School Safety and Crisis

Preventing Bullying: Guidelines for Administrators and Crisis Teams

Schools have a legal and ethical responsibility to prevent bullying behavior and ensure that all students feel safe and supported at school. Preventing bullying has a direct connection to the quality of the learning environment and the social, emotional, and mental health of student and staff. Recognizing the negative, long-lasting, and potentially severe effects of bullying, states have enacted laws and model policies to prevent and intervene with bullying (see https://www.stopbullying.gov/laws/index.html and https://cyberbullying.org/cyberbullying-laws). According to stopbullying.gov, some key components of these laws include:

- Policies for defining, reporting, investigating and responding, and recording incidents of bullying and how they were handled
- Sanctions (graduated range of consequences) for bullying
- Referrals for mental health services as appropriate
- Training and preventive education for school staff

In addition, the Office for Civil Rights (OCR) has asserted that bullying creates a climate of fear and hostility and undermines a student's ability to be successful in school. Therefore, school personnel have a legal, ethical, and moral obligation to address bullying (OCR, 2010). The OCR asserts that local educational agencies may inappropriately address discriminatory behavior as bullying but rather, the behaviors may actually be violating a student's civil rights. Therefore, the OCR states that schools must go beyond addressing specific discriminatory behavior and take the appropriate actions to prevent the harassment from reoccurring and eliminate the hostile environment (OCR, 2010). Relevant statutes include:

- Title IV of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 (Title IV) which prohibits discrimination based on race, color, or national origin;
- Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972 (Title IX) which prohibits discrimination based on sex;
- Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 and Title II of the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990, which both prohibit discrimination based on disability.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR BULLYING PREVENTION AND INTERVENTION

Unfortunately, reviews of commercially available and school-created bullying prevention programming in schools found these programs produced negative, negligible, or small effects in reducing the prevalence of bullying (Farrington & Ttofi, 2009). Instead of the "program" approach, schools should address bullying comprehensively within a social–ecological framework (see special issues of *School Psychology Review*; Rose, Nickerson, & Stormont, 2015; http://naspjournals.org/toc/spsr/44/4, and the *American Psychologist*; Swearer & Hymel, 2015; http://www.apa.org/pubs/journals/special/4017005.aspx for in-depth guidance). Below are some components of this comprehensive approach.

- **Teach respectful behavior systematically.** Starting early, and continuing in a developmentally appropriate and culturally sensitive manner, use approaches such as school-wide positive behavioral support (Waasdorp, Bradshaw, & Leaf, 2012) and social–emotional learning (Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor, & Schellinger, 2011) to teach and reinforce social, emotional, and behavioral skills and prevent bullying.

- **Develop, implement, and enforce antibullying policies.** Comprehensive policies that define and prohibit bullying, and specify processes for addressing bullying and changing behavior, are important to creating a safe and respectful school climate (Cosgrove & Nickerson, 2017; Hatzenbuehler, Schwab-Reese, Ranapurwala, Hertz, & Ramirez, 2015).

- **Recognize bullying as a mental health and relationship issue.** Both perpetrators and victims of bullying are more likely to suffer from depression, anxiety, suicidal ideation, and school problems, such as more negative perceptions of school climate and poor academic achievement (Espelage & Holt, 2013; Glew, Fan, Katon, Rivara, & Kernic, 2005; Nickerson, Singleton, Schnurr, & Collen, 2014). Bullying is also inconsistent with healthy relationships. Therefore, addressing bullying successfully requires attention to mental health and relationship issues.

- **Use a comprehensive approach.** Focus on mental health services for youth suffering from depression and anxiety and implement evidence-based interventions that improve the school environment and provide supports to bullies, targeted students, and families. Multitiered systems of supports programs are recommended for addressing these needs (e.g., Bullying Prevention in Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports; Cowan, Vaillancourt, Rossen, & Pollitt, 2013; Good, McIntosh, & Gietz, 2011).

- **Teach the responsible use of technology.** Particular features of cyberbullying, such as its anonymity, wide reach (including 24 hours a day, 7 days a week), and involvement of youth as both perpetrators and victims (Li, 2007), can make it especially challenging for educators and parents to address. Therefore, teaching students about responsible and respectful online communication is recommended.

- **Address the needs of marginalized youth (e.g., LGBTQI2-S youth, students with disabilities, students from diverse racial/ethnic/socioeconomic/religious backgrounds).** Bullying involves an imbalance of power, and youth who are perceived as different or nonconforming due to many factors (real or perceived sexual orientation, disability, cultural or religious practices) are at increased risk for being marginalized and bullied. Providing a variety of opportunities for involvement (e.g., Gay–Straight Alliances, multicultural clubs) and support is helpful in creating an inclusive and respectful school climate (Poteat, Sinclair, DiGiovanni, Koenig, & Russell, 2013; Shriberg, Song, Miranda, & Radliff, 2013).

- **Teach bystanders options for helping.** Students who witness bullying are in a powerful position to help stop bullying, but they often do not intervene, despite the effectiveness of bystander intervention (Polanin, Espelage, & Pigott, 2012). Raising the awareness of all students and teaching explicit skills (e.g., reporting to an adult, intervening directly if safe to do so, comforting or befriending the target) should be part of comprehensive efforts to prevent bullying.

SUMMARY

Research has consistently established the very negative and damaging association between bullying and its outcomes. In addition, cultures of hostility and discrimination in schools can exacerbate issues related to bullying and victimization and must be addressed. Schools should address bullying behaviors by using a multitiered service delivery model. There should be a focus on fostering students' social–emotional health and developing clear guidelines and consequences for student behavior. This handout outlines steps to take and provides many resources to help address these issues. Similarly, a list of additional resources is provided to help guide the development of programs and policies.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- Bullying Prevention and Intervention Information and Resources, https://www.stopbullying.gov

- Bullying Prevention Resources From the National Association of School Psychologists, https://www.nasponline.org/bullying-prevention

- Cyberbullying Research Center, https://cyberbullying.org

- Addressing Social-Emotional Skill Development from the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning, https://casel.org

- UB Alberti Center for Bullying Abuse Prevention, http://ed.buffalo.edu/alberti.html

- National Suicide Prevention Lifeline, 1-800-273-8255

- Pacer's National Bullying Prevention Center, https://www.pacer.org/bullying/

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