Children's Hospital of Philadelphia
PolicyLab

Bullying Prevention in Schools: Equipping Students & Adults with Evidence-based Tools

Behavioral Health

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By the time they graduate high school, nearly all children in the U.S. have had personal experiences with bullying, either as a bully, victim or witness to the behavior. Bullying is defined as unwanted behaviors that are repeated or have a high likelihood of being repeated within the context of a real or perceived power differential. These behaviors can occur both in person and electronically (i.e., cyberbullying).

Involvement in these behaviors—either as a perpetrator, victim, or bystander—is linked to significant developmental challenges in social, emotional, mental health and educational domains. Bullying was once understood as an inevitable part of childhood, but fortunately, it is now recognized as the detrimental traumatic experience that it truly is. In fact, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention categorizes bullying as a form of youth violence and as an adverse childhood experience (ACE), signifying the gravity of this behavior and identifying the potential for long-lasting negative impacts on a child's trajectory.

As the co-directors of School-Based Bullying Prevention and Social Emotional Learning (SEL) Research in Children's Hospital of Philadelphia's (CHOP) Center for Violence Prevention, our work ensures that students and staff in schools have the tools they need to understand and address bullying. We are excited to join PolicyLab as research faculty, given that PolicyLab's model for evidence-to-action reflects the way in which we do our research, which we'll describe in more detail below.

What We've Learned from Our Research on Anti-bullying Efforts

Research is clear that to reduce bullying, we must give children social skills to use in peer relationships. The focus cannot be exclusively on the victim or the child(ren) who engaged in the bullying behaviors—we must also equip children with strategies to use if they are a bystander of bullying.

We have also found that systems can perpetuate or ameliorate bullying behaviors. Given this, bullying prevention efforts are most effective when they work to address the larger systems (family, school, community) through which children experience the world. As one key piece of the system, our programs promote children's positive social and emotional development with parents and adults in a school setting.

Finally, we learned building school capacity to provide this support is critical. Training and coaching school staff in bullying prevention and intervention strategies helps programs to be meaningful and sustainable.

How We're Using Research to Inform School Supports for Children and Adults

Based on what we've found in our research, our team has been implementing interventions at various levels within schools, including:

- School counselor-led small groups for children who are at risk for displaying bullying and aggression, with a focus on strategies to process social information and problem solve
- Counselor- and/or teacher-provided lessons for all children in a classroom with a focus on extending social problem solving to include empathy, perspective taking and active bystander strategies
- Programming that engages adults who are influential supports and change agents for children, including professional development training and one-on-one coaching for teachers to improve classroom management and bullying detection, prevention, and intervention, as well as connections to and training for parents and school staff in important lunchroom and playground settings

But anti-bullying efforts can't happen in a vacuum, and there are additional parts of the system that can contribute to school success in supporting children.

Continued Collaboration to Prevent Bullying

A critical factor in school-based bullying prevention is fostering community partnerships, which should occur from the early stages of program development to implementation and effectiveness testing. This approach can bridge the gap between evidence-based research and practice in real-world school settings.

Collaborations must also extend to those involved in broader educational reform and government-driven policies. It's important for policymakers and school administrators to understand the difference between conflict and bullying and the impact of bullying in order to prevent and intervene effectively. They must also advocate for a systems approach to bullying prevention.

Additionally, policies at the state and federal levels are critical for schools to be able to carve out necessary time to include social-emotional learning and bullying prevention programs for students and to train school staff on these policies, which will be the key to their success. Example policy opportunities include funding evidence-based programs, supporting professional development of staff and prioritizing this learning through educational standards.

To truly make a difference, we must work together to embrace a systemic approach to bullying prevention. By nurturing and enriching the environments in which children grow and learn, we can create a culture where bullying has no place. It's through the combined efforts of these initiatives, along with the collaboration of policymakers, educators, parents, and researchers, that we can aspire to bring about real change and ensure that every child can thrive in a safe and supportive environment.

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