



Bullying of Children Series

This Month's Topic:

Responding to Bullying

Introduction

How should schools, teachers and others associated with the school respond to bullying? It is essential that bullying not only be addressed as serious and unacceptable in a school but also that when it occurs that it is handled immediately. When adults respond quickly and consistently to bullying behavior they send the message that it is not acceptable. Research shows this can stop bullying behavior over time. There are simple steps adults can take to stop bullying on the spot and keep kids safe. This issues of ***NASET's Bullying of Children*** series will focus on school response to bullying. It will lay out step-by-step approaches to addressing bullying in schools and point out what to do and not to do in various situation.

Stop Bullying on the Spot

When adults respond quickly and consistently to bullying behavior they send the message that it is not acceptable. Research shows this can stop bullying behavior over time. There are simple steps adults can take to stop bullying on the spot and keep kids safe.

Do:

- Intervene immediately. It is ok to get another adult to help.
- Separate the kids involved.
- Make sure everyone is safe.
- Meet any immediate medical or mental health needs.
- Stay calm. Reassure the kids involved, including bystanders.

- Model respectful behavior when you intervene.

Avoid these common mistakes:

- Don't ignore it. Don't think kids can work it out without adult help.
- Don't immediately try to sort out the facts.
- Don't force other kids to say publicly what they saw.
- Don't question the children involved in front of other kids.
- Don't talk to the kids involved together, only separately.
- Don't make the kids involved apologize or patch up relations on the spot.

Get police help or medical attention immediately if:

- A weapon is involved.
- There are threats of serious physical injury.
- There are threats of hate-motivated violence, such as racism or homophobia.
- There is serious bodily harm.
- There is sexual abuse.
- Anyone is accused of an illegal act, such as robbery or extortion—using force to get money, property, or services.

Find Out What Happened

Whether you've just stopped bullying on the spot or a child has reached out to you for help, follow the steps below to determine the best way to proceed.

Get the Facts

- Keep all the involved children separate.
- Get the story from several sources, both adults and kids.
- Listen without blaming.
- Don't call the act "bullying" while you are trying to understand what happened.
- It may be difficult to get the whole story, especially if multiple students are involved or the bullying involves social bullying or cyberbullying. Collect all available information.

Determine if it's Bullying

There are many behaviors that look like bullying but require different approaches. It is important to determine whether the situation is bullying or something else.

Review the definition of bullying. State law and school policy may have additional guidelines for defining bullying behavior.

To determine if this is bullying or something else, consider the following questions:

- What is the history between the kids involved? Have there been past conflicts?
- Is there a power imbalance? Remember that a power imbalance is not limited to physical strength. It is sometimes not easily recognized. If the targeted child feels like there is a power imbalance, there probably is.
- Has this happened before? Is the child worried it will happen again?
- Have the kids dated? There are special responses for teen dating violence.

- Are any of the kids involved with a gang? Gang violence has different interventions.

Remember that it may not matter “who started it.” Some kids who are bullied may be seen as annoying or provoking, but this does not excuse the bullying behavior.

Once you have determined if the situation is bullying, support the kids involved.

Support the Kids Involved

All kids involved in bullying—whether they are bullied, bully others, or see bullying—can be affected. It is important to support all kids involved to make sure the bullying doesn’t continue and effects can be minimized.

Support Kids Who are Bullied

- **Listen and focus on the child.** Learn what’s been going on and show you want to help.
- **Assure the child that bullying is not their fault.**
- **Know that kids who are bullied may struggle with talking about it.** Consider referring them to a school counselor, psychologist, or other mental health service.
- **Give advice about what to do.** This may involve role-playing and thinking through how the child might react if the bullying occurs again.
- **Work together to resolve the situation and protect the bullied child.** The child, parents, and school or organization may all have valuable input. It may help to:
 - Ask the child being bullied what can be done to make him or her feel safe. Remember that changes to routine should be minimized. He or she is not at fault and should not be singled out. For example, consider rearranging classroom or bus seating plans for everyone. If bigger moves are necessary, such as switching classrooms or bus routes, the child who is bullied should not be forced to change.
 - Develop a game plan. Maintain open communication between schools, organizations, and parents. Discuss the steps that are taken and the limitations around what can be done based on policies and laws. Remember, the law does not allow school personnel to discuss discipline, consequences, or services given to other children.
- **Be persistent.** Bullying may not end overnight. Commit to making it stop and consistently support the bullied child.
- **Avoid these mistakes:**
 - Never tell the child to ignore the bullying.
 - Do not blame the child for being bullied. Even if he or she provoked the bullying, no one deserves to be bullied.
 - Do not tell the child to physically fight back against the kid who is bullying. It could get the child hurt, suspended, or expelled.
 - Parents should resist the urge to contact the other parents involved. It may make matters worse. School or other officials can act as mediators between parents.
- **Follow-up.** Show a commitment to making bullying stop. Because bullying is behavior that repeats or has the potential to be repeated, it takes consistent effort to ensure that it stops.

Address Bullying Behavior

Parents, school staff, and organizations all have a role to play.

- **Make sure the child knows what the problem behavior is.** Young people who bully must learn their behavior is wrong and harms others.
- **Show kids that bullying is taken seriously.** Calmly tell the child that bullying will not be tolerated. Model respectful behavior when addressing the problem.
- **Work with the child to understand some of the reasons he or she bullied.** For example:
 - Sometimes children bully to fit in. These kids can benefit from participating in positive activities. Involvement in sports and clubs can enable them to take leadership roles and make friends without feeling the need to bully.

- Other times kids act out because something else—issues at home, abuse, stress—is going on in their lives. They also may have been bullied. These kids may be in need of additional support, such as mental health services.
- **Use consequences to teach.** Consequences that involve learning or building empathy can help prevent future bullying. School staff should remember to follow the guidelines in their student code of conduct and other policies in developing consequences and assigning discipline. For example, the child who bullied can:
 - Lead a class discussion about how to be a good friend.
 - Write a story about the effects of bullying or benefits of teamwork.
 - Role-play a scenario or make a presentation about the importance of respecting others, the negative effects of gossip, or how to cooperate.
 - Do a project about civil rights and bullying.
 - Read a book about bullying.
 - Make posters for the school about cyberbullying and being smart online.
- **Involve the kid who bullied in making amends or repairing the situation.** The goal is to help them see how their actions affect others. For example, the child can:
 - Write a letter apologizing to the student who was bullied.
 - Do a good deed for the person who was bullied or for others in your community.
 - Clean up, repair, or pay for any property they damaged.
- **Avoid strategies that don't work or have negative consequences.**
 - Zero tolerance or “three strikes, you're out” strategies don't work. Suspending or expelling students who bully does not reduce bullying behavior. Students and teachers may be less likely to report and address bullying if suspension or expulsion is the consequence.
 - Conflict resolution and peer mediation don't work for bullying. Bullying is not a conflict between people of equal power who share equal blame. Facing those who have bullied may further upset kids who have been bullied.
 - Group treatment for students who bully doesn't work. Group members tend to reinforce bullying behavior in each other.
- **Follow-up.** After the bullying issue is resolved, continue finding ways to help the child who bullied to understand how what they do affects other people. For example, praise acts of kindness or talk about what it means to be a good friend.

Support Bystanders Who Witness Bullying

Even if kids are not bullied or bullying others they can be affected by bullying. Many times, when they see bullying, they may not know what to do to stop it. They may not feel safe stepping in in the moment, but there are many other steps they can take.