When nearly one in five students is bullied each year, it’s no wonder the topic is on educators’ minds. Teachers want to make their classrooms safe, supportive learning environments. Administrators want positive school climates. Both are looking for tools to reach these goals.

To meet their needs, Teaching Tolerance offers an abundance of professional development tools, classroom activities, magazine articles and blogs dedicated to the topic. When you have an immediate question, though, finding what you’re looking for among such extensive resources can be daunting.

That’s why we’ve put together this quick reference, answering questions we hear frequently from the Teaching Tolerance community. The information below will get you started and point you toward more in-depth resources.

**What is bullying?**

Bullying has three key components—unwanted, aggressive behavior; a real or perceived power imbalance, and repetition; and the potential to be repeated over time (stopbullying.gov). The combination of these three factors creates a situation that moves beyond conflict to become persistent persecution.

**What is the connection between bias and bullying?**

There’s a strong correlation between bias and bullying. The targets of bullies are often from a group marginalized because of a certain characteristic (such as race, immigration status, sexual orientation, religion, ethnicity, gender expression/identity or size) about which others hold prejudiced assumptions.

In a large study of California middle and high school students conducted by University of Arizona professor Stephen T. Russell, nearly 40 percent reported that they had been bullied within the past year. Analyzing the incidents, Russell concluded that 75 percent of all bullying came from some type of bias.

**What’s the most effective tool against bullying?**

Prevention. By creating an inclusive learning environment that supports all students, educators maintain a space that is inhospitable to those who would bully. Everyone—including administrators, teachers, cafeteria staff, bus drivers, assistants, substitute teachers, parents/guardians and students—has a role to play in creating an anti-bullying climate in your school, and the culture must exist from the cafeteria to the classroom.

- Watch Teaching Tolerance’s award-winning film, *Bullied*, to kick off your
school’s middle or high school anti-bullying efforts.

- Break down social barriers by participating in Mix It Up at Lunch Day.
- Teachers and administrators should take these 5 Steps to Safer Schools.
- Students can learn about bullying and plan an anti-bullying initiative using this activity.
- Examine the role principals play in creating an inclusive school culture with this Professional Development video.
- Create a school climate or anti-bullying team using our Responding to Hate and Bias at School guide (see worksheet 1).

How do I know if students are being bullied at my school?

Just because you don’t see obvious bullying in your classroom doesn’t mean it isn’t happening at your school. Bullying often happens when—and where—adults aren’t present.

The only way to be sure your school is the inclusive environment you want it to be is to closely examine your school climate on a regular basis. This includes making sure students know how to report bullying and feel safe doing so. Sometimes just asking the right questions and letting students know they can talk to you makes all the difference.

Also remember that not all bullying looks the same. Harder-to-detect actions, such as spreading rumors or isolating a student from friends, can also constitute bullying. Students may hesitate to even call the harassment they’re enduring “bullying.” Other phrases, such as “there was drama” or “she was messing with me,” may clue you in on the situation.

- Start the process of examining your school climate with our questionnaire.
- Look for these warning signs a student may be being bullied.
- Review some easily identifiable indicators of bias-based bullying.

Which students are most vulnerable to bullying?

Any child at any school may be the target of bullying, but certain children are at higher risk. Teachers should be especially attentive to students who exhibit the following risk factors, defined by stopbullying.gov:

- Are perceived as different from their peers, such as being overweight or underweight, wearing glasses or different clothing, being new to a school, or being unable to afford what kids consider “cool”
- Are perceived as weak or unable to defend themselves
- Are depressed, anxious, or have low self-esteem
- Are less popular than others and have few friends
- Do not get along well with others, seen as annoying or provoking, or antagonize others for attention

How do I know a student isn’t lying about being bullied?

Kids typically resist reporting bullying—just admitting they’re being targeted can be embarrassing. They may also fear if they report the harassment, it will only bring more attention to the situation, escalating the bullying. If a child tells you he’s being bullied, believe him.

Are remarks or behavior based on religious belief exempt from bullying rules?

No. Any behavior that meets the definition of bullying above is indeed bullying—even if the motivation for said behavior is an individual’s religious beliefs.

Now that I know bullying is occurring, what can I do to stop it?
First and foremost, it is essential that you understand your school’s anti-bullying policies. Being familiar with these expectations allows you to respond appropriately and immediately. If you school doesn’t have an explicit anti-bullying policy, our Responding to Hate and Bias at School guide can help you create one.

It is also important to remember that anti-bullying measures should address bullying behavior. Never label a child a bully. Bullying is an action, not an identity. When bullying is addressed constructively, it is possible to both support the bullied child and transform the behavior of the child who has been bullying others.

- These bullying guidelines highlight appropriate and inappropriate educator responses to bullying.
- “Bully, Bullied, Bystander… and Beyond” examines the various players in a bullying incident.
- Two new Teaching Tolerance guides, Speak Up at School and Responding to Hate and Bias at School, provide detailed information about responding to bullying incidents on both individual and institutional levels.

**What role do students play in preventing and responding to bullying?**

Because bullying so often happens when adults aren’t present, it’s especially important that students be empowered to stand up against bullying and biased language.

Speak Up at School is a great place to start. It provides strategies for speaking up against biased speech from peers. The Speak Up Pocket Guide is another great way to start the conversation and keep bullying top of mind throughout kids’ days.

Students should also be informed about the school’s anti-bullying policies—including how to appropriately report bullying behavior. Kids are an invaluable resource when it comes time to update these policies as well. By including them in meetings and conducting student bullying surveys, educators can take advantage of their students’ on-the-ground perspective.

**My school wants to include language about anti-gay bullying in its bullying policy. Bullying is bullying, right? Why give special protection to specific groups?**

Students who are perceived by their peers as being “different” are at heightened risk of being bullied. Because of this, certain groups of students—such as LGBT students, children with special needs and English-language learners—are statistically more likely to be bullied. By specifically mentioning them in anti-bullying policies and providing them specific supports, schools are more likely to create an inclusive atmosphere that neutralizes that heightened risk.

- Learn ways to support at risk students and their families with our ELL Best Practices Collection.

**Students live in a world of digital communication. How can I ensure none of my students are targeted by cyberbullying?**

It would be impossible for educators to follow every tweet or Facebook post of their students, but teachers and administrators do have a responsibility to keep abreast of the digital landscape their students live in. Include questions on your annual anti-bullying survey about the social-media climate of your school. Talk with students about their online communication, and set the same inclusive expectations that apply to hallway and classroom conversations.

- Teaching Tolerance’s new guide, Responding to Hate and Bias at School,
has an entire section on preventing cyberbullying.

Do teachers ever bully?

Unfortunately, yes. We addressed the problem in “Bully at the Blackboard” in the Fall 2011 issue of Teaching Tolerance magazine. It is essential for every person at a school be aware of biased-language and other forms of bullying, regardless of their source. Speak Up at School gives practical advice to help educators speak up against biased language and intolerance from students, peers, and even administrators.

I’ve heard people say bullying isn’t serious; it’s just a matter of kids being kids. Is this true?

This is a dangerous myth. Bullying causes serious harm to children, including depression, school avoidance, drug use and poor grades. It also is part of the progression up the “Pyramid of Hate” described by the Anti-Defamation League and Survivors of the Shoah Visual History Foundation.

Isn’t it better to let kids learn how to deal with bullying on their own?

Just as society doesn’t expect victims of other types of abuse (such as child maltreatment or domestic abuse) to “deal with it on their own,” we shouldn’t expect this from the targets of bullying. Adults have critical roles to play in helping to stop bullying (stopbullying.gov/respond).

Why not just reassign students who are being bullied to different schedules, lockers or homerooms?

By forcing the targets of bullying to modify their behavior, you are in essence punishing them for the harassment they are suffering rather than engaging with the real issue—the bullying behavior of another child or other children. This, and other similar approaches—like telling an LGBT student to dress differently to avoid bullying—are both offensive and ineffective. Far better is to address the bullying incident head-on, thus moving toward an inclusive school climate that will prevent further problems.

Are zero-tolerance anti-bullying policies necessary?

No, they are not. Zero-tolerance policies have been shown to be ineffective in addressing any type of misbehavior, including bullying, and they carry heavy consequences for students, such as higher drop-out and incarceration rates. Policies that reward positive behavior—such as reparative justice, Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports, and behavior contracts—are far more effective discipline tools.

Bullying is a complex issue—one that deserves careful consideration and response. To explore all of Teaching Tolerance's anti-bullying resources, click here.

Add new comment

Comments

Bullying comes in all flavours
Submitted by Anonymous on 18 March 2013 - 8:08pm.

If you would think the strong and tough are save, you are wrong. Bullying makes no exceptions. Everyone can become a target.

reply
Bullying the Mentally Ill

Some kids are bullied because they are "weird". Many of us who live with mental illness report being bullied, but you fail to include us on your list.

reply

bullying the mentally ill
Submitted by Anonymous on 20 August 2013 - 1:26pm.

I agreee these kids are seveely overlooked by the school environment when it comes to bullying..I am a career teacher with over 35 yrs of experience but have 3 children all at varying degrees of being on the "spectrum" aspergers ocd full blown autism..they were always harassed bullied etc and complaints ALWAYS fell on deaf ears at their elmem middle school and esp their high schools...my oldest daughter had 2 teachers who bullied her relentlesly..sad sad ..no excuse for it and it has haunted them ever since...I stepped in toaddress it at each level..but was also ignore put off etc by the administrations..

reply