

# Bullying Intervention Strategies That Work

**"Bullying," according to noted expert Dan Olweus, "poisons the educational environment and affects the learning of every child." Learn what you can do to keep bullying behavior from poisoning your school. Included: Practical tips for changing the behavior of bullies and their victims.**

In 1982, three Norwegian boys, ages 10 through 14, committed suicide, apparently as a result of severe bullying by their classmates. The event triggered shock and outrage, led to a national campaign against bullying behavior, and finally, resulted in the development of a systematic school-based bullying intervention program. That program, developed by psychologist Dan Olweus, was tested with more than 2,500 students in Bergen, Norway. Within two years, incidents of school bullying had dropped by more than 50 percent. Since then, a number of countries, including England, Germany, and the United States, have implemented Olweus's program with similar results.

## HOW IT WORKS

Olweus based the program on principles derived from research into behavior modification techniques for aggressive or violent children. The program restructures the learning environment to create a social climate characterized by supportive adult involvement, positive adult role models, firm limits, and consistent, noncorporal sanctions for bullying behavior.

In order to effectively accomplish its goals of reducing existing bullying problems and preventing the development of future problems, the program leads teachers, administrators, and staff through a series of tasks that make them aware of the extent of the bullying problem and help them solve it. Those tasks include the following:

### At the school level:

- a bullying survey to determine the extent of the problem.
- a conference day to educate teachers, administrators, school staff, parents, students, and community members about bullying behaviors, response strategies, and available resources.
- increased supervision in the cafeteria, hallways, bathrooms, and on the playground, where most bullying behavior occurs.
- a coordinating group --, typically consisting of an administrator; a teacher from each grade level; a guidance counselor, psychologist, and/or school nurse; and parent and student representatives -- to manage the program and evaluate its success.
- ongoing meetings between parents and school staff.
- discussions of bullying issues at regularly scheduled PTO meetings.

### At the classroom level:

- a curriculum that promotes kindness, communication, cooperation, and friendship and includes lessons and activities stressing empathy, anger management, and conflict resolution skills.
- class rules against bullying. Rules should be brief and clear. Olweus suggests the following examples:
  1. We will not bully other students.
  2. We will try to help students who are bullied.
  3. We will include students who might be left out.
- immediate consequences for aggressive behavior and immediate rewards for inclusive behavior. Possible sanctions include having the bully
  1. apologize;
  2. discuss the incident with the teacher, principal, and/or parents;
  3. pay for damaged belongings;
  4. spend time in the office or another classroom;
  5. forfeit recess or other privileges.

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- weekly meetings to communicate to students clear and consistently enforced expectations and to engage them as resources in preventing bullying behavior.
- ongoing communication with parents.

#### **At the individual level:**

- serious talks with bullies and victims.
- serious talks with the parents of bullies and victims.
- role playing of non-aggressive behavior with bullies.
- role playing of assertive behavior with victims.

The key components of the bullying intervention program, according to Olweus, are increased adult supervision in all areas of the school, increased consequences for bullying behavior, and a clear message that bullying will not be tolerated.

## **DEFINING CHARACTERISTICS**

Olweus also recommends that for a bullying intervention program to be successful, schools must do the following:

- Place primary responsibility for solving the problem with the adults at school rather than with parents or students.
- Project a clear moral stand against bullying.
- Include both systems-oriented and individual-oriented components.
- Set long-term and short-term goals.
- Target the entire school population, not just a few problem students.
- Make the program a permanent component of the school environment, not a temporary remedial program.
- Implement strategies that have a positive effect on students and on the school climate that go beyond the problem of bullying.

Bullying behavior, according to Dr. Olweus, is evident even in preschool and the problem peaks in middle school. It's important, therefore, that bullying intervention strategies be implemented as early as possible. Even if only a small number of students are directly involved, Olweus points out, every student who witnesses bullying is affected in some way. Even students who initially sympathize with or defend victims may eventually come to view bullying as acceptable if responsible adults fail to say otherwise. Over time, ignoring -- or being ignorant of -- bullying behavior will result in a social climate that fosters bullying, fighting, truancy, and other social and learning problems in all students.

"The school," said Olweus, "has a responsibility to stop bullying behavior and create a safe learning environment for all students."