

Bullying – What Does Work

The word “discipline” comes from the same root as the word “disciple” and means “to teach.” We are most likely to succeed in helping young people change their aggressive behavior when we use the principles of good teaching in our discipline interventions.

We start with the ABCs:

A. Respect young peoples’ Autonomy. We can’t make them change. We can increase the cost of their existing behavior by following through consistently with consequences. We can build supportive relationships so they want to be contributing members of the school. We can recognize their positive actions. They will choose their behavior; we can help them see they have a choice and help them find the best choices for themselves.

B. Maintain young peoples’ sense of Belonging. When we welcome youth to school each day; when we build mentoring relationships; when consequences are seen as being earned instead of being given in anger or rejection; when we avoid taking their misbehavior personally; and when we maintain positive feeling tone in the discipline process, young people are more likely take responsibility for negative behaviors and to change.

C. Teach Cause and effect thinking and promote conscience development. We help young people see the connections between what they do and what happens to them through using predictable, transparent, consistent discipline approaches. We can use praise to help them connect their positive behavior with positive outcomes. We can help them discover the positive and negative effects of their actions on others through observation and reflection. We can use questions instead of statements whenever possible so young people learn to think about their own goals and about their behavior.

Bullying - What Doesn't Work?

Interventions that are unlikely to work except as part of a comprehensive intervention:

Asking the target to solve the problem:

Just as in our social reaction to other forms of abuse, we have all tried to get the victims of bullying to act differently to solve the problem. We have trained victims to:

- be assertive
- blend in
- ignore bullying
- pretend they're not bothered by bullying ("Sticks and stones...")

The problem with these approaches used in isolation, no matter how good our intentions in using them, is that they displace responsibility for stopping bullying from us to the victims. If these approaches do not work the victim is left with a sense of failure. These interventions can be effective only if they are part of a comprehensive intervention.

Whole-population education

There are a number of curriculum approaches to reducing aggressive behavior. Most of them teach alternatives to aggression and work to build empathy. These approaches, like sensitivity training as a preventive to workplace sexual harassment, are often ignored by the people whose behavior we want to change. Bullies tend to either deny their behavior or see it as justified. As we watch bullies in an educational discussion of bullying we see one of two reactions:

- boredom ("Man, this is stupid")
- or outrage directed at others, with no realization that the presentation is about them ("I can't believe bullies do that.").

This kind of educational presentation will not change bullies' behavior or attitudes unless it is part of a comprehensive intervention.