

National Association of Special Education Teachers (NASET)

THE PRACTICAL TEACHER

This Month's Topic:

Bullies: Turning Around Negative Behaviors

Bullying in school is usually a hidden problem. The teaching staff typically is unaware of how widespread bullying is in their building and may not even recognize the seriousness of bullying incidents that do come to their attention. Teachers who are serious about reducing bullying behaviors must (1) assess the extent of the bullying problem in their classrooms, (2) ensure that the class understands what bullying is and why it is wrong, (3) confront any student engaged in bullying in a firm but fair manner, and (4) provide appropriate and consistent consequences for bullying.

1. Assess the Extent of the Bullying Problem

By pooling information collected through direct observation, conversations with other staff, and student surveys, teachers can get a good idea of the amount and severity of bullying in their classroom. To more accurately assess bullying among students, a teacher can do the following:

- Drop by unexpectedly to observe your class in a less-structured situation (e.g., at lunch, on the playground). Watch for patterns of bullying by individuals or groups of students. Signs of direct bullying could include pushing, hitting, or kicking. Also be on the lookout for prolonged teasing, name-calling, and other forms of verbal harassment. If you should overhear students gossiping about a classmate or see evidence that an individual has been excluded from a group, these may well be signs of indirect bullying. Note the names of children who appear to be instigators of bullying, as well as those who seem to be victims.
- A single teacher alone is not likely to see enough student behavior to be able to accurately pick out bullies and victims in his or her own classroom. Ask other school staff that interact with your students (e.g., gym teacher) whom they have may have observed bullying or being victimized within your class or other classes in the same grade. Note the students whose names keep coming up as suspected bullies or victims. Monitor children thought to be bullies especially closely to ensure that they do not have opportunities to victimize other children.
- Create a simple survey on the topic of school bullying. Have your students complete this survey anonymously. Questions to ask on the questionnaire might include "Where does bullying happen in this school?" and "How many times have you been bullied this year?" If your school administrator approves, you may also ask students to give the names of specific children whom they believe are bullies.

NOTE: When administering this survey to students, you should also share with them the names of trusted adults in the building with whom they can talk in confidence if they are currently victims of bullying.

2. Ensure That the Class Understands the Definition of 'Bullying'

Children may not always know when their behavior crosses the line and becomes bullying. Two important goals in asserting control over bullying are to create shared expectations for appropriate conduct and to build a common understanding of what behaviors should be defined as 'bullying'. To accomplish these objectives, a teacher can:

- Hold a class meeting in which students come up with rules for appropriate behaviors. Rules should be limited in number (no more than 3-4) and be framed in positive terms (that is, stating what students should do instead of what they should avoid doing). Here are several sample rules:
 - o Treat others with courtesy and respect.
 - o Make everyone feel welcome and included.
 - o Help others who are being bullied or picked on.
 - Create a shared definition for bullying with the class by having them identify behaviors that are 'bullying' behaviors. List these behaviors on the board. If students focus only on examples of direct bullying, remind them not to overlook indirect bullying (e.g., gossip, excluding others from a group). Tell the class that when you see examples of bullying occurring, you plan to intervene to keep the classroom a safe and friendly place to learn.
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3. Confront Students Engaged in Bullying in a Firm But Fair Manner

When a teacher communicates to the class that bullying will not be tolerated and then intervenes quickly and consistently whenever he or she observes bullying taking place, that instructor sends a clear message to students that bullying will not be tolerated.

Bullies are often quite skilled at explaining away situations in which adults have caught them bullying. When confronted, they may say, for example, "I was just kidding around" or "Nothing happened"--even when the evidence clearly suggests otherwise. You can avoid disputes with students by adopting the 'I-centered' rule for evaluating misbehavior.

A. Tell your class that it offends or bothers you when you witness certain kinds of hurtful student behaviors (e.g., teasing, name-calling). Emphasize that when you see such behavior occurring, you will intervene, regardless of whether the offending student meant to be hurtful.

B. If you witness suspected bullying, immediately approach the child responsible, describe the negative behavior that you witnessed, explain why that behavior is a violation of classroom expectations, and impose a consequence (e.g., warning, apology to victim, brief timeout, loss of privilege). Keep the conversation focused on facts of the bully's observed behavior and do not let the bully pull the victim into the discussion.

C. If the bully's behaviors continue despite your surveillance and intervention, impose more severe consequences (e.g. temporary loss of playground privileges).

Here are additional tips to keep in mind when confronting students who bully:

- When you confront a student for bullying, do so in private whenever possible. A private discussion will remove the likelihood that the confronted student will 'play to the audience' of classmates and become defiant or non-compliant. If you must call a student on his or her bullying behavior in public, do so briefly and in a business-like manner. Then arrange to have a private discussion with the student at a later time to discuss the bullying incident in greater detail.
- Find an adult in the school with whom the student who bullies has a close relationship. Enlist that adult to sit down with the bully to have a 'heart-to-heart' talk. The adult should be willing to discuss with the student the problems created by his or her bullying behavior, to express disappointment with the student's conduct and to encourage the student to stop his or her bullying. This conference is not intended to be punitive. However, the student should feel at the end of the talk that, while he or she is valued, the student's bullying behavior hurts and disappoints those who care about the student.

4. Provide Appropriate and Consistent Consequences for Bullying

Schools should remember that the relationship between a bully and his or her victim is coercive in nature, and that the bully always wields power unfairly over that victim. Strategies for addressing student conflict such as peer mediation, therefore, tend to be ineffective in bullying situations, as the bully can always use his or her power advantage to intimidate the victim. The most sensible disciplinary approach that teachers can use with bullies is to make sure that they are watched carefully and that adults follow up with firm consequences for each bullying incident. When providing consequences for bullying, the teacher should consider these strategies:

- Assemble a list of appropriate behavioral consequences for bullying. Include lesser consequences for isolated instances of bullying and greater consequences for chronic or more serious bullying. Share those consequences with your class. (In fact, you may want to enlist students to help generate items on the list!) Whenever a student is observed bullying a classmate, intervene and apply a consequence from the list. For example, a student who bullies during lunch might be required to spend several days seated away from his or her friends at a supervised lunch table. If a group or class participates in a bullying incident (e.g., children at a lunch table socially ostracizing a new student), hold the entire group accountable and impose a disciplinary consequence on each group member.
- If one of your students takes advantage of unsupervised trips from the room (e.g., bathroom break) to seek out and bully other children, restrict that student's movements by requiring that the student be supervised by an adult at all times when out of the classroom. When you are satisfied that the student's behaviors have improved enough to trust him or her once again to travel out of the room without adult supervision, let the student know that he or she is 'on probation' and that you will reinstate these school 'travel restrictions' if you hear future reports of bullying.
- When you observe a student engaging in a clear pattern of bullying, arrange a conference with that child's parents. At that conference, share with them the information that suggests that the child is bullying other students. Enlist their help to stop the child's bullying. (You will probably

want the child to attend that conference so that he or she will understand clearly that the school is monitoring his or her bullying behavior and will impose negative consequences if it continues.)

- Develop a 'reward chart' for the student who bullies. Tell the student that you will put a sticker on the student's chart for each day that you do not receive reports from other teachers or from students and do not directly observed bullying or 'unkind behavior'. Let the student know that if he or she manages to collect a certain number of stickers within a certain number of days (e.g., 4 stickers across a 5-day period) for good behaviors, the student can redeem them for a prize or privilege.

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