

Discussing Bullying Behaviors with Teens: Tips for Adults at School and Home

Bullying is a common problem affecting youth of all ages and it can have a negative impact on every student, as well as the climate of a school community. Bullying has been shown to affect students' social and emotional well-being and their overall physical health. In addition, whether they experience bullying or are simply afraid that they or their peers will be bullied, students' achievement and ability to attend to learning can be negatively affected. There is also evidence that bullying may be linked to sexual harassment and dating violence.

Adolescent development can pose some unique challenges to the implementation of bullying prevention and intervention strategies. This tip sheet is intended for adults at home and school. It includes both common misconceptions and suggestions to help adults better understand some of these issues and how to respond most effectively.

Common misconceptions about helping teens deal with bullying problems:

Myth #1: Teens need to “work things out” between themselves. This common misconception assumes adolescents can (and should) be left to resolve bullying problems on their own. Certainly adolescents should take more responsibility for all kinds of problem solving, but bullying is a form of abuse, not a conflict to be “worked out.” Also, the increasing complexity of teens' social problems often exceeds the sophistication of their social skills. As a result, they can get themselves into a variety of painful social dilemmas without the tools to effectively resolve things on their own. Bystander peers can be a great support when they are given strategies to offer help on-the-spot or support after the fact. But relying upon positive bystander behavior is not a substitute for proactive and effective adult responses to bullying incidents. Unfortunately, adults tend to back off when they should step in—thinking that doing so will improve teens' social problem-solving skills and independence. At the same time, teens tend to shut out adults who might be able to advise and assist them in resolving painful interactions with their peers or adults at school.

Adults at home and school can offer teens critical support:

- Be clear that adults are interested and available 24/7 in all aspects of their teens' lives. Opportunities to talk openly with adolescents often have to be on their terms and in their own time. Learn to ask open-ended questions to encourage communication.
- Praise, support, and encourage teens as often as possible for the good choices they make. It can be easy to focus on criticizing their poor choices or annoying behavior, so try to build up a bank of good feelings to improve personal rapport.
- Listen before offering advice; then ask what help or strategies would be most useful for them. Adolescents are often ambivalent about asking for adult help and often need to let off steam first. They may feel that adults “don't get it” when offering strategies or solutions too quickly. If, however, teens seem in imminent danger, adults should firmly step in and offer assurances to adolescents about ways they will protect their privacy and prevent retaliation.

- Provide a variety of opportunities to role play or rehearse realistic social dilemmas and problems that encourage students to go outside of their comfort and ability zones. In school, use literature, videos, and other real-life scenarios as opportunities to discuss social issues and the impact of particular choices.
- At school, use opportunities in all classes to talk about the ramifications of common responses to social problems. Then brainstorm and analyze alternative actions students might make. For example:

Situation: Someone makes a snide comment about another student’s race or appearance. Another student sees what happens but just laughs or doesn’t say anything.

Discussion: What else could the student who watched have done instead? What might be some pros and cons of those choices?

- At home, make uninterrupted time for conversations with your teen. Research has found that remarkable things can happen if parents and caregivers spent at least 15 minutes of undivided time a day listening and talking with their kids. If general conversation time is established, teens are more likely to open up and ask for help when needed. Research also tells us that children (even teens) really do look to their parents and caregivers for advice and help about difficult choices and decisions. A helpful resource that frames questions parents can ask to start discussions about bullying with their teens is “15+ Make Time to Listen, Take Time to Talk...About Bullying” which can be found at: <http://store.samhsa.gov/product/SMA08-4321>.
- Always encourage teens to come to you with any concerns about school, whether related to their own experiences or about things they might notice with friends or peers.
- It is particularly important for adults (both at home and at school) to understand that older students are much less likely than younger children to report bullying they have experienced. So pay close attention whenever teens do reveal bullying in conversations. In addition, adults must be more observant of teens’ behavior and take the initiative to talk with them should they suspect that the youth has been targeted by their peers.

General Discussion Starters Include:

- What does “bullying” mean to you?
- How are students at your school bullied?
- Do you know of kids at your school who are left out?
- Do you ever feel lonely at school or left out of activities? What happened and what was that experience like for you?
- What is lunch time like at your school? Who do you sit with, what do you do, and what do you talk about?
- What’s it like to ride the school bus (or walk to school)?
- Do kids ever call others mean names, or tease them? Has this ever happened to you?
- Talk more about how you feel and what you do when this happens.
- What about physical bullying in your school? Have kids been bullied by being hit or pushed, or physically hurt in other ways?
 - Do you believe there are kids who are scared to go to school because they were afraid of being bullied?
 - Have you ever been scared to go to school because you were afraid of being bullied?
 - Have kids ever bullied you by hitting or pushing you or other things like that? Let’s talk about

what you do when this happens.

- Does anyone try to help when someone is being bullied?
- What do you think would be helpful to stop bullying at school?

Myth #2: By high school, students should have all the skills they need to make and keep friends.

Adolescents are beginning to form more adult-like friendships based on common interests and values. Yet, longstanding friendships sometimes dissolve and students may “try out” different kinds of relationships. Even the most popular and socially adept adolescents may lack some basic relationship skills that might help them make and keep solid friendships.

Help adolescents develop relationship-building skills:

- Offer vocabulary to help teens express nuances in feelings such as sadness, frustration, discomfort and anger, as well as satisfaction, pride, joy, and love (e.g. ask about feelings they are experiencing; gently encourage them to be more specific when they describe their feelings).
- Offer strategies about how to maintain friendships and negotiate dating relationships (e.g. explore ways to graciously give and accept compliments or criticism; discuss qualities of a “true friend” as opposed to an “acquaintance;” discuss the definition and importance of empathy).
- Suggest ways of creating healthy boundaries in relationships (e.g. demonstrate and practice how to say “no” in situations that are socially uncomfortable; discuss the value of trusting their own feelings when faced with peer pressure).
- Set a good example and model positive behavior for dealing with conflicts and difficult people (e.g. be respectful even with people you don’t like or agree with; talk about consequences when you didn’t handle a situation well).
- Discuss ways of dealing with cliques and normal shifts in friendships (e.g. offer emotional support and problem-solving opportunities).

Myth #3: Group activities always help students learn to work well with others. Learning to work cooperatively in a variety of situations and with different groups of people is an important life skill. Teamwork is critical for success, both in the workforce and in all personal relationships. However, while group projects do provide opportunities for students to practice working well with others, these situations are sometimes fraught with difficulties that can bring out the worst in even the best students.

Group work can be more successful, when skills for working together are taught:

- Build into each project a brief team-building or ice breaker activity that helps students learn more about their common interests and other facts about the group that help them feel more comfortable with each other.
- If project work outside of the school day is required, ensure that all students involved share needed contact information with each other and set guidelines for using that information.
- Discuss the importance of disagreeing without being disagreeable, the types of common conflicts that can arise when groups work together, how to negotiate such conflicts, and

graceful ways to share credit. Practice responses that students might make in different situations in class and outside of class.

- Assign group roles that do not reinforce social hierarchies. Encourage the group to promote individual group members' strengths and a democratic group process. For example, rather than assigning roles like leader, secretary, or reporter; suggest roles such as facilitator, analyst, negotiator, delegator, design advisor, etc., and assist the group with decisions (if necessary) as to who might assume each role.

Myth #4: "We can't talk about that." There are certain topics that may feel taboo for adults and teens to discuss, but from a bullying prevention and intervention point of view, it is critical for adults and teens to have open discussions about important issues. Some biases and stereotypes result in particularly cruel bullying behaviors during the adolescent years. If these issues are left unaddressed, they may escalate, causing severe emotional trauma and even suicide attempts.

Talk with teens:

- In particular, biases regarding body image, gender stereotypes, dating relationships, sexual orientation, racial and class privilege, and cyber technology etiquette and safety are key topics that need to be addressed openly.
- Teens need to have trusted adults with whom they can talk comfortably about difficult subjects.

Myth #5: Intervention at the classroom level takes too much time. At the secondary level, teachers raise legitimate concerns about finding the time to focus on bullying prevention. While it does take thought and preparation, integrating bullying prevention discussions does not have to cut into academic time. These discussions should be viewed as "built in" rather than an "add on."

Note: High School teachers and parents may be surprised by the fact that high school students often report that one of the most common "hot spots" for bullying in the school is "in the classroom, with the teacher present." This can cause acting out or resisting behaviors that take time from instruction. Creating a classroom that provides a safe climate, free from bullying behaviors, and respect for all students can create MORE time to devote to teaching.

Build anti-bullying messages into the school culture:

- Regular class meetings are a part of the OBPP model, where students have the time to discuss social issues that are important to them, related to building a positive school climate. Most secondary schools are able to utilize advisory, team, or study periods for structured class meetings. Homerooms are another option, but frequently have to be extended to allow enough time for meaningful discussion.
- Classroom teachers (regardless of the content area they teach) are key in a student's life, but advisory staff, teaching specialists, school librarians, health educators, and school resource officers also play important roles. District administrators and building principals can provide

leadership to emphasize the importance of preventing bullying to improve learner outcomes and to ensure all staff members have time and flexibility to address critical issues with students.

- Outside of school, parents, coaches, and other youth leaders are key in supporting bullying prevention and intervention conversations at home and in extra-curricular activities, and they can actively communicate with schools about difficulties teens might have. It's important to include parents as partners at a time when teens and schools may tend to minimize parent input. When adults collaborate, students get the message that they genuinely care about them and are willing and able to help when needed.
- Because high school students are so mobile during the day, they may have fewer opportunities to talk with adults about personal concerns. As a result, it is important to allow informal opportunities for students to process and discuss urgent social issues as they arise so these problems don't fester or go underground.
- Find ways to integrate bullying prevention and intervention themes into daily routines. Building these ideas into conversations with students is needed at the high school level because it provides a greater chance of conveying proactive messages in ways teens can relate to, and increases the opportunities for adults to offer them support. Any adult who has close contact with adolescents can help to infuse bullying prevention into their daily conversations and activities.

How can bullying prevention be woven into the high school curriculum?

There are many logical connections between bullying prevention and intervention concepts and every curriculum content area. There are two broad approaches to integrating bullying prevention into curricula. Using both of the following approaches allows concepts to be reinforced in a variety of content areas, contexts, and with a mix of teaching modalities.

1. Fold anti-bullying themes and material into existing academic content areas. Ideally, sessions can be integrated into multiple subject areas (e.g. language arts, social studies, math and science, arts, or health). This approach can be effective in including bullying-related topics in a direct way, but may be difficult to sustain or "keep fresh" over time. Opportunities to bring the subject of bullying into everyday activities include classroom discussions, assignments, and homework. Some examples include:
 - English: Write an essay about bullying experiences the perspectives of various participants in a bullying situation.
 - Social Studies or Civics: Discuss examples of bullying based on stereotypes about gender or ethnicity.
 - Math or Science: Create a survey to identify students' opinions about cyber-bullying.
 - Health and Human Development: Discuss roles of body image and stereotypes about weight in bullying.
 - Physical Education or Intramural Sports: Practice ways of including students who are generally left out because they are less skilled in physical activities.
 - Arts: Use artwork, skits or music to highlight the impact of bullying behavior on individuals or illustrate bullying prevention rules.

2. Look at bullying prevention from a broad perspective—beyond just bullying behavior as a topic. Identify potential points of connection between academic subject material and bullying prevention content. Examples include the following:
- Team-Building: Use cooperative games in physical education classes to promote cooperation and teamwork.
 - Feelings: Examine ways poetry is used to express nuances in feelings and write a poem to describe what it feels like to be a teen today.
 - Communication: Investigate ways humans use non-verbal communication to contradict or emphasize spoken language.
 - Peer Relationships: Use journal writing to log thoughts about traits of a good friend, how friendships change, and the traits that make someone popular.
 - Respecting Differences: Research current events for examples about individuals who work to promote social justice.
 - Stereotypes/Privilege/Prejudice: Identify ways that media stereotypes about what society considers “normal” affect student attitudes about each other.
 - Problem-Solving/Critical Thinking: Debate advantages and disadvantages of different options for standing up for others.