

# Stop Bullying Before It Starts!

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**Bullying is no longer seen as the norm in the school or the community at large, and prevention has become the name of the game. Included: Poor and good solutions to bullying.**

The killings at Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado, focused attention on the age-old problem of bullying. Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold were apparently taunted and tormented, which has led some observers to attribute their subsequent violent acts at least in part to the cruelty they suffered. Of course, typical bullying doesn't usually lead to carnage. It does, experts increasingly recognize, cause more harm than is readily apparent though.

How prevalent is bullying? One in seven children is a bully or the target of a bully, according to the National Association of School Psychologists. Targets of teasing and bullying often remain silent, but they may suffer the effects of bullying, such as a lack of self-confidence, underachievement in school, and withdrawal.

"While the school crime rate is decreasing," says the first Annual Report on School Safety, "students feel less safe at school. [This] climate of fear erodes the quality of any school."

There are ways to stop bullying, however, and those are what educators now explore, rather than accepting bullying as part of school life.

## PUT A STOP TO BULLYING

"To prevent bullying, educators need to do nothing less than change school culture -- what noted education researcher J. David Hawkins of the University of Washington calls the 'social environment' in which learning takes place," Lee Sherman, editor of the *Northwest Education* magazine issue *Learning in Peace*, told Education World.

"A safe environment," Sherman said, "is one where students are not only free of physical threat but also free of emotional and psychological threat. The harm bullies inflict on their peers is less visible, but no less real, than the damage done by guns. As we have seen in the school shootings that have stunned the nation, kids who are mercilessly harassed often become angry and alienated -- sometimes to the point of exploding in lethal ways."

To end bullying and violence, Sherman says, schools must do the following: "Along with zero tolerance for weapons, schools must send a clear message of zero tolerance for harassment, put-downs, and bullying. Schools won't eliminate cliques and differences among students. They can, however, demand that students respect one another, despite those differences, and treat every student with the dignity he or she has a right to expect in the public school system.

"Hawkins and his colleagues have identified four steps for eliminating disruption, incivility, and violence in schools:

- fostering social bonding and academic achievement;
- promoting norms of nonviolence;
- teaching skills for living according to nonviolent norms (skills include anger management, conflict resolution, and problem-solving);
- eliminating firearms and other weapons.

"Parents must be partners in any effort to change school culture," Sherman said. "The expectations of schools must be supported and reinforced in the family and throughout the community."

## IT'S A LEGAL ISSUE

Increasingly, parents are turning to the law to protect their children from bullying. The parents of two children in a Roman Catholic school in Las Vegas sued the parents of seven other students, claiming that those students had bullied the two youngsters for more than a year. Both students were sixth-graders at the school, which was not named as a defendant. [See Education Week, [Suit Says Pupils Were Bullied](#), June 3, 1998.]

In California, children who are bullied by classmates can get stay-away orders issued against the aggressors. Passed in 1998, the law provides for stay-away orders that allow police officers to arrest violators for making telephone contact, mailing letters, or coming within a specified distance of the victim. Democratic state senator Sheila Kuehl, who co-sponsored the bill, said the law closes "a very important and problematic loophole" by specifying that minors are covered by civil protection orders. Before bullying reaches a point at which parents turn to the law, other actions can be taken.

## POOR SOLUTIONS AND GOOD SOLUTIONS TO BULLYING

Many teachers are concerned about bullying. One teacher commented, "Calling kids names and picking on them many times leads to physical violence. The key is to stop it at the elementary-grade level and reinforce the 'no bullying' policy right through high school. Strong measures and consistency are key to stopping this abusive behavior."

Bullying strips away a victim's feeling of safety, leaving the person feeling, at times, totally vulnerable. A girl who received telephone threats from a boy became frightened at night when tree branches brushed her window. She thought her tormentor was trying to break into her room. "All I want to do is make her feel safe," her mother told *The Sacramento Bee*. "He's taken away my ability to do that." In such an extreme situation, a solution is hard to come by. Many other, less threatening, kinds of bullying can be handled in a constructive way, however. An Australian teacher has created an [Anti-Bullying Unit](#) that offers a practical list of poor solutions and good solutions for students who are being bullied.

The poor solutions include

- **Do nothing.**
- **Change schools or classes to avoid the problem.**

Potentially good solutions include

- **Talk about being bullied.** Schools need to encourage students to do this and then act against bullying.
- **Get a buddy; friends will help deter bullying.** Experts agree that bullies are cowards who won't feel comfortable picking on more than one person at a time.
- **Establish behavior contracts for bullies.** Some schools send bullies home for a couple days; before they can start classes again, the bullies must return with their parents and sign a contract of good behavior.
- **Adopt a no-blame policy.** In some schools, a victim of bullying reports the situation to a coordinator, who then talks to the bully and any witnesses. There is a meeting between the victim and the bully to air their differences. Then an action plan is drawn up to solve the problem. This approach is based on the theory that being nice to people brings out the best in them and is less punitive than some other solutions. Some students also seem to feel freer to report a bully if they know he or she won't be punished.
- **Take a no-bullying course.** Victims of bullies must learn how to stop being bullied. They must learn to be positive, to stand their ground, to maintain eye contact, and to surprise bullies by doing the unexpected. Schools can offer such courses.

## PEACEFUL SCHOOLS

"Peaceful Schools" is a booklet published by the Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory. It calls for schools to address the following issues in preventing bullying:

- The physical plant should feel safe to students and staff; entrances should be visible, hallways well lighted, and playgrounds monitored.
- A strong sense of organization tends to permeate safe schools.
- Safe schools discipline students for disruptive behavior early and fairly. For students to feel safe, discipline needs to be fair, consistent, and clear. Rules and guidelines need to be clearly and repeatedly communicated to students and parents.
- Schools must challenge social norms that encourage violence.
- Advance planning is needed for a timely response in the event of a crisis.
- In-service training for teachers helps them understand a violence-prevention curriculum.

The Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory has been selected to operate the National Safe Schools Resource Center to provide training and technical help to the nation's schools and communities to assist them in creating crime- and violence-free learning environments.

The new emphasis is on preventing bullying, stopping it before it starts. In that way, educators hope to avoid further tragedies like the killings at Columbine High School.

## ANTI-BULLYING RESOURCES

To obtain a copy of the *Northwest Education* magazine issue *Learning in Peace*, call (503) 275-9515. To obtain a copy of the booklet "Peaceful Schools," call (503) 275-0666.

On the Internet...

### [Bullying](#)

Education World's "Bullying" archive includes lesson plans, success stories from schools, resources, and much more.

### [The Safetyzone](#)

A clearinghouse for information and material related to schools safety. Includes eight school safety technical assistance guides.

### [Bullying Resource List](#)

This Web site lists publications, videos, posters, children's books, and organizations that offer help in combating bullying.

### [Annual Report on School Safety, October 1998](#)

Containing a portion of the "Annual Report on School Safety," this site provides contacts for information on bully-proofing your school.

### [Center for Safe Schools and Communities](#)

This Web site offers community and school-based prevention programs that address school safety and promote cultural diversity.

### [No Bully](#)

This Web site provides concise answers to such questions as What is bullying?, Why do some people bully?, and Why are some young people bullied?