanders

When bullying occurs, bystanders are present around 80% of the time (stopbullying.gov, 2018). They can play a big part to stop bullying when it starts by simply intervening. Stopping the behavior and taking the side of the targeted student can lessen his or her feelings of depression or anxiety in the wake of the incident. Unfortunately, bystanders can often be unaware how to help or intervene when bullying incidents occur, especially if they fear being bullied as well or losing their social status among their peers (stopbullying.gov, 2018). Some ways for bystanders to lessen the chances of bullying or safely intervene include the following.

- **Be inclusive:** Welcome other students into activities and groups. Make an effort to sit with or near vulnerable students (stopbullying.gov, 2018).
- **Be a role-model:** Modeling kindness, respect and acceptance among their peers. Being involved with anti-bullying efforts in school or the community (stopbullying.gov, 2018).
- **Intervene:** This can include intervening as a group, changing the subject, questioning the bullying behavior, using humor to stop a situation from escalating, openly objecting to harassment and bullying, and outwardly validating the targeted student in front of his or her peers (stopbullying.gov, 2018).
- **Reach out:** Express support or concern for the targeted student in private, reporting bullying behavior to a trustworthy adult, reaching out to the person doing the bullying if they feel safe doing so (stopbullying.gov, 2018).
- **Encourage reporting with context:** When stressing “see something, say something,”

Strategies to Support Bystanders

students need to have a sense of what will happen if they report bullying or harassment that they observe. They may be worried that their peers will now they “tattled.” And if the bullying student is a friend or classmate, students need to know that their report will be taken seriously, and all students involved will be treated with care.

It should also be mentioned that it is difficult to teach empathy and respect if the adults and leaders with whom students interact are not emotionally healthy and mature themselves. It is not impossible for someone with low social-emotional skills to teach students how to be effective and build respect and empathy for their fellow students, but it requires consistency and awareness of their own behaviors. Reducing stress and actively being aware of modeling good behavior are essential to leading by example (Jones & Bouffard, 2012).

Schools should support their educators and leaders with time for reflection and mindfulness, strategies to reduce burnout, and environments that enable educators to positively reflect on their experiences teaching their students (Jones & Bouffard, 2012). Counselors are an excellent resource as models for learning about emotional and mental health.

Works Cited

- APA. (2018). Bullying and School Climate. American Psychological Association. <http://www.apa.org/advocacy/interpersonal-violence/bullying-school-climate.aspx>
- Erikson, E.H. (1968). *Identity: Youth and Crisis*. Oxford, England: Norton & Co.
- Garnett, B.R., Masyn, K.E., Austin, S.B., Miller, M., Williams, D.R., & Viswanath, K. (2014). The Intersectionality of Discrimination Attributes and Bullying Among Youth: An Applied Latent Class Analysis. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, 43, 1225-1239. DOI 10.1007/s10964-013-0073-8
- Glew, G., Fan, M.Y., Katon, W., Rivara, F. & Kernic, M. (2005). Bullying, Psychosocial Adjustment, and Academic Performance in Elementary School. *Archives of Pediatrics & Adolescent Medicine*, 159(11), 1026-31. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1001/archpedi.159.11.1026>
- HBO. (2013). Weight of the Nation, documentary. HBO. <https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLVVILW-m7zH1gAQyHHgaeHy4WnmPm7g0N>
- Jones, S.M., & Bouffard, S.M. (2012). Social and Emotional Learning in Schools: From Programs to Strategies. *Society for Research in Child Development*, 26(4). https://www.srccd.org/sites/default/files/documents/spr_264_final_2.pdf.
- Kumpulainen, K., Rasanen, E., & Puura, K. (2001). Psychiatric Disorders and the Use of Mental Health Services Among Children Involved in Bullying. *Aggressive Behavior*, 27(2), 102-110. <https://doi.org/10.1002/ab.3>
- Learning for Justice. (2017). *Responding to Hate and Bias at School*. Montgomery, Ala.: Southern Poverty Law Center. <https://www.tolerance.org/magazine/publications/responding-to-hate-and-bias-at-school>
- Musgrove, M., & Yudin, M.K. (August 20, 2013). Dear Colleague Letter to Educators and Stakeholders on the Matter of Bullying of Students with Disabilities. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Education Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services. <https://www2.ed.gov/policy/speced/guid/idea/memosdcltrs/bullyingdcl-8-20-13.pdf>
- Pepler, D., & Craig, W. (2009). Responding to Bullying and Harassment: An Issue of Rights. In Boyce, W., Roche, J. & Davies, D. (Eds.) *Adolescent Health: Policy, Science, and Human Rights*. Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press.
- Stopbullying.gov. (September 28, 2017). Support the Kids Involved, web page. Stopbullying.gov. <https://www.stopbullying.gov/prevention/support-kids-involved>
- Stopbullying.gov. (August 2018). Fact Sheet: Bystanders are Essential to Bullying Prevention and Intervention. Stopbullying.gov. <https://www.stopbullying.gov/sites/default/files/2018-08/Bystander-Factsheet.pdf>
- Swearer, S.M. (March 2011). Risk Factors for and Outcomes of Bullying and Victimization. *Educational Psychology Papers and Publications*. <https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1131&context=edpsychpapers>
- U.S. Department of Education. (2021). Return to School Roadmap, online. Washington D.C.: U.S. Department of Education. <https://sites.ed.gov/roadmap>

Serving 11 states and D.C., the IDRA EAC-South is one of four federally-funded centers that provide technical assistance and training to build capacity to confront educational problems occasioned by discrimination on the basis of race, national origin, sex and gender, and religion.

Intercultural Development Research Association

IDRA EAC-South, Dr. Paula Johnson, Director
5815 Callaghan Road, Suite 101 • San Antonio, Texas 78228 • 210-444-1710 • eacsouth@idra.org • www.idra.org/eac-south

Authors

Gretchen Brion-Meisels, Ed.D., Harvard Graduate School of Education lecturer;
Eliza O'Neil, Ed.M., Essential Partners associate and Seeds of Peace co-director of U.S. programs; &
Sarah Bishop, M.A., technical writer and IDRA VisionCoders advisory team member.

The contents of this publication were developed under a grant from the U.S. Department of Education. However, these contents do not necessarily represent the policy of the Department of Education, and you should not assume endorsement by the federal government.