

IMPROVING SCHOOL CLIMATE: BULLYING

Minimum Time Required: 90 minutes

NOTE: There is a great deal of content in this particular “chunk.” Not every word under each slide below needs to be memorized, but it needs to be understood by the facilitator so that the essence of the content can be communicated and honor the research.

Slide #2: A Statistical Perspective

This statistic has been widely quoted for years. Throughout the country, 160,000 children, which translates into over 2,200 bus loads of students stay home each and every day because they fear being picked on, made fun of, threatened, teased, taunted and so on. These are the students who are absent from school out of fear and are not physically available for learning, not to mention that their emotional state also compromises their ability to focus when they are physically present in the classroom. And, depending upon how the concept of “bullying” is defined, anywhere from 5% to 30% of students are the ones who are causing the 160,000 students to live in fear. One of the important elements in this mosaic is to understand that as these individuals who engage in mean spirited behaviors toward others grow up, their behaviors do not change with their chronological age. Children who target others and act in mean spirited ways (engage in “bullying” behaviors) grow up into adults who target others and act in mean spirited ways (engage in “bullying” behaviors). The inappropriate treatment of others in childhood becomes habitual and results in adults who continue to treat others in these inappropriate ways. “Kid ‘bullies’ grow up into adult ‘bullies’.”

Slide #3: A Toxic School Concept

No one wants the “bully” or “bullying” label – except the family of the target.

Slide #4: If Only it was This Easy

There is no such thing as a stereotypical bully. The only “truth” in this cartoon is that those who truly bully abuse their power, whatever kind of power they have. It is not possible to look at an individual and know by his/her appearance (size, race, ethnicity,

gender, etc.) if an individual is a “bully.” Children who target others, and are often labeled “bullies,” have a number of characteristics. It is often believed that these children feel bad about them and target others because they are trying to increase their lower levels of self-esteem or self-worth. In actuality, nothing could be further from the truth. Bullies actually have average or better than average sense of self. They have come by these behaviors honestly...from the role models in their lives. From the people around them who they look up to, which may well include those who are their media idols, they have learned habits of behavior that work to get their needs met. These individuals wield power over others because they have observed that it works in gaining social status and/or things. In some cases, children are mean for the sole reason of avoiding becoming targets themselves.

There is a small group of individuals who both are targeted and hurt others. They are referred to in the research as “bully victims.” The reasons for this kind of profile are twofold. First, they may want to “get back” at those they can dominate because they are hurt by those who dominate them. Second, they may wish to demonstrate that others shouldn’t “mess with them” to avoid becoming targets any more than they are already.

Whether children are bullies or they are bully victims, they lack a necessary characteristic: empathy/compassion/caring. People do not hurt those they care about, and this includes animals or property. Having compassion, which involves being able to stand in the other’s position and understand and be perceptive about how they feel, is the only true antidote for meanness/aggression. Learning to be compassionate / empathic diminishes the levels of hurtful behavior.

Those who target others require social access to do so. Usually, when it comes to our attention that someone is targeting another, our response is to provide constant supervision, or “protection,” and make sure that the target always has a pair of caring eyes and physical presence nearby to insure that he/she is safe. This tact is actually backwards. Targeted individuals are typically socially isolated to begin with and providing them with this kind of increased supervision only serves to increase this

isolation. Rather, the supervision should be directed toward the child(ren) who is/are acting in hurtful mean spirited ways. In this way, they do not have the social access they need to be cruel. Children who target others are “sneaky” and will do it most commonly away from adult eyes. The supervision on those who target others lessens the chances that they have the social access, to engage in any kind of hurtful, mean-spirited behavior including but no limited to bullying and harassment. They must earn the right to rejoin the social group and act appropriately. This kind of intervention must be paired with more long-term work that will help them develop empathy toward others.

Slide #5: Lessons Learned

What the CT statistics tell us. The CT State Dept. of Education (CSDE) is not permitted by law (PA 11-232) to intervene, monitor, investigate or supersede any decisions made at the local level but daily there are inquiries pertaining to bullying that come to the attention of the CSDE. The log that is kept regarding these inquiries yields interesting trends. These bullets represent what trends are apparent from the hundreds of individual stories...no town or economic status predicts amount of “bullying.” No type of behaviors (physical, or emotional, lower level or serious) is more commonly discussed. It is routine to hear about situations with pre-school aged children as it is about adult behavior (consistently about 10% of the inquiries involve allegations about adult misbehavior. There is always a slight increase (“hump”) in the middle school years...but not because this is a middle school problem, but rather because middle school is a perfect storm (short from self-contained classroom to more academic focus with change of classes, vast individual developmental differences among individual children, fewer years in school to develop meaningful relationships with adults, “feeder” school reality where children do not know one another and are in a larger school setting, learning to figure out social world and personal status, etc.). Two things do unite these many inquiries: Even though statewide and nationally about 10% - 12% of students are officially identified as having special needs, the inquiries represent three – six times this amount. Consequently, over ½ of the situations coming to the attention of the CSDE involve children with identified special needs. They are vulnerable targets, as are others who are perceived to be different (gender non-conforming, overweight, overbite, dress oddly, etc.) The second thing that unites virtually all of these cases is that the

perceptions of the family members who inquire about bullying tend always to be different from the perceptions from the schools' perspective. Since parents/guardians and other adults who advocate for students are not literally at school, they are experiencing what is going on vicariously. The most that the CSDE can do is place "courtesy" calls to school administrators to let them know that parents/guardians have contacted the CSDE and through these back-and-forth calls these different worlds of perception are learned.

Slide #6: "Bullying"

In a small group, sort the provided cards into 3 groups: Is the behavior listed "bullying" → Yes, No or Maybe. Place the cards on your table so it is easy to observe which cards are under which heading.

- ▶▶ Ask each group to process this task individually. Typically there is much debate around which cards fits under which heading.
- ▶▶ Remind groups to place all their cards out on the table so it is easy to see all of the cards.
- ▶▶ Once the groups have sorted their cards, ask them to get up and walk around the room and observe how other groups have sorted their cards. (Note: While everyone is on the gallery walk surreptitiously place a "meanness" card face down on each table where they are unlikely to see it until you call attention to it later.
- ▶▶ Question – "Did all of the groups sort their cards in the same way?" What did you notice?
- ▶▶ Groups typically do not sort the cards in the exact same way. You will see some similarities and some differences. We do not have a shared, clear vision of what "bullying" is.

- ▶▶ Some of the behaviors go beyond “bullying” and are best classified as protected class Harassment

Slide #7: Define Bullying

In a small group, decide which of the provided definitions of “bullying” is the best (in your opinion).

- ▶▶ Responses to this task will vary – you may have consensus or you may have differences in choosing the “best” definition.
- ▶▶ All of the provided definitions are “correct” from different perspectives – each is an actual definition from the anti-bullying laws in different states.

Slide #8: Bullying Defined

49 states with “Bullying” laws – 49 different definitions of “bullying.” There may be general themes, but defining bullying is somewhat arbitrary. In fact, in CT alone, with the four amendments to the statute since it was first passed in 2002 (2006, 2008 and 2011) the definition has changed each time.

Slide #9: Solving “Bullying” by Passing State Anti-Bullying Laws

Most states pass a “Bullying” law in response to a student tragedy.

Slide #10: The Reason for Legislation

The vast majority of states in our country have an “anti-bullying” law of some sort, as do most of the industrialized nations throughout the world. In our country, all of them without exception was legislated post-Columbine. These laws vary greatly in their specificity, force and effect. In other words, some are far weaker than others. All of them describe legal requirements (the “letter” of the law). ALL of them have been passed with the clear INTENT of creating safe environments for children in schools. This is the “spirit” of all of these laws. There is always a “gap” between the letter and the spirit of the law. It is important to recognize this gap and to work in practice to honor the wider intent and create safe schools for all school community members.

Slide #11: “Bullying” is About Abuses of Power

Is it bullying? Or is it... One person's bullying is another person's “kids will be kids,” or “that's just how they interact,” etc. These days, from the perspective of a targeted individual, EVERYTHING is initially described as “bullying” and when everything is bullying...nothing is bullying.

Slide #12: “Meanness”

Replace the card titled “Bullying” with the new card provided titled “Meanness.”

Now sort the cards into the same 3 piles: Is the behavior listed “meanness” → Yes, No or Maybe.

- ▶▶ Typically groups are much quicker to come to consensus and agree – all of the behaviors are mean. (At least clearly from the targets' perspective).
- ▶▶ Some of the behaviors listed go beyond mean and are criminal activity or protected class discrimination / harassment.
- ▶▶ We all know what meanness / mean-spirited behavior is.
- ▶▶ When we use that term as our standard in practice, it is much easier to focus on creating a positive school climate.
- ▶▶ The term “bullying” is at best confusing. The term “mean-spirited behavior” provides a clearer picture of what is occurring in many, many instances.
- ▶▶ For policy, the term “bullying” is needed, and there are true instances of “bullying”, involving abuses of power. In practice, the term “meanness” is much clearer and gives us a clear direction to move in in practice.

Slide #13: The World of Inappropriate Behavior

- ▶▶ There are three important concepts that are overlapping, but could stand alone, as well. These are Bullying, Protected Class Harassment and Criminal Behavior. It is possible that something could be bullying alone, protected class harassment alone or criminal behavior alone. A situation could also be both bullying and protected class harassment, something could be both protected class behavior and criminal and something could be criminal behavior and bullying. It is also possible that certain situations could be all three at once. What is also extremely important to be aware of is that the remaining spaces all around the VENN diagram recognize the world of hurtful mean spirited behaviors which are not appropriate or respectful may not rise to the levels of being labeled bullying, protected class harassment and/or criminal behavior. Educators must intervene with ALL of it: any kind of hurtful mean spirited behavior including but not limited to bullying, criminal behavior and protected class harassment.

Slide #14: Video: Ball Passes

Now, we're going to watch a short video. You will see students pass basketballs back and forth. Watch carefully and count the number of ball passes that happen among the student with WHITE shirts.

- ▶▶ Show the video.
- ▶▶ Ask how many passes. There will be varying answers.
- ▶▶ Then ask, "How many saw the gorilla?" Some will have missed it completely.
- ▶▶ Show the video again to allow everyone to see the gorilla. Explain that this is a fitting metaphor for bullying. When we are looking for bullying we miss seeing the gorilla (mean spirited behaviors. If we know what to look for (the "mean") we will see the gorilla.

Slide #15: “Bully” and “Bullying” are Out

Reframing the Concept of Bullying

With all of this as a backdrop, it might seem to be inevitable that there can be no clarity or consensus about how to move forward in the interest of helping students and creating the kinds of positive school climates that would truly have rare occurrences of bullying. Rather than promoting this “gloom and doom” perspective, I’d like to reframe the picture in a meaningful and practical way.

Jane Bluestein, Ph.D., in her well-researched and highly praised book, Creating Emotionally Safe Schools (Health Communications, Inc., 2001) argues that “bullying” needs to be reconceived as being an attitude rather than an act. All of the relevant research in and around the arena of bullying is unanimous in concluding that the ultimate remedy for bullying is to create and maintain the kinds of positive school climates that unconditionally do not permit any kind of mean act to occur, ***the first time*** it happens. This would be the goal. Logically, every case of bullying (repeated acts of ridicule, intimidation, etc.) began with an initial instance. Why do we have to wait until instances of any form of meanness become habitual, through repetition, before we act to intervene? Shouldn’t we want to stop it from the beginning in the first place?

Preventing a pattern from developing is a much better strategy. Because, as Bluestein states, “any act of aggression by peers [or adults] that compromises the safety of the person being targeted for that aggression in any way has a tremendous and long-lasting negative impact on a student [or adult].” When the definition of bullying is reframed in this way, as Bluestein does, we are not obligated to wait until the acts of meanness have escalated into places that are practically much more difficult to manage and turn around. Also, when the lens is widened, virtually all of the students in school will have experienced this kind of aggression. Again, as Bluestein recognizes, “fun is only fun if everybody involved agrees it’s fun. Even without malicious intent, if it hurts, if it’s mean, if it excludes, if it frightens, it will impact a [person’s] sense of safety.”

In practice, when bullying is reconceived in this way, for the critical goal of creating the most positive school climates and truly diminishing the amount of bullying behaviors, we are much more likely to make our schools safer for all students. Interventions with

those who act in mean spirited ways and those who are the vulnerable targets will always be necessary.

However, we must work simultaneously with the vast majority of the school population who “just want to get along.” These are often called the “innocent bystanders” (that 70% – 95% of the population left out from the statistics cited above) who are capable of “closing the bullying show down,” by becoming vocal advocates (allies/upstanders) for the proposition that hurting others physically or emotionally is not acceptable.

Conclusion

Schools are made up of adults and students and everyone has a role to play in helping achieve this important goal. In typical schools, about 90% of the total population are students. Only 10% of the people in schools are adults. We adults must choose to be good role models and vocal advocates for acceptable behavior, but since we are vastly outnumbered, we cannot do this alone. Students are key to creating “climates of respect” in our schools. Unless this is part of the plan, we will always be dealing with the same levels of bullying from where we start at any given point in time.

On a final note, given all of the inherent vagueness, as well as the negativity surrounding the concept of bullying itself, whenever possible the word should just not be used. In our experience in talking with parents in crisis over how their children are being treated, with parents of children who tend to be aggressive or mean toward others, as well as with school personnel who want to create and demonstrate that their schools are safe places for all, the words “bully” or “bullying” are conversation closers. This negative label stops communication rather than welcoming it. We recommend reframing the accusations and conversations by using the term “mean” instead. Even the best behaved of children are mean (intentionally and unintentionally) to others from time to time (and siblings count!) We need to talk about the behaviors (teasing, name-calling, and exclusion, etc.). Everyone understands this. In order to diminish “bullying,” no matter how trivial or severe, we in schools need to collaborate and communicate cooperatively with students, parents and community members, not create adversary relationships to solve these problems. Our collective goal must be to create the kind of

positive school climates for which we are all proud. Beginning the conversation with the words “bully” or “bullying” does not help that cause.

Slide #16: A Familiar Nursery Rhyme

This saying is a myth...words hurt...immensely and the hurt lasts.

Slide #17: The Nature of Teasing

All teasing is potentially hurtful, whether it is misunderstood and the “teaser” meant it as a joke or in good fun, a target can always take it the wrong way. “Good” teasing can be enjoyable as long as everyone fully understands what is going on and the participants ALL truly feel respected and safe and in no way marginalized. The one important caveat when there is good teasing going on is that there not be any outsiders who are just listening/observing because they will not understand the context and will assume that “bad” teasing is happening. Bad teasing falls into two categories. From a target’s perspective, both are equally hurtful. The first category is unintentional. For example, if someone recognized a person’s height characteristics not knowing that that person was particularly sensitive and hurt whenever his/her height was brought up. In such a case, the speaker had no idea that the target was sensitive to and teased by such comments. Usually, when unintentional teasing takes place and it is called to the attention of that person, he/she is remorseful, fully apologizes and it does not happen after that point. The other form of bad teasing is when the “teaser” intends to hurt the target by knowingly using comments that are meant to harm. In many cases, such intentional bad teasing is used as a way to impress others and move up the social ladder. Intentional bad teasing is often sloughed off as “just being a joke” when in reality it is anything but a joke. The teasers just try to get out of the situation by pinning it on the fact that it was “just a joke.”

Slide #18: Dangerous “Weapons” in School

By far, some of the most hurtful forms of peer cruelty that are experienced on a daily basis in schools are the mean and hurtful words and exclusionary behavior that students fling at one another and subject one another to. In a very real sense, words are dangerous and injurious weapons. When students call each other names, put one

another down, use racial, sexual and homophobic slurs, they are hurting each other beyond belief. These “silent” weapons are devastating and are almost always where instances of physical violence began. Mean-spirited language is heard and exclusionary behavior experienced on a daily basis by about 90% of a school community and most commonly is directed toward girls/women, perceived non-heterosexual individuals and groups, those who are under or over weight as well as racial and religious groups. In recent years, using homophobic language has become pervasive, even for elementary-age students. Students can be heard describing something they don’t like as being “gay,” For example, telling someone that the lunch in the cafeteria is “gay” is to others ears as being a lousy lunch. Adults very often treat this kind of language as “background noise.” In other words, since it is so commonplace, it is entirely ignored. This can no longer be condoned and treated as such. No matter what anyone thinks about homosexuality from a moral or religious perspective, the emotional and physical violence that occurs in reaction to non-heterosexuality cannot be condoned.

“Whether a [boy or] girl is or isn’t gay is less important than if and when homophobia is used as a weapon against a [boy or] girl to put [him or] her down and isolate [him or] her.” Rosalind Wiseman, Queen Bees & Wannabes

It is not necessary to engage in any kind of discussion or argument about whether someone chooses to be non-heterosexual or whether it is innate. The only thing that needs to be understood and enforced is that if ***any form of language hurts another, it cannot be allowed***; homophobic language is of this kind. Students and/or adults may believe that no one in their worlds is non-heterosexual and that this kind of language is permissible because no one hearing it will be negatively affected. In reality, this may or may not be true, but someone’s relative or friend is, and even hearing language used in a pejorative way hurts more than anyone could know.

Slide #19: Sarcasm

This simple cartoon highlights the hurt of sarcasm. Sarcasm comes from a Greek root and means “the tearing of flesh.” Peppermint Patty enters the principal’s office and speaks to him behind his desk, “Yes, sir...I’d like to protest a grade that my teacher gave me on our last test...Look a ‘Z-Minus’! That’s not a grade, that’s **sarcasm!!**” Most students, no matter their age, never understand sarcasm. They are never sure if it is a joke or not. And, importantly, anyone, including parents/guardians whose native language is not English will never understand sarcasm. Sarcasm should not be used in school if at all possible.

Slide #20: Where Students See, Hear & Learn Hurtful Language

Children learn to use mean-spirited and hurtful language from a variety of sources:

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| ▶▶ Parents and all other adult mentors | ▶▶ Idols |
| ▶▶ Bus drivers, coaches, teachers, supervisors, community leaders | ▶▶ Celebrities |
| ▶▶ Virtually any adult | ▶▶ Young people |
| ▶▶ Popular culture | ▶▶ Friends |
| ▶▶ Media | ▶▶ Siblings |
| | ▶▶ Virtually any peer |

Any form of hurtful language has the capacity to escalate from words to threats to physical assaults. It must all be taken very seriously and stopped as early in the cycle as possible.

Two consistent sources for learning this inappropriate use of language are the media and school busses. There is not a kindergarten child alive who gets on the bus during the first days of school and has thoughts about being mean to others in this setting. But, by watching the older children’s verbal and physical behavior on the bus, they learn that riding the bus includes hurting others with words and deeds. Unfortunately, typical adult response to what goes on during the bus rides to and from school is to ignore it and pretend that it just isn’t happening and it is “kids just being kids”. There is not a an adult or child who can settle down to their relative jobs if they have experienced a stressful trip to “work.” Issues of hurt that get off the busses with children in the

mornings must be dealt with in administrative offices and classrooms, if they are ever to be managed and diminished.

Slide #21: Solutions Through Conventional Wisdom

There are interventions that are commonly used to solve “bullying” issues that should not be considered, because they do not work. Although peer and/or adult mediation or conflict resolution can be extremely useful interventions in some contexts, this tool is not a good intervention in true cases of bullying where there is an imbalance of power between the perpetrator and the target. Mediation tends to widen the power imbalance, not close it because bullying is about power, not conflict. Also, talking to and advising those who are targeting others simply not to do it does not work. These individuals require long-term education to develop empathy. Simply telling them not to hurt others has little to no effect. And, talking to and telling targeted students to self-advocate in some way is unfair and unrealistic; if they could have self-advocated in the beginning, they would not be targets. Finally, ignoring those who watch others hurt and be hurt by their peers and stand by doing nothing to help and intervene is unfortunately far too common. Bystanders (adult and student, active – laughing along, encouraging, etc. or passive – just watching with no participation) need to be developed into a community of “alies” or “upstanders.”

Slide #22: Physical Safety

Safety is really a continuum. 99.9% of physical harm began with earlier manifestations of emotional harm that escalated because it was not intervened with at these lower levels. All of the research confirms that if one-time, lower levels of mean-spirited words and deeds are stopped, they don’t escalate.

Slide #23: Ultimate Remedy for Bullying

The very real remedy for all forms of mean-spirited behavior, including but not limited to bullying and harassment is to create the kind of positive school climate that does not support these hurtful behaviors.