

Ten Steps to Building Schools Where Everyone Belongs

1. Establish clearly defined schoolwide behavior expectations rather than rules that only describe general principles.

Here is an example of a clearly defined rule: "No teasing. Teasing is name-calling, starting rumors, gestures, or other actions that are likely to make students feel bad about themselves." Here is a general principle: "We will treat each other with respect." Which of these rules will be more likely to lead to consistency among staff members in deciding whether a rule has been broken? General principles can be a guide in the creation of clearly defined expectations.

2. Use predictable and escalating consequences for aggression rather than creating a unique consequence for each student and each situation.

When there are inconsistent consequences for bullying, young people are likely to continue. When we have to customize a consequence for each incident, the process of discipline becomes impossibly time-consuming. Planned, rubric-based consequences take much less time to administer and thus can be used more consistently. When consequences are predictable and based on a clear rubric, young people can learn from each others' misdeeds. On the other hand, when two different students do exactly the same thing yet receive consequences of different severity, cause and effect learning is jeopardized. Students with more serious consequences, and their parents, are likely to believe that the consequence is unjust.

3. Maintain a positive emotional tone between adults and youth rather than treating students with anger and frustration.

When consequences come from a rubric, when they are earned rather than given, and when there are planned next steps if the student continues to choose aggression, there is no need for adults to use anger as a behavior management tool. When adults monitor their own feelings of frustration and look for small signs of progress, they are more able to develop positive relationships with at-risk youth. When adults model friendly and respectful communication, students are more likely to respond in kind.

4. Acknowledge positive actions rather than ignoring positive behavior or using person-based praise.

When staff point out students' positive behavior using descriptive language, students are more likely to repeat this behavior. We may say, "I noticed that you walked away instead of hitting when you were out in the game," "I saw you sit with Susan when she was alone at lunch," or "You complimented Bobby." When, in addition, we help students see the natural positive outcomes of their actions, we can be even more effective. We may say, "I noticed that you walked away instead of hitting when you were out in the game. You came back to the game and kept playing" or "I saw you sit with Susan when she was alone at lunch and I saw her smiling."

5. Provide structured opportunities for aggressive youth to think about their actions instead of using threats, lectures, or anger.

When young people take responsibility for their actions and for hurting others, they strengthen conscience. When they realize what goals they were trying to reach by being aggressive and find other ways to reach those goals, they learn to meet their needs in acceptable ways.

6. Work to develop a peer climate in which bystanders discourage bullying and in which peers befriend targets.

When 85% of the school population—the bystanders—stop watching silently and starts telling bullies to stop, telling adults, and reaching out in friendship, bullying behavior becomes less damaging and less frequent. The best way to encourage youth to make these changes is for adults to model the behaviors for them. We can set an example by implementing effective discipline systems, recognizing positive behaviors, and spending time listening to, sharing enjoyment with, and validating all students.

7. Protect targets and bystanders from repeated or retaliatory harassment. Reducing the rate of bullying is the best support we can give targets.

If we want young people to tell us about bullying, we have to make telling safe by using consequences for harassment of youth who report.

8. Help targets to reverse feelings of self-blame and to feel powerful.

"First they bully you, then you bully yourself," a student said to me in Florida. Targets often begin to believe what the bullies say about them: that they are stupid, ugly, or fat. Helping targets to see themselves more positively often takes time. They need to feel included and find ways to experience their strengths. As targets learn to brainstorm and apply problem-solving steps, they feel more competent.

9. Help targets build friendships.

Youth tell me that social isolation is the most painful part of being bullied. "If no one stands up for you, you feel like you don't exist" said one teenager in Ohio. We can encourage peers to reach out in friendship and help targets and other isolated youth participate in that friendship.

10. Recognize and build on the strengths and accomplishments of your school community.

When we recognize the positive programs and practices that stop bullying in a school, staff and students are more likely to continue them. When we track improvements and show everyone involved what they are doing to make a positive impact, it is more likely that people will stay committed to a bullying prevention program.

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