How to Intervene to Stop Bullying: Tips for On–the–Spot Intervention at School

As adults, we may feel uncertain about how to handle bullying when we see or hear it happening. We may respond in ways that don't make the best use of the opportunity to teach a young person the difference between appropriate and inappropriate behavior. Bullying among children is inappropriate because it is aggressive behavior that is intentional and involves an imbalance of power and strength. If the situation is not handled appropriately, we could end up inadvertently promoting, rather than reducing, bullying. Here are some tips to help respond more effectively on the spot and make the best use of the "teachable moment" with all students at school.

When you see or hear bullying

- *Immediately stop the bullying:* Stand between the child or children who bullied and those who were bullied, preferably blocking eye contact between them. Don't send any students away—especially bystanders. Don't immediately ask about or discuss the reason for the bullying or try to sort out the facts.

- *Refer to the bullying behavior and to the relevant school rules against bullying.* Use a matter-of-fact tone of voice to state what behaviors you saw/heard. Let students know that bullying is unacceptable and against school rules (e.g., "Calling someone names is bullying and is against our school rules," or "That was bullying. I won't allow students to push or hurt each other that way").

- *Support the bullied child in a way that allows him or her to regain self-control, to "save face," and to feel supported and safe from retaliation*. Make a point to see the child later in private if he or she is upset, but don't ask what happened at the time of the incident. It can be very uncomfortable to be questioned in front of other students. Let his or her teachers know what happened so that they may provide additional support and protection. Increase supervision to assure that the bullying is not repeated and does not escalate.

- *Include bystanders in the conversation and give them guidance about how they might appropriately intervene or get help next time*. Don't put bystanders on the spot to explain publicly what they observed. Use a calm, matter-of-fact, supportive tone of voice to let them know that you noticed their inaction or that you are pleased with the way they tried to help—even if they weren't successful. If they did not act, or if they responded in aggressive ways, encourage them to take a more active or prosocial role next time (e.g., "Maybe you weren't sure what to do. Next time, please tell the person to stop or get an adult to help if you feel you can't work together to handle the situation").

- *If appropriate, impose immediate consequences for students who bully others*. Do not require students to apologize or make amends during the heat of the moment (everyone should have time to cool off). All consequences should be logical and connected to the offense. As a first step, you might take away social opportunities (e.g., recess, lunch in the cafeteria). Let students who bully know that you will be watching them and their friends closely to be sure that there is no retaliation. Notify colleagues.

- *Do not require the students to meet and "work things out."* Unlike conflicts, bullying involves a power imbalance, which means this strategy will not work. Trying to find a way to "work things out" can retraumatize the student who was bullied and does not generally improve relationships between the parties. Instead, encourage the student who bullied to make amends in a way (after follow-up with an adult) that would be meaningful for the child who was bullied.

Individual follow-up and support

Even if you make good use of the "teachable moment" when bullying occurs, you will still encounter situations in which staff members will need to provide follow-up interventions. Follow-up is time-consuming and may not be appropriate in every case of bullying. In addition, staff members who provide follow-up are likely to need specialized skills or training as well as enough time to investigate problems, to administer out appropriate discipline, or to provide support or therapeutic intervention.

- Provide follow-up interventions, as needed, for the students who were bullied and for those who bullied. Determine what type of situations and level of severity of bullying incidents require follow-up intervention from adults and designate who should intervene in various circumstances.

- Notify parents of children who are involved, as appropriate.

- Bullied students need to process the circumstances of the bullying, vent their feelings about it, and get support. Some may need assistance reading or interpreting social signals, practicing assertive behavior, building self-esteem, or identifying friends and classmates who can give them support.

- Students who bully may need help recognizing their behavior, taking responsibility for their behavior, developing empathy and perspective-taking abilities, and finding ways to make amends. They also may need help to learn how to use power in socially appropriate ways (e.g,. focusing their energy on causes they care about).

- When there are suspicions of bullying, gather more information by talking privately with bystanders. Intensify observation and supervision and offer incentives or positive consequences to active, helpful bystanders to increase involvement by students. To be successful, bystanders need opportunities to discuss and practice responses outside of the heat of the moment. The more options they have , the more successful they will be.