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Practical Ways to Reduce In-School & Online Bullying

Elizabeth Englander, PhD

The Massachusetts Aggression Reduction Center (MARC) is an academic Center at Bridgewater State University in Massachusetts. By running a training program for graduate and undergraduate students in higher education, MARC offers free research, programs and services to K-12 schools in Massachusetts. Everyone benefits: future educators receive unique field training, and K-12 schools receive high-quality, no-cost programs and services.

One important characteristic of MARC's mission is to transmute significant research findings into concrete, useable information for K-12 teachers in the field. The sheer amount of information available today about bullying and cyberbullying can make any educator's head spin. But despite the plethora of new research and findings, the cur-

rent state of knowledge does permit us to make certain generalizations. Here are a handful of tips that any educator can use to help cope with, and reduce, bullying behaviors.

Focus on Even the Small Stuff

Many adults conceptualize bullying as a largely physical behavior, but that is not what is dominating the bullying landscape today (Englander, 2010). In 2010 and 2011, MARC researchers found that it was the *gateway behaviors* that were by far the most frequent in victim reports. These rude, insolent acts — like eye rolling or snickering — usually do not break any specific rules, so adults often ignore them. But gateway behaviors may normalize disrespect or even reward it, and research reveals how toxic they can be. Focusing on the small stuff means educating young children and adolescents about the impact of even small acts of insolence and reacting when any such behavior occurs. *How to respond?* Explain that the rude behavior, even if targeted at another pupil, offends *yourself* and disrupts the class. Inform students that they must not display any behavior that might be interpreted as rude or hurtful. Make it a classroom rule. Then, any repeated instances constitute insolence towards *the teacher* — which raises the behavior to a level requiring school discipline.

Some Gateway Behaviors Are Red Flags

In our 2011 research on 617 college freshmen, some behaviors were much more likely to be strongly associated with the students who were most deeply involved in bullying and cyberbullying (as both a bully and a victim). These were: receiving threatening or very cruel text messages; having lies posted about the target online; and/or having lies and false rumors text-messaged to others. These red flags were more evident in female subjects than in male subjects. Because these types of bullying and cyberbullying were found much more often in the students most heavily involved, relative to other students, if behaviors like these are reported, adults should take the time to explore in more detail that student's involvement in bullying and/or cyberbullying.

Cyber-Stuff: Don't Berate — Instead, Educate

Although young people are comfortable with technology, they are not necessarily knowledgeable about it (Willard, 2006). MARC research on more than 600 college freshman in 2011 found that despite their *belief* that they were knowledgeable, the group on average scored between 60 - 77% on most Internet and computer skills. In addition, about one-third of students reported opinions revealing that they did

not really understand why digital privacy was an issue deserving of attention (e.g., “*I don’t believe that any of my private information would be of interest to others.*”). Navigating cyberspace is not just about technical knowledge; it is also about maturity and common sense (Englander, Mills, & McCoy, 2009). Bottom line? Parents and educators need to talk with children about technology (Pew Internet & American Life Project, 2007). It does not take a technology wizard to ask youngsters what they are up to online and how they feel about the way people treat others when they are in cyberspace. Even if an adult is not proficient in cyberspace communications, he or she can be loud and clear about the absolute necessity to watch what one says, whatever the format, and to remain civil to others at all times.

Talk to Youngsters about How to Handle Things when They Become Angry with One Another

When in distress or upset, students may be more likely to text others to garner social support. One problem with this approach is that by putting a conflict or bullying situation in writing, and by disseminating it widely, the problem will likely escalate rather than resolve. Another problem is that the escalation can occur because youngsters may inflate their words or emotions when they feel anonymous and do not have to witness the repercussions of what they say. Although previous generations did not need direct coaching on how to discuss and deal with a situation in person, children and teens (especially females) today may need this instruction; they are often unaware of the greater clarity and positive results that can come from handling a situation di-

rectly, through face-to-face communication.

Do Not Neglect Elementary School Students

Both bullying and cyberbullying start at a young age. Although adults tend to neglect these topics until middle school, the seeds of bullying—and that includes cyberbullying—are actually sown long before that. An ongoing MARC study has found that over 90% of third graders are online (usually playing games). The good news is that elementary students are very willing and able to internalize rules about behavior. Thus, teaching them that being a good person on the *computer* is just as important as teaching them about being a good person on the *playground!*

Connect with Students on an Emotional Level

Children today are still reporting bullying to adults at very low levels. Boys, especially, in MARC research, are not reporting to educators. Why are children reluctant to report bullying? More than 80% of the boys and girls in MARC research revealed that when they did report, no action was subsequently taken. Confidentiality laws (both federal and, in many states) prohibit educators from discussing the specifics about any action taken against another student. Nevertheless, these laws do not prohibit a teacher or administrator from telling a student, “We’re not ignoring your report. We are working on it!” and that is exactly what reporters of bullying need to hear. When adults connect with students at an emotional level, students are more willing to report bullying (Glasner, 2010).

Pay Particular Attention to Girls with Regard to their Traditional Social Support

According to MARC research, male cyberbullies tended to attack strangers, acquaintances, or children who were friends long ago. Girls, on the other hand, tended to attack their current friends or those with whom they were recently friends (Snell & Englander, 2010). This finding is particularly disconcerting because traditionally females have developed strong friendships, and these strong friendships have been a significant source of emotional support. The long-term repercussion when adolescent girls damage friendships — instead of developing them into that source of emotional support — is unknown. Female students may need extra help in learning to address irritation, jealousy, and anger within a friendship in a way that maintains the relationship instead of undermining it. For many girls today, talking with friends and refraining from texting is a foreign concept.

Take a Moment to Reinforce Patient, Kind, and Friendly Behaviors

One unfortunate effect of the increase in bullying and cyberbullying is the tendency of adults to focus on negative student behaviors. But how one reinforces good behavior is even more important than how one responds to poor behavior. Every behavioral psychologist knows that reinforcement is far more effective than punishment! When an adult notices a child being particularly good-hearted — especially in a potentially difficult situation, such as when a classmate cannot under-


stand something, or when a classmate is being picked on — that adult should personally express appreciation and admiration to the positive intervener. Better yet, teachers might use a classroom recognition system for the students who behave so admirably and step up to the plate for others (Raffalli, 2010).

Enlist the Students in the Process of Changing the Social Dynamic

Although teachers can be agents of change, children or adolescents themselves also greatly affect the social dynamics within their school. Teachers should ask the students what types of bullying problems *they* see and feel are most important, and then resist the temptation to correct their impressions. Next, adults should model how to brainstorm pie-in-the-sky solutions and how to winnow down those ideas to the most realistic solutions to those problems. Such support and encouragement will help to empower the students, allowing them to carry out their solutions and to achieve a positive change in their environment.

Conclusion

Although the changed nature and technological aspects of bullying and cyberbullying today may confuse or intimidate educators, the basic principles for prevention and intervention above will be familiar for many adults who work with children. Children do not need technical guidance from all of the adults in their lives, but they still need to connect with teachers and parents on a cognitive and an emotional level. Learning to identify, label, prevent, and reduce bullying and

cyberbullying means talking about these issues with adults and with other children. Ultimately, it is this type of education and awareness that are likely to prove most successful in addressing this serious social problem among children and teens today. MARC's website offers many resources for both parents and educators, all designed to increase this type of awareness and education. The website www.MARCcenter.org offers many free downloads, games, tips, and curricula for all schools, as well as parent downloads, available in English, Spanish, and Portuguese. 

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