Chapter 9

Preventing and Responding to Aggressive Social Behavior, Bullying, and Harassment

Chapter Objectives

- Describe the background on various forms of aggression, bullying, and harassment in schools
- List the components of an effective response to these aggressive behaviors
- Discuss how a school-wide bullying prevention strategy can integrate with Best Behavior

Background: The Problem of Bullying and Harassment in School

No matter what their experiences or background in growing up, most adults can remember at least one or two occasions during childhood where they were picked on, made fun of in front of peers, humiliated in some way, threatened, intimidated, or perhaps even beaten up (Knof, 2007; Nishioka, Coe, Burke, Hanita, & Sprague, 2011; Swearer & Cary, 2007). Most can clearly recall the student or students who did these things, as well as details and circumstances surrounding the incident(s), even though they may not be able to remember much else from this period in their lives. Not surprisingly, such unpleasant situations are often initiated and sustained by the same student or students who are commonly identified as school bullies.

[insert call out] Most adults can remember being bullied during childhood with exceptional detail — these incidents stand out clearly against an otherwise less distinct impression of the school years.

Nearly everyone who has attended school has had some experience with bullying. In the vast majority of cases, such experience tends to be negative and emotionally searing, whether it plays out directly or indirectly. Perhaps that student(s) picked on them or others, called them names, teased them, or somehow embarrassed them in public. Maybe the bully took something from them or deliberately broke a prized possession just to be mean—or simply because the bully knew he could do it. Overt, painful, and intimidating events of this nature are more likely characteristic of boys than girls and they tend to occur in school settings where there is limited adult supervision and monitoring to prevent them. Girls also engage in bullying and peer harassment of each other at rates that some researchers say approximately equal those of boys (Nishioka, et al., 2011); however, their bullying is typically expressed in more subtle behavioral forms known as relational (or social) aggression (Lafferty, 2007). It is much more covert in nature and can occur in any setting at basically any time.

[insert call out] Traditionally boys are implicated in more overt or physical bullying, while girls are implicated in more covert or relational bullying. However, this difference seems to be blurring in modern times.
Those engaged in relational aggression tend to exclude others from activities, damage reputations through backbiting, lies, and rumors, try to ruin existing friendships through alienation, and engage in social manipulation and discrimination of others for indefensible reason(s). Typically girls do not display as much of the kind of overt, “in your face” bullying that is identified as characteristic of boys. It should be noted and stressed that both genders engage in both overt (direct, physical) and covert (indirect, social) bullying and harassment behavior. Although in the past it seems that male bullying consisted mostly of the overt behaviors and female bullying was largely confined to the covert behaviors, this division along gender lines seems to be blurring in society, and especially in schools, today. It is obvious from media accounts, school reports, and legal actions that female aggression and violence is occurring on a daily basis. Likewise, any boy in school will tell you that boys regularly engage in social bullying. The upshot is that both types of bullying and harassment can be extremely damaging to both the victim and, since long-term social and academic outcomes for bullies are so negative, the perpetrators.

What Students Believe about Aggression
Beliefs about aggression tend to predict our behavior, and influence our motivation to change (Huesmann & Guerra, 1997; Swearer & Cary, 2007). In a large study conducted in the Western United States, students in grades 3-8 were asked an extensive set of questions about their beliefs and experiences regarding bullying and harassment in school, presented in Figure ** (Nishioka, et al., 2011 ). These studies indicate that certain types of aggression, in certain situations, is accepted among the students surveyed. If change is to happen, adults will have to drive it.

These studies and many others show clearly that aggression is prevalent in all grades. Lower grade levels (elementary and middle) report higher victimization from “overt” bullying. Aggression increases in grade 5 and peaks in middle school. In middle and high school, relational aggression is a priority area for intervention. The studies also suggest that we consider addressing beliefs about social and relational aggression.
Reflection

Use the box below to write down your thoughts and knowledge about aggressive behavior (including overt and covert) and bullying in your school. Even better, sit with a colleague or group of colleagues and discuss the following questions listed below.

Reflection
Socially Aggressive Behavior and Bullying in Schools

- Does your school have a school-wide program that teaches pro-social skills to all students, creating a respectful social climate such as PBIS?
- To what extent is socially aggressive behavior, bullying and harassment a problem in our school?
- Does our school or school district have a specific policy about socially aggressive behavior / bullying?
  - If so, what does the policy require us to do?
- What is the proper response if a student reports a socially aggressive behavior or bullying incident to you?
  - What should you say to the student?
  - What information do you need to collect?
  - Who do you report the socially aggressive behavior or bullying to?
- Does our school have a specific plan or program for on socially aggressive behavior or bullying prevention and response?
  - Do students know how to report socially aggressive behavior or bullying properly?
  - Do students know how to respond to a socially aggressive behavior or bullying incident?
    - When they are the victim?
    - When they are “standing by” and watching it happen?
  - How do we respond when the socially aggressive person /bully won’t stop?

Changing a Destructive Peer Culture

Transforming the destructive peer culture is perhaps our most formidable task in the area of school safety and discipline. This culture may not be of the schools making; but aside from families, schools are perhaps the only social institution capable of addressing it effectively. Addressing this problem is critically important and complex! Figure ** below provides a summary of best practice recommendations.

Cyber bullying or electronic aggression has emerged as another form of aggression as students have increased access to computers, cell phones, and other electronic devices (David-Ferndon & Hertz, 2009). This form of bullying refers to aggression that is executed through personal computers or cell phones to send e-mail, instant messaging, text messages, or posting messaging on social networks. Though research is limited about this new form of bullying, 9–35 percent of students report being the target of cyber bullying and 4–21 percent report being the aggressor (Hertz & David-Ferndon, 2008; Wang, Iannotti, & Nansel, 2009)
**What Can We Do About Aggression and Bullying?**

1. Create a school culture that encourages communication:
   - Student to student, student to adult, and adult to student communication
   - Respectful communication between all members of the school community
     - Respectful use of electronic devices
2. Create a school culture that encourages trust:
   - Promises to follow up are kept
   - Students are listened to
   - Students are supported and protected
3. Understand the school's anti-bullying policies and procedures:
   - Be able to explain them to students, colleagues, and parents
   - Follow their proscribed processes
   - Commit to them as a vehicle for positive culture change
4. Develop and maintain a safe and inviting system for reporting incidents:
   - Encourage reporting by involved parties when they see or experience aggression or bullying, including students, teachers, and parents
   - Take all reports of aggressive behavior or bullying seriously
   - Respect confidentiality
   - Collect evidence
   - Respond as soon as possible

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**Steps to Address the Problem and Develop a Culture of Respect**

A school-wide culture of respect can be developed and maintained through teaching of positive social skills, and systematic rewards for the positive behaviors taught, as well as systematic response to negative ones. Effective interventions therefore consist of two research-based components:

- **Social Skills Curriculum** Curricular or instructional programs centered around social skills training and adult response protocols (Atlas & Pepler, 1998; Knoff, 2007; Menard, Grotpeter, Gianola, & O’Neal, 2008; Olweus, 1993)
- **PBIS** Positive behavior intervention and support programs designed to teach and reinforce positive behavior for the majority of the students and the school community (Agatston, Kowalski, & Limber, 2007; Garbarino, Bradshaw, & Vorrasi, 2002)

Social skills curriculum provides for the consistent and comprehensive teaching, practice, and reteaching of social emotional skills such as:

- Empathy
- Friendship-building and maintenance
- How to recognize and respond to aggressive behavior, bullying, or harassment
- How to report these types of behaviors to adults

When behavior expectations based on or supporting these social and emotional skills are included in the school's **Best Behavior** plan (a PBIS program), they harness the teaching, practice, and reteaching strengths of this program as well.
In general, schools seeking to reduce or eliminate aggression and bullying should follow a series of steps designed to introduce, teach, embed, and infuse a systems-wide intervention program. The program must be ongoing, supported at district and school administrative levels. It must also be research based, financially feasible, and acceptable to the various stakeholders involved.

These steps should include the following:

1. Formulation and implementation of a bullying and harassment policy at the campus-specific or district levels (Knoff, 2007; Menard, et al., 2008)
2. Assessment of the nature and extent of the problem through surveys and observations
3. Selection of an appropriate school-wide response (Garbarino, et al., 2002)
4. Solicitation of family support and involvement
5. Training of all staff, students, and families in behavior expectations and policy.
6. Train all students, teachers, and parents on the role of bystanders in preventing aggression or bullying
7. Promoting active supervision of students in common areas (see Chapter 8)
8. Assisting students who are repeat victims to be more assertive, gain friendship skills, and avoid dangerous situations (increasing supports and proven interventions; i.e. tiered intervention model (Menard, et al., 2008; Ross, Horner, & Stiller, 2011))
9. Responding to repeated incidents of aggression or bullying with increasing supports, sanctions, and proven interventions (tiered intervention model)
10. Recording all instances of aggressive and bullying behavior and analyzing data for patterns, and incorporating results into ongoing efforts

We will now add detail to each implementation step listed above.

**Anti-bullying Policy**

Increasingly, we see local school districts and states developing and requiring implementation of anti-bullying and harassment laws and policies. Here is a checklist of items generally required by such laws.

**Considerations for Compliance with Anti-bullying Laws**

- □ Do you have a specific policy against social aggression, bullying, and harassment?
- □ Do you have a written code of conduct that publicizes it?
- □ Does the policy address all forms of social aggression and bullying (sexual, racial/ethnic, sexual orientation, and differently-abled harassment)?
- □ Are there references to social aggression, bullying, and harassment in the following handbooks?
- □ Does the policy contain the following detailed elements: a definition, procedures, sanctions, and prescribed method for notifying people?
- □ Is there a procedure to inform new employees and students of the policy?
- □ Are there references to social aggression, bullying in the school discipline code?
- □ Student handbook
- □ Staff handbook
- □ Parent handbooks?
Are the following parties notified of the social aggression, bullying, and harassment policy?
- Student extracurricular activity
- School associated event sites
- Job training work sites
- Visiting vendors and salespersons?

Assess the Nature and Extent of Your School’s Problem

There are number of methods and tools available to help you gather data to determine the nature and extent of aggression and bullying at your school. These include surveys and observations.

Bullying Assessment Options
- Prevention and Response Systems
- Procedures and Policy
- Reporting
- Responding to chronic problems
- Student-level data
- Surveys
  - Administer the Olweus Bullying Questionnaire (Bauer, Lozano, & Rivara, 2007)
  - Vernberg Peer Experiences Questionnaire (Vernberg, Jacobs, & Twemlow, 1999)
  - Local or State-level “Healthy Students” Survey

Select a School-wide Response

The Best Behavior program or other School-wide Positive Behavior and Intervention Support programs (SWPBIS) offer methods, strategies, and decision-making frameworks for systematic prevention of and response to aggression and bullying. These programs are school-wide, requiring commitment and involvement of all members of the school culture.

These programs, including Best Behavior, identify some standard practices. First, establish a committee to oversee interventions to address aggression and bullying. We recommend that the PBIS team take on this responsibility. Second, establish a positive social culture using Best Behavior or SWPBIS. This includes teaching school-wide behavioral expectations (we recommend "Be respectful, Be responsible, Be safe" in Chapter 5). Teaching is followed by acknowledgement and reward of appropriate behavior (Chapter 7), and clear consequences for inappropriate behavior (these should be specified in the policy).

Include Families

Solicit family support for the program, and family and community involvement. The more adults are involved and supportive, the greater the impact on students through repeated exposure to the concepts, skills, and policies. Parents can contribute to culture change at the school. Parents can be involved in the planning, training, and review of data. All parents should be kept informed of the program and developments and results.

Train All Participants

All staff, students, and families must be trained. Training can be differentiated for each group, as each has different needs.

- Conduct committee and staff trainings
- Hold staff discussion groups
- Introduce the school rules that encourage prosocial behavior and discourage socially aggressive behavior or bullying
• Hold a school kick-off event to launch the program for all participants
• Teach (and reteach) aggression and bullying prevention skills
  o Prosocial skills
  o Strategies for dealing directly with aggression and bullying, such as the strategies "stop," "walk," and "talk."

Following are some examples of behavior expectations that schools commonly teach that relate to aggression and bullying. Refer back to Chapters 5 and 6 for guides on developing behavior expectations, and strategies for teaching them effectively via formal lesson plans. Teachers can also pre-correct (provide quick practice of appropriate skills just before going to problem areas such as the playground or cafeteria) to provide some of the review required throughout the year.

**Teach the “Stop” Signal** The stop signal is a verbal and non-verbal signal that is standardized school-wide as one strategy to halt aggression or bullying situations. Lessons should include how to use the stop signal in various situations in which one is the target of aggression or bullying, or in which others are; bystanders can use this strategy as well. Tie the problem behavior back to the core school rules (e.g. Be Safe, Be Respectful, Be Responsible). The non-verbal signal is commonly a hand held palm-out, just like police directing traffic.

Choices of verbal signal can include:
- “Stop”
- “Enough”
- “Don’t”

The language and signal need to be age appropriate, and contextually acceptable.

**Teach “Walk Away”** Most socially-initiated problem behavior is probably maintained by peer attention. Victim behavior inadvertently maintains taunt, tease, intimidate, harassment behavior. Walking away ends the bullying interaction and therefore any peer attention for in.

In planning for supporting walking away, build social reward for victim. See Figure ** for a sample behavior expectation and lesson plan for the strategy “walk away,” based what we learned in Chapter 6. and do not reward inappropriate behavior.

**Teach “Talk”** Even when students use the stop signal and they walk away from the problem, sometimes other students will continue to behave inappropriately toward them. When that happens, the victim should talk to an adult. It is common practice to identify the line between tattling, and reporting, so that students can differentiate and practice the appropriate behavior.

Here are some guidelines for students on talking versus tattling.
- **Talking** is when you have tried to solve the problem yourself, and have used the "stop" and "walk away" steps first.
- **Tattling** is when you do not use the "stop" and "walk away" steps before you "talk" to an adult
- **Tattling** is when your goal is to get the other person in trouble

**Teach How to Respond to "Stop" What to do when you are asked to stop by someone else?**
Eventually, every student will be told to stop. When this happens, they should do the following things even when they don’t agree with the stop signal:

- Stop what they are doing
- Take a deep breath
- Go about their day (no big deal)

**Active Supervision of Common Areas**

Common student areas, as discussed in Chapter 8, are frequently problem areas for all types of negative behaviors, including aggression and bullying. As discussed in that chapter, review these areas and refine the school’s supervision system to effectively maintain a safe environment. Focus on common-area settings such as the cafeteria, gym, playground, hallway, bus area, bathrooms, and media center or library.

**Intervention for Bullies**

For students who are repeatedly engaged in aggressive or bullying behaviors, your school’s tiered intervention plan should identify the needs for increased levels of intervention. The following are common program components to support these students:

- Conduct Individualized assessment
- Involve parents of the perpetrator and victim
- Teach appropriate social skills
- Individual (and separate) conferences with the person who was the bully, and the person who was the victim in incidents.
- For students with high rates of physical and verbal aggression, consider precorrection and on-site practice

**Intervention for Victims**

For students who are repeatedly the target of aggression and bullying behaviors, your school's tiered intervention program should also provide support. Assist them in learning positive social and friendship skills, and avoiding dangerous situations. The following are common program components to support these students:

- Teach specific social skills in assertiveness, friendship skills, and avoiding dangerous situations.
- Involve the parents.
- Separate frequent victims from the negative peer group.
- Embed student in constructive peer groups.
Important Role for Bystanders Provide specific instruction on the role of bystanders in preventing socially aggressive behavior or bullying. These are the majority in schools, and thus have the power of numbers, and of providing positive peer role models for those engaged in the bully/victim roles.

Record and Review Data All instances of aggression and bullying behavior must be recorded. Develop and use a data-collection system for monitoring your school’s program and making decisions. There are a number of potential data sources. These would include surveys, observation, and data from discipline referrals. Referral forms can be altered so that sufficient detail is collected on aggression and bullying to be informative for decision-making (see Chapter 10). Regular review of data will allow identification of patterns or problem areas, and building on successes.

Summary
Just as Best Behavior (a PBIS program) can be used to systematically support a wide variety of positive behaviors, so too it can be used in preventing and responding to aggression and bullying. All expected behaviors can be supported by the PBIS model. Integrate your expected behaviors around preventing aggression and bullying into your work in the prior chapters of Best Behavior, such as your school matrix, your lesson plans, and your schedule of lessons.

Big Ideas – Take Aways
- Create school cultures where bullying is ineffective and inefficient - PBIS.
- Focus on prevention first.
- Choose evidenced-based interventions and implement them with fidelity.
- Always take a student’s report seriously, and follow-up!
**Activity: Planning to Implement Your Anti-Bullying Program**

Turn back to your reflection earlier in this chapter to help you identify areas of need among the action steps below. In the notes column you might list: current status, available data, resources (policies, tools, or area experts), completion deadlines, responsible parties, and general ideas for implementation.

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