

10 tips for educators on preventing bullying

This fall, there are new and revamped laws in many states that address K-12 bullying and cyber bullying. In Massachusetts, we have one of the most comprehensive and far-reaching laws in the country. As in many states, K-12 teachers in Massachusetts have new responsibilities to respond to, report, and address bullying and cyber bullying. Here at the Massachusetts Aggression Reduction Center (MARC), we've developed 10 tips to help faculty cope with what can seem an overwhelming task.

1. Keep “responding” and “reporting” separate in your mind.

What behaviors do you have to report for possible formal discipline? Also, how should you respond when you see inappropriate (possibly bullying or definitely bullying) behaviors? Always respond by making it clear that you are disturbed by what you saw. Should you respond to a behavior that you might not normally report (such as laughter at a child's expense)? The answer is yes. Remember that even if it's not a “reportable” behavior—respond to it. Ignoring even mild bullying behaviors is essentially the same as endorsing them.

2. Focus on the small stuff.

It's useful to understand the difference between “gateway” behaviors and blatant bullying. Gateway behaviors facilitate or reinforce bullying—they make disrespect seem normal (which facilitates bullying) or even rewarded (like laughing along with a bully). The difficulty is that there are usually no solid rules against gateway behaviors, so adults often ignore them. But research shows us how toxic they can be. In 2009 and 2010, MARC researchers found that it was the gateway behaviors that dominated victim reports.

Focusing on the small stuff means understanding that we need to educate kids about the impact of even small behaviors and react when we see them happening. How to respond? Explain that even small behaviors really affect others. Tell the child that you don't want to see behavior that might be interpreted as rude, and instruct the child to stop. Make it a classroom rule. Then, repeated instances become insolence towards you—which is a possible matter for school discipline.

3. The cyber stuff: Approach and coach.

Although kids are comfortable with technology, they are not necessarily knowledgeable about it—don't confuse the two. We all need to talk with kids about technology. Don't worry about how much you know or don't know. Ask kids what's happening online with them. Ask them to tell you (or show you) what they're up to online. And keep in mind that even if you might not know how to do a particular thing, you do know that even online they should watch what they say and be civil to others. Don't hesitate to make that message loud and clear.

4. The Rumor Mill is still the leader in social problems.

Online and offline, rumors today fly at an incredible rate. In our research, bullies tell us that spreading rumors online is the by far the most common thing they do to others. So if we do anything to stop bullying, let's be sure to focus on the rumors.

5. Talk to kids about how to handle things when they get mad at each other.

Kids today often vent electronically when they're mad, instead of trying to resolve the problem. Faced with the choice between a difficult face-to-face conversation, versus the ease of venting online, they might often conclude that it makes more sense to go electronic. The problem is that by doing so, they usually escalate the conflict instead of resolving it. In bygone days, kids didn't need to be coached on the benefits of talking face to face when they're upset—but today they often do. In our research, girls particularly showed a tendency to do this.

6. Don't neglect elementary school students.

Both bullying and cyber bullying start young. Although we tend to neglect these topics until middle school, the fact is that the seeds of bullying are sown at a young age. And that includes cyber bullying: In a study conducted in 2008, the Corporation for Public Broadcasting found that 72 percent of all first graders used the internet at least once a week during the summer. Anecdotally, at MARC we have seen cases of cyber bullying involving second graders.

The good news is that young elementary students are very willing and able to internalize rules about behavior. Thus, it is important to teach them that being a good person on the computer is just as important as being a good person on the playground. MARC offers a

curriculum on bullying and cyber bullying for grades K-5. You can read about it on our web site and request a copy online.

7. To get the kids to report, you must connect with them emotionally on some level.

We're not saying you should be best friends with your students; only that your students need to know that you care about them and their welfare. Kids today are still reporting bullying to adults at very low levels. Boys particularly, in our research, are not reporting to educators. Why aren't kids reporting? More than 80 percent of the boys and girls in our research revealed that when they did report, no action was taken as a result. They took a big risk in "telling," but as far as they knew, nothing was done.

Of course, confidentiality laws (both federal and, in many states, local) prohibit educators from telling a person specifics about any action taken against another student. But these laws don't prohibit you from telling a student, "We're not ignoring your report. We are working on it," and that's exactly what reporters need to hear.

8. Girls might need particular attention, socially.

In our research, male cyber bullies tended to attack strangers, acquaintances, or kids who were friends long ago. Girls, on the other hand, tended to attack their friends or those with whom they were recently friends. This is a finding of particular concern, because it means that girls are attacking the very foundations of their social support.

Adolescence is a time when kids are learning how to form the long-term friendships they will depend upon as adults. So be aware of the girls you teach: They might need your help in learning to appreciate and protect their social infrastructure—not attack it.

9. Take a moment to reinforce patient, kind, and friendly behaviors.

We all know that the carrot works better than the stick. When you notice a child being particularly good-hearted—especially in a potentially difficult situation, like when helping a classmate understand something, or sticking up for another child—be sure to let them know that you personally appreciate and admire their behavior. Better yet, use a classroom recognition system for the students who behave so well.

10. Enlist the kids in your efforts.

Although adults can be key players, it's the kids themselves who are the ultimate arbiters

of their group's social behavior. Ask your students what kinds of bullying problems they notice, and what rules they believe should address those problems. Then sit back and watch them enforce their own rules with enthusiasm!

The Massachusetts Aggression Reduction Center is an academic center at Bridgewater State University in Massachusetts. We offer K-12 schools in Massachusetts free programs and services by running a training program for graduate and undergraduate students in higher education. Everyone benefits: Future educators receive unique field training, and K-12 schools receive high-quality, no-cost programs and services. Our web site (www.MARCCenter.org) offers many free downloads, games, tips, and curricula for all schools, and parent downloads that are available in English, Spanish, and Portuguese.

Free cyber bullying toolkit from Common Sense Media

Common Sense Media, an independent nonprofit organization that helps parents and educators teach children how to be savvy users and consumers of media and technology, has created a free toolkit to help educators address the issue of cyber bullying in their schools.

For each grade level (elementary, middle, and high school), “Stand Up, Don’t Stand By” contains two of the organization’s best lessons on cyber bullying from its digital literacy and citizenship curriculum. The toolkit also includes a parent-focused “workshop in a box” to help incorporate parents into the conversation.

Research from the Pew Internet & American Life project suggests that one in three kids is a target of cyber bullying—which leaves two in three who play a different role, Common Sense Media says. “Stand Up, Don’t Stand By” is part of the group’s upcoming campaign to encourage parents and teachers to start a conversation about cyber bullying with their children and students, and support kids in taking a stand against digital harassment.

<http://www.commonsensemedia.org/educators/cyberbullying-toolkit>