

Breaking the code: understanding and intervening in teen bullying

Adults who experienced bullying as kids on the playground, school lunchroom, or locker room may be clueless about the use of technologies to bully. They may downplay its harm as well as their responsibility to intervene. It's important that adults and teens work together to "break the code" of teen bullying and understand what bullying is, why it occurs, and take actions to reduce its harm.

Know it when you see (or hear) it.

Bullying is a specific type of aggression that

- Intends to **harm**
- Is **repetitive**
- Thrives on a **power differential**; the more powerful (physically, socially, financially) attacking the less powerful

Often, bullying creates a sense of **terror** in the target as well as those who observe it as bystanders.

Bullying can be:

Direct

- Physical (e.g., hitting, shoving, tripping)
- Verbal (e.g., name-calling, threats, hate speech)

Indirect

- Psychological (e.g., intimidation, harassment, terrorizing)
- Relational (e.g., rumors, social exclusion, shunning, lies)

Relational aggression: Is it a girl thing?

There are significant gender and age differences in the prevalence of bullying. Physical bullying is more prevalent at younger ages and among boys. Social bullying and relational aggression (social exclusion, telling lies or rumors, shunning, humiliation, insults) are more common among girls. As girls begin middle school, they are more likely to bully each other through social exclusion and relationships.

Relational aggression is the dominate form of bullying for female teens and may be a way for them to control their peer groups.

Electronic bullying and social technologies

Bullying via electronic means includes texting insults on cell phones, spreading rumors via e-mail, harassing by instant message, and posting embarrassing items on social network (Facebook, etc.) profiles. Also, online trash-polling sites that encourage youth to "vote" for the fattest, ugliest, or dumbest demean and dehumanize.

Electronic or cyber bullying is willful and repeated harm inflicted through electronic text. Use of electronic means to bully can be far more damaging than face-to-face bullying because instead of remaining a private matter or known by just a few persons, text or photos can be communicated to a large audience in a short time.

Cyber bullies typically don't experience feelings of regret, sympathy, or compassion since they usually don't have face-to-face contact with their targets. Female bullies often use electronic communication to hurt, and then wait to see the relational harm done when they encounter the target(s) in social settings.

Code of silence

Targets do not tell because:

- They're ashamed of being bullied.
- They're afraid of retaliation.
- They don't think anyone can or will help them since past attempts were ignored or trivialized by adults.
- They think bullying is part of growing up.
- They believe that "snitching on" another kid is not cool.

Those who observe bullying and do nothing to stop it are "bystanders." Bystanders do nothing because:

- They are afraid of getting hurt physically, emotionally, or socially.
- They don't want to draw attention to themselves and risk being the next target.
- They're afraid of making the situation worse.
- They don't know what to do.

BREAKING THE CODE: INTERVENTION

Before steps are taken to intervene in teen bullying, it's important to know what has been proven to be both effective and ineffective.

WHAT DOESN'T WORK

- "Zero tolerance" policies and suspensions can discourage teens from reporting and don't allow adults to exercise decision-making authority.
- Conflict resolution and peer mediation send the wrong message that the target is partly at fault. Bullying is abuse—not conflict.
- Group treatment for bullies will reinforce their behaviors.
- Simple, short-term solutions and programs are merely "Band-Aids." Sustained changes in social settings are required to change social behaviors.

WHAT WORKS FOR YOUTH GROUPS AND PROGRAMS

- Assess bullying for your group: Are there bullying "hot-spots" that your group is aware of that need to be monitored by adults? If overt bullying isn't happening, then is your group free of relational bullying too? Chances are that at least one third of your members are involved with bullying and bring those experiences to group meetings and activities.
- Openly discuss cyber bullying and the appropriate use of social technologies.
- Create awareness among group members so targets know they're not alone.
- Formulate a group plan for bullying prevention, including a "contract" that all group members sign for positive, respectful behaviors and consequences. Continue these efforts over time and with new members of the group.

Adults must intervene.

Adults must be willing to intervene appropriately in bullying by

- Demonstrating that they respect the uniqueness of teens and their use of technology
- Improving the social climates of all youth organizations and activities
- Promoting friendship support
- Teaching assertiveness
- Helping teens distinguish between playful versus mean and hurtful behaviors or messages

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