

# Classroom-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

Although bullying behaviors can occur in many different contexts, classroom teachers must be equipped with the knowledge and skills to address these behaviors in a classroom setting. Classroom-level strategies refer to routines, approaches and preventative actions that are designed to build a positive classroom climate and strengthen the structures that effectively address harm when it occurs.

Students benefit from consistent opportunities to build social emotional skills in the context of their classroom (Jones & Bouffard, 2012; Jones, Bailey & Jacob, 2014; Jones, et al., 2016). Specifically, as related to the prevention of bullying and harassment, students of all ages must be given opportunities to: (1) build positive relationships with peers and teachers; (2) celebrate and value each other for their individual gifts and identities; (3) recognize and name emotions and needs; and (4) practice problem-solving, particularly in the context of conflict. (For more information on social and emotional learning, see also the Collaborative for Social and Emotional Learning, CASEL.)

In addition to building social and emotional learning skills, students must have opportunities to build positive relationships with school-based adults, especially classroom teachers (Gallagher, 2013). Positive interactions with teachers are linked to a decrease in the likelihood that students will engage in bullying behaviors at the elementary level (Espelage & Horne, 2007).

Across the developmental spectrum, positive relationships with teachers and other school-based adults are critical supports for wellness and achievement. Research suggests that when students feel engaged and welcome in classroom activities (Newman, Murray & Lussier, 2001; Bradshaw, 2015), and when teachers treat students with warmth and responsiveness (Olweus, Limber & Mihalic, 1999; Learning for Justice, 2017), responding quickly and effectively to bullying behaviors (Olweus, 1993; Learning for Justice, 2017), then bullying behaviors typically decline (Espelage & Swearer, 2010). Establishing structures and routines, building relationships, and providing resources that support students' individual needs all help to foster a positive classroom climate. When such a climate exists, it is much easier to address harmful behaviors like bullying and harassment (Learning for Justice, 2017).

### Guidelines for Building Safe Classroom Climates

---

Every classroom can benefit from routines and structures that allow students to feel safe, valued, and able to participate fully. However, the types of routines and structures that teachers adopt often shift depending on the developmental needs of their students. For example, at the elementary level, teachers can build strong relationships by: creating opportunities for students to celebrate and learn about each other (ensuring that *every student* has a chance to be celebrated); teaching students to recognize and name their own emotions; providing opportunities for students to play and work cooperatively, with structured scaffolding around social interactions; and explicitly teaching students strategies for resolving conflicts with others (Bradshaw, 2015; Simonsen, et al., 2017; Willoughby, 2018).

At the secondary level, teachers might focus on a slightly different set of opportunities, such as opportunities to celebrate and learn about one's own cultural identity and the cultural identities of others; tools for resolving conflict with others; opportunities for students to appreciate each other; opportunities for students to reflect on their own skills, needs and relationships; and opportunities for students to take on leadership roles.

Below, we provide a set of classroom-level strategies from which educators might draw to build a positive classroom climate. These strategies work best when integrated into an explicit, multi-tiered effort to improve school culture and climate, such that teachers are not doing this work in isolation of administrators, colleagues, families or other community members.

#### Setting Up Classroom Structures & Routines

- Facilitate the development of a class-wide bullying policy at the start of the year or semester. This might be a code of conduct or set of overarching classroom norms that all students agree to follow. Provide opportunities for students to self-evaluate, reflect on their progress as a group, and revise or recommit to these norms on a regular basis. (For more on building a safe environment, see [stopbullying.gov](http://stopbullying.gov).)
- Engage in community meetings or restorative circles regularly. These should be an opportunity for students to build relationships, get to know each other, express and witness vulnerability, and celebrate each other's accomplishments. *After this type of initial community-building occurs*, community meetings (and/or circles) can also be used to address harm that has occurred in a classroom.

## Building Capacity in Teachers

---

- Build in time throughout each day for students to get to know each other more fully. This might be through games, introductory activities, partner or small group work, etc.
- Make consequences clear and formative. When harmful behavior occurs, stop the behavior, protect the target, remind bystanders to take action next time, and apply consequences that teach students strategies for getting their needs met without harming others.
- Adopt a no-blame approach for early intervention. Focus on coming up with early solutions that are inclusive (not exclusive) and build on mistakes as an opportunity for growth.
- Include issues around “difference,” power, and inclusion/exclusion in your curriculum. (For examples of this type of work, see Learning for Justice.)
- Provide students with opportunities to learn about bullying and harassment, their effects, and how to address them. (Get ideas from “Anti-Bullying Activities | Anti-Bullying Lesson Plans” and “Lesson Plan Booster: How Can Students Help a Bullied Peer?” from Education World.)

## Building Capacity in Teachers

---

Following are strategies by Stan Davis ([www.stopbullyingnow.com](http://www.stopbullyingnow.com)).

- **Make time to get to know each of your students.** Build warm, positive relationships with the students in your classrooms (Ferland, 2019). Students who have positive relationships with their teachers tend to be more accepted by their peers (Ladd, Birch & Buhs, 1999) and to be well-liked and considered socially competent by other students in the classroom (Hughes, Cavell & Willson, 2001). Relationships can be built through writing, small group work, and other simple efforts to connect.
- **Build relationships with families.** Students often feel more connected to their classroom when their families and teachers connect. Family engagement has been shown to increase academic, social and emotional outcomes (Montemayor & Chavkin, 2016; Henderson, et al., 2007; Mapp & Kuttner, 2013). Connecting with families is also an opportunity to model positive adult-to-adult communication.
- **Connect with colleagues.** Build allies and initiate a larger effort to create a safe school climate. Increasing awareness and training among your colleagues will increase the likelihood of educators at your school intervening when they see bullying or harassment

occur (Gulemetova, Drury & Bradshaw, 2011; Cohen & Freiberg, 2013).

- **Model prosocial behavior in the classroom.** Students often mirror teacher behavior, particularly when it comes to relationships and problem-solving. Be careful to develop your own social and emotional skills, such that you can model communication, problem solving, self-regulation, and conflict resolution for your students. Be sure that you are not unintentionally modeling behaviors that mimic bullying in an effort to control or exclude students (PREVNet, 2018).

## Building Capacity in Students

---

- Mobilize (and empower) students to be upstanders. Provide students with the language to interrupt incidents of bullying and harassment, and to foster inclusion among their peers. Provide students with concrete examples of how they might react to harmful behaviors, as well as opportunities to foster a positive culture among their peers (Learning for Justice, 2017).
- Communicate to students what will happen when they report bullying or harassment.
- Help students find friends that can act as supportive upstanders. If you have students who are isolated, help them connect with peers and begin to build strong, positive relationships. Leverage the power of peer relationships by engaging groups of friends in positive, upstander behaviors.
- Teach upstander behaviors through role-playing and reflection.
- Foster student agency by giving students structured opportunities to lead. Incorporate choice as much as possible into the school day, including choice in activities, in content areas, and in work products. Provide opportunities for students to self-evaluate and encourage goal-setting. This may require giving up a degree of your control as a teacher, and it will take extra time and energy, but allowing students to demonstrate agency in positive ways can reduce the need for them to demonstrate agency in potentially harmful ways.
- Provide opportunities for all students to contribute to classroom conversations, whether through structured sharing or think-pair-share routines. Use multiple learning styles to engage multiple types of learners. Work toward inclusion, in as many ways as possible.
- Build student confidence by reinforcing existing competencies – remind students of what they already know and can do when introducing new topics. Celebrate their successes often.

## Tier 2 and Tier 3 Strategies for Students Who Need Additional Support

---

- Reframe mistakes or failures as opportunities to learn. Change negative scripts and celebrate perseverance instead of good grades.

For more information about building student capacity, see Faculty Finds (Catlett, 2018) and Fostering Resiliency in Kids (Benard, 1993).

## Tier 2 and Tier 3 Strategies for Students Who Need Additional Support

---

If a small group of students seems to be engaging in bullying behaviors or continually harassing others, you might consider the following responsive interventions.

- Hold a social skills group or regular lunch meeting for students who need practice building relationships with peers;
- Scaffold cooperative learning exercises for students who are struggling with peer interactions;
- Hold a conflict resolution group for students who need to practice safe and healthy problem-solving skills;
- Work with the school counselor or social worker to develop a targeted intervention for students who need additional support;
- Work with the school counselor or social worker to develop formative consequences that allow students to practice building critical social and emotional skills; and
- As much as possible, draw on the school counselor's expertise to find new ways to incorporate social emotional skills building activities or routines every day.

## Reinforcing Positive Social and Emotional Learning

---

Considering the many tasks asked of teachers to help their students succeed, it can be difficult to find time to specifically address bullying. Studies have shown, though, that daily reinforcement of positive social and emotional learning in the classroom can help reduce bullying in the long term (Jones & Bouffard, 2012). Educators should also avoid labelling students as bullies or victims and talk instead about the behaviors in which students are engaging and how these behaviors cause others harm (Van der Valk, 2013). Strategies at

## Reinforcing Positive Social and Emotional Learning

---

the classroom level include the following.

- Avoid blaming students and using deficit-based explanations to explain bullying behaviors.
- Teachers should not label students as bullies but rather refer to their specific behaviors. Labelling a student as a bully implies that this is a fixed character trait.
- Teachers must build positive, quality relationships with their students. Strong relationships discourage bullying behavior and allow students to feel safer reporting these infractions (Ferland, 2019).
- Adults should avoid labeling students who are targeted by bullies as “victims,” because this attaches a characteristic to that student’s identity.
- Create and emphasize a safe, welcoming classroom atmosphere (Bradshaw, 2015).
- Be aware of any disabilities or difficulties certain students may have and ensure that they have positive interactions with their peers. Students with severe disabilities may not understand or be capable of fully communicating how they feel when they have been bullied, so teachers should be aware of these students’ needs (Musgrove & Yudin, 2013).
- Set aside some class time to discuss bullying, and use lessons to foster social-emotional skills. A good framework for social emotional learning is represented by the acronym SAFE: Sequenced activities that lead directly to skills; Active forms of learning; Focused on developing one or more social skills; and Explicit about targeting specific skills (Bradshaw, 2015; Jones & Bouffard, 2012). These lessons should be a part of the general curriculum.
- Educators should encourage and reinforce good behavior, particularly when students are being respectful to one another. Reinforcement of respectful language should also be encouraged during tense or difficult moments (Learning for Justice, 2017).
- Set expectations for how students should speak to each other, regardless of whether or not they are in earshot of an adult. Guide students in brainstorming activities to find ways to curb teasing and taunting. With adult guidance, allow students to make their own set of rules for respectful language (Learning for Justice, 2017).

## Works Cited

- Benard, B. (November 1993). Fostering Resiliency in Kids. *Educational Leadership*. Vol 51 , No 3. <http://www.ascd.org/publications/educational-leadership/nov93/vol51/num03/Fostering-Resiliency-in-Kids.aspx>
- Bradshaw, C.P. (2015). Translating Research to Practice in Bullying Prevention. *American Psychologist*, 70(4). <https://www.apa.org/pubs/journals/releases/amp-a0039114.pdf>
- Catlett, C. (May 2018). Faculty Finds. *Southern Early Childhood*.
- Cohen, J., & Freiberg, J. (February 2013). School Climate and Bullying Prevention. *National School Climate Center*. <https://www.schoolclimate.org/themes/schoolclimate/assets/pdf/practice/sc-brief-bully-prevention.pdf>
- Education World. (2021). Anti-Bullying Activities | Anti-Bullying Lesson Plans, web page. [https://www.educationworld.com/a\\_special/bully.shtml](https://www.educationworld.com/a_special/bully.shtml)
- Education World. (2021). Lesson Plan Booster: How Can Students Help a Bullied Peer?, web page. Education World. [https://www.educationworld.com/a\\_lesson/student\\_engagers/bullying\\_student\\_engager.shtml](https://www.educationworld.com/a_lesson/student_engagers/bullying_student_engager.shtml)
- Espelage, D., & Horne, A. (2007). School Violence and Bullying Prevention: From Research-Based Explanations to Empirically Based Solutions. In S. Brown & R. Lent (Eds.), *Handbook of Counseling Psychology* (4<sup>th</sup> ed). Hoboken, N.J.: Wiley.
- Espelage, D.L., & Swearer, S.M. (Eds.). (2010). A Social-Ecological Model for Bullying Prevention and Intervention: Understanding the Impact of Adults in the Social Ecology of Youngsters. In S.R. Jimerson, S.M. Swearer, & D.L. Espelage (Eds.), *Handbook of Bullying in Schools: An International Perspective*. New York, N.Y.: Routledge/Taylor & Francis Group. <http://dx.doi.org/10.4324/9780203842898>
- Ferlazzo, L. (February 2019). Response: Going After “The Roots of Bullying.” *Education Week*. [http://blogs.edweek.org/teachers/classroom\\_qa\\_with\\_larry\\_ferlazzo/2019/02/response\\_going\\_after\\_the\\_roots\\_of\\_bullying.html](http://blogs.edweek.org/teachers/classroom_qa_with_larry_ferlazzo/2019/02/response_going_after_the_roots_of_bullying.html)
- Gallagher, E. (2013). The Effects of Teacher-Student Relationships: Social and Academic Outcomes of Low-Income Middle and High School Students. *Applied Psychology Opus*. [https://wp.nyu.edu/steinhardt-appsych\\_opus/the-effects-of-teacher-student-relationships-social-and-academic-outcomes-of-low-income-middle-and-high-school-students/](https://wp.nyu.edu/steinhardt-appsych_opus/the-effects-of-teacher-student-relationships-social-and-academic-outcomes-of-low-income-middle-and-high-school-students/)
- Gulemetova, M., Drury, D., & Bradshaw, C.P. (2011). National Education Association Bullying Study. *Colleagues*, 6(2). <https://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/colleagues/vol6/iss2/11/>
- Henderson, A.T., Mapp, K.L., Johnson, V.R., & Davies, D. (2007). *Beyond the Bake Sale: The Essential Guide to Family-School Partnerships*. New York, N.Y.: The New Press.
- Hughes, J.N., Cavell, T.A., & Willson, V.A. (2001). Further Support for the Developmental Significance of the Quality of the Teacher–Student Relationship. *Journal of School Psychology*, 39(4). [http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/S0022-4405\(01\)00074-7](http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/S0022-4405(01)00074-7)
- Jones, S.M., Bailey, R., Brion-Meisels, G., & Partee, A. (September 2016). Choosing to Be Positive. *Educational Leadership*, 74(1), 63-68. <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ1112092>
- Jones, S.M., Bailey, R., & Jacob, R. (2014). Social-Emotional Learning is Essential to Classroom Management. *Phi Delta Kappan*, 96(2). <https://doi.org/10.1177%2F0031721714553405>
- 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.srcd.org/sites/default/files/documents/spr\\_264\\_final\\_2.pdf](https://www.srcd.org/sites/default/files/documents/spr_264_final_2.pdf)
- Ladd, G.W., Birch, S.H., & Buhs, E.S. (1999). Children's Social and Scholastic Lives in Kindergarten: Related Spheres of Influence? *Child Development*, 70(6). <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/10621962>
- Learning for Justice (formerly Teaching Tolerance). (2017). Responding to Hate and Bias at School. Learning for Justice. <https://www.learningforjustice.org/magazine/publications/responding-to-hate-and-bias-at-school>
- Mapp, K.L., & Kuttner, P. (2013). *Partners in Education: A Dual Capacity-Building Framework for Family-School Partnerships*. SEDL. <https://www2.ed.gov/documents/family-community/partners-education.pdf>
- Montemayor, A.M., & Chavkin, N. (September 2016). Liderazgo Familiar Intergeneracional: Intergenerational Family Leadership as a New Paradigm of Family Engagement. VUE Voices in Urban Education. <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1111072.pdf>

- Musgrove, M., & Yudin, M.K. (August 2013). Dear Colleague Letter. *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>
- Newman, R.S., Murray, B., & Lussier, C. (2001). Confrontation with Aggressive Peers at School: Students' Reluctance to Seek Help from the Teacher. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 93(2), 398-410.  
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/0022-0663.93.2.398>
- Olweus, D. (1993). *Bullying at School: What We Know and What We Can Do*. New York, N.Y.: Blackwell.
- Olweus, D., Limber, S.P., & Mihalic, S. (1999). The Bullying Prevention Program: Blueprints for Violence Prevention, Vol.9. Boulder, Colo.: Center for the Study and Prevention of Violence.  
<https://www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/Digitization/174202NCJRS.pdf>
- PREVNet. (2018). How to Encourage Empathy: Consequences that Teach. *PREVNet*.  
<https://www.prevnet.ca/bullying/parents/how-to-encourage-empathy>.
- Podolsky, A., Kini, T., Bishop, J., & Darling-Hammond, L. (2016). *Solving the Teacher Shortage: How to Attract and Retain Excellent Educators*. Palo Alto, Calif.: Learning Policy Institute.
- Ronfeldt, M., Loeb, S., & Wyckoff, J. (2013). How Teacher Turnover Harms Student Achievement. *American Educational Research Journal*, 50(1), 4-36.
- Simon, N.S., & Johnson, S.M. (2015). Teacher Turnover in High-Poverty Schools: What We Know and Can Do. *Teachers College Record*, 117, 1-36.
- Simonsen, B., Sugai, G., Freeman, J., & La Salle, T., (January 2017). Addressing School Climate: 5 Ways Schools Can Positively and Proactively Support All Students. PBIS. <https://www.pbis.org/resource/addressing-school-climate-5-ways-schools-can-positively-and-proactively-support-all-students>
- Sutcher, L., Darling-Hammond, L., & Carver-Thomas, D. (2016). *A Coming Crisis in Teaching? Teacher Supply, Demand, and Shortages in the U.S.* Palo Alto, Calif.: Learning Policy Institute.
- Van der Valk, A. (2013). There are No Bullies: Just Children Who Bully – And You Can Help Them. *Learning for Justice* 45. <https://www.learningforjustice.org/magazine/fall-2013/there-are-no-bullies>
- Villegas, A.M., & Irvine, J.J. (2010). Diversifying the Teaching Force: An Examination of Major Arguments. *Urban Review: Issues and Ideas in Public Education*, 42(3):175-192.
- Willoughby, B. (2018). Speak up at School. *Learning for Justice*.  
<https://www.learningforjustice.org/magazine/publications/speak-up-at-school>

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](mailto:eacsouth@idra.org) • [www.idra.org/eac-south](http://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.