
Bully-Proofing Your Middle School

Bullying Puts All Students at Risk

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by Marla Bonds

Bullying is a form of violence prevalent in many schools today. If undetected and untreated, it creates a climate of fear and anxiety that can harm students physically, emotionally, and academically.

Research shows that bullying reaches its peak in both frequency and severity during middle school and then declines in high school. It becomes more sophisticated as adolescents' cognitive and verbal abilities increase, leading to more indirect and group bullying, both of which can be hard to detect and combat.

Bullying 101

There are many types of bullying (see below). It can be direct, such as pushing or shoving, or indirect, such as rumors or graffiti, and can include boys or girls, individuals or groups. The following characteristics define a bullying situation:

- *An imbalance of power*—physical, psychological, or intellectual—that hinders victims from defending themselves.
- *Repeated negative actions* that usually (not always) occur over a period of time.
- *Intentional harm*. Bullies purposefully choose actions that will hurt or intimidate the targeted victim.
- *Unequal levels of affect*. Victims typically display unusually high levels of emotional distress, while the bully demonstrates little emotion and often blames the victim for the aggressive act by saying, "He/She deserved it."

Surprisingly, it is not being different that repeatedly pulls a student into a victim role with a bully; it is the student's reaction to the bullying. Bullies target those who they can upset or over whom they can assert power.

Victims of bullying often experience physical symptoms and emotional reactions, including nervousness, worrying, stomach-aches, headaches, and fatigue, all of which directly interfere with a student's ability to focus on schoolwork and contribute to poor school attendance.

It is not only the direct victims of bullying who feel unsafe. All students who know about or witness bullying incidents are deeply affected as well. They conclude that adults either ignore or do not notice these situations, and their sense of security in the school environment and in their own well-being is shaken, compromising their ability to learn.

Teachers are also affected. Often they must spend time attending to disruptive students and interpersonal conflicts within the classroom, instead of focusing on academics.

Types of Bullying

- Physical aggression—physical harm or destroying property.
- Social aggression—rumors, racial slurs, or exclusion from a group.
- Verbal aggression—name-calling, teasing, or threatening.
- Intimidation—phone calls, dirty tricks, or taking possessions.
- Written aggression—threatening notes or graffiti.
- Sexual harassment—comments or actions of a sexual nature, which make the recipient uncomfortable.
- Racial and cultural (ethnic) harassment—comments or actions containing racial or ethnic overtones (direct or indirect) which make the recipient uncomfortable.

Battling Bullying

At Prairie Middle School, we take the bullying problem seriously. We have adapted the *Bully Proofing Your School* program (Garrity et al. 1996) to meet the unique developmental needs of middle school students, designing interventions to develop a "caring majority." It is a comprehensive program that includes all systems that impact the school environment—from administration to transportation. The entire school gives a consistent message that bullying and harassment are not tolerated.

The main focus of the program is creating a school climate that feels safe and secure for all members of the school community. We give students practical tools not only to avoid victimization but to stand up and help others. We developed seven classroom lessons for each grade level, which can be facilitated by the teacher alone or with an administrator, counselor, or mental health professional. The lessons are meant to be fun and to foster thoughtful dialogue among students about difficult social decisions. Topics include empathy, taking a stand, friendly versus hurtful teasing, sexual harassment versus flirting, and creative problem solving.

To teach specific skills to avoid victimization, we use the acronym "HA HA SO" (*see below*). A common vocabulary is emphasized throughout the curriculum and used by all members of the school community.

"HA HA SO"

The acronym "HA HA SO" provides students with strategies to avoid bully victimization.

Help. Seek assistance from an adult, friend, or peer when a potentially threatening situation arises

or when other strategies aren't working.

Assert Yourself. Make assertive statements to the bully, addressing your feelings about the bully's behavior.

Humor. Use humor to de-escalate a situation.

Avoid. Walk away or avoid certain places in order to avoid a bullying situation.

Self-Talk. Use positive self-talk to maintain positive self-esteem.

Own It. "Own" the put-down or belittling comment in order to defuse it.

Empowering Bystanders

A unique component of *Bully Proofing Your School—The Middle Years* is that it focuses on "bystanders," the 85 percent of students in a school who are neither bullies nor victims. This "silent majority" is often an ignored and underused resource in our schools.

These students generally have well-developed social skills, but are often confused about both their responsibilities and their roles in bullying situations. They do not get involved because they don't know what to do, fear retaliation or making the situation worse, or worry about losing social status.

The program teaches them skills they need to become a "caring majority." Students learn they must share with adults the responsibility for keeping our school safe and caring. We remind them that their fears are normal and that there is strength in numbers. We also provide methods of reporting bullying incidents anonymously or privately.

Support for Victims

When bullying does happen, victims are vulnerable and often likely to blame themselves. The following suggestions can empower the victim and help them avoid repeated bullying attacks.

- Reduce fear by being empathetic and supportive.
- Reduce self-blame by identifying cruel behavior.
- Connect the victim to helpful peers.
- Teach "HA HA SO" (see box) strategies to avoid revictimization.
- Provide individual help with friendship skills.

Combating violence and bullying are difficult issues for schools. But when the systems surrounding the students come together, and the powerful silent majority is mobilized to take a stand for its fellow peers, a true sense of community can develop. By learning to rely on each other, we all benefit.

Tips to Decrease Bullying Incidents

- Maintain adequate supervision of children.
- Make sure the entire school understands that bullying, teasing, and harassing will not be tolerated.
- Train and expect teachers, cafeteria workers, bus drivers—all who supervise children—to intervene in both direct and indirect bullying situations.
- Communicate clear policies and consequences to staff and students for dealing with bullying.
- Discipline bullies in a no-nonsense style.

Reference

Garrity, C.; Jens, K.; Porter, W.; Sager, N.; and Short-Camilli, C. *Bully Proofing Your School: A Comprehensive Approach for Elementary Schools*. Longmont, Colo.: Sopris West, 1996.

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