

What works in bullying prevention in schools? by Stan Davis, <http://www.stopbullyingnow.com>

Let's start with **what doesn't work**.

It DOESN'T work to expect young people to solve all their own problems or to tell them not to ask adults for help. When we do that, youth with higher status will continue to mistreat youth who are less valued by the school community.

It DOESN'T often work to tell mistreated youth to "pretend it doesn't bother you," "just walk away," or "tell them how you feel." See <http://www.youthvoiceproject.com> for more information about what more than a thousand mistreated young people in grades 5-12 told Dr. Charisse Nixon and me about the negative effects of these common strategies. It can be valuable to empower youth to tell others to stop, yet they need to know that the teens we surveyed said this sometimes doesn't work. If telling others to stop doesn't make things better or doesn't feel safe, it is important to get help from peers and adults.

It DOESN'T work to just get all the students in a classroom or school together and tell them that bullying is wrong. This strategy works no better than "just say no to drugs."

What DOES work?

It DOES work to build positive connections between school staff and all students through class meetings, advisor-advisee programs, activity times, welcoming in the hall, positive feeling tone, and frequent positive feedback. At all grade levels, increasing positive connection between teachers and students improves academic achievement, student behavior, and school climate. See The Wingspread Declaration, on line at www.jhsph.edu/bin/s/q/Septemberissue.pdf, for more information about the importance of building connections to school.

It DOES work to develop clear, consistent rules and interventions at school about acceptable and unacceptable student actions toward other students. The Wingspread Declaration describes effective discipline systems this way: "Applying fair and consistent disciplinary policies that are collectively agreed upon and fairly enforced." For more information about ways to create effective responses to peer mistreatment, see <http://www.stopbullyingnow.com>. As young people in the Youth Voice Project said, it is important to follow up after reports of mistreatment to make sure that the school's actions make the situation better instead of worse.

It DOES work to develop consensus among all school staff so they take action to discourage and interrupt low-level mean student behavior before it becomes serious. Fire prevention and fire fighting are helpful analogies. We need firefighting teams to put out moderate- to-large fires. Yet we also need every individual to take action to reduce fire hazards. Similarly, we need administrators and counselors to intervene in more serious peer mistreatment. We also need all school staff to be trained and ready to intervene by stopping the indirect use of biased speech or the small incidents of exclusion that can escalate into more serious behaviors. In addition, we can learn from firefighting that everyone in a community has an ethical responsibility to report fires. Similarly we need to see reporting peer mistreatment as a responsibility for all students rather than as "tattling."

It DOES work to have formal and informal systems in place to support mistreated youth, in the same way that both the Red Cross and community networks support people whose lives are hurt by fire. We also need to have interventions in place to help mistreating youth develop more positive behaviors.

It DOES work to develop positive peer norms among students in the same way that we have worked to build positive norms about other potentially harmful behaviors. Young people participating in the Youth Voice Project told us that they found it most helpful when other students spent time with them, listened to them, encouraged them, called them at home to give support, helped them get away from negative situations, and helped them tell adults. These safe and effective actions can become the norm among the large majority of youth who want peer mistreatment to stop.

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What should we call these negative behaviors?

An increasing number of us in this field have come to believe that the word “bullying” has lost much of its usefulness, because it has come to include too wide a range of behaviors. Using the word “bullying” also implies that we know that one or more of the people involved is “a bully”- that is, someone who wants to hurt others. Since we never know for sure what a person is thinking, we do better by describing negative actions that are likely to cause harm. “Peer aggression” or “peer mistreatment” are two other phrases we might use. Some negative peer actions are also harassment or assault and should be treated as such.

In addition to fire prevention, two other helpful analogies which help us see what to do are these:

Drinking and Driving

When people drink and drive, they put themselves and other people at risk of harm. That risk of harm has nothing to do with whether the person drinking and driving is an alcoholic. It has nothing to do with what the person drinking and driving intended to do. People who want to celebrate their birthdays by drinking are just as likely to kill someone if they drive home impaired as are people who mean to defy the law and drive impaired. Therefore, laws about drinking and driving focus on different levels of blood alcohol rather than on the driver’s intentions or solely on whether harm was actually done in a particular situation. Similarly, we can set fair, effective rules and consequences for peer mistreatment based on the risk of harm of specific negative behaviors. We do not have to base our actions on our judgment of the intentions or character of the young person who is mistreating another. We do not have to know that the person mistreated was hurt. We can act to stop behavior that is likely to do harm. In addition, successful efforts to prevent the harm that can be done by drinking drivers have combined frequent traffic stops, inevitable fair consequences, and public education. Effective public education has included helping people who are concerned about drinking and driving find a safe and effective role- that of the designated driver. Similarly, we can build fair consistent behavior standards and consequences for peer mistreatment and help concerned youth act as mentors, sources of support, and friends to mistreated and excluded youth.

Workplace manners

Adults in a workplace cannot choose to work only with their best friends. Most working adults also work with a large group of co-workers who they like working with but who they would not choose as best friends and who they would not trust with their deepest secrets. In addition, most adults work with a few people who they distrust and dislike. Even with this last group of co-workers, adults have to find ways to work together politely and productively. In working with co-workers we dislike or distrust, we need to treat them with courtesy and to ask for help from employers if these people mistreat us in a significant way. In most workplaces, workers are expected to collaborate with everyone, even with people they mistrust, because help and collaboration are needed for a business to be productive. In productive companies, negative behavior aimed at co-workers is not allowed because it leads to decreased profit. This parallel is an important one for students to understand. Their school is their workplace. A school’s goal is the educational success of all students. Young people need to learn ways to interact positively with all three groups of classmates. They need skills in managing close friendships at school without excluding or mistreating others. They need skills in building non-excluding, supportive connections with the majority of their classmates who they like but who are not their closest friends. And they need skills in working together politely with those they dislike while protecting themselves and while keeping some emotional distance.

I welcome your thoughts about this summary. You can email me at stan@stopbullyingnow.com