

Involvement of Law Enforcement Officers in Bullying Prevention

Bullying is unwanted, aggressive behavior among school aged children that involves a real or perceived power imbalance. The behavior is repeated, or has the potential to be repeated, over time. Both kids who are bullied and who bully others may have serious, lasting problems.

In order to be considered bullying, the behavior must be aggressive and include:

- **An Imbalance of Power:** Kids who bully use their power—such as physical strength, access to embarrassing information, or popularity—to control or harm others. Power imbalances can change over time and in different situations, even if they involve the same people.
- **Repetition:** Bullying behaviors happen more than once or have the potential to happen more than once.

Why Law Enforcement Officers Should Help Stop Bullying

With solid relationships forged in the school resource officer (SRO) and Drug Abuse Resistance Education (D.A.R.E.) programs, law enforcement officers are in a unique

position to help identify and eliminate bullying behavior in schools—behavior that is seriously interfering with students' ability to receive a sound education.

Law enforcement officers, like other adults, should be concerned about the effects of bullying on children. Research indicates that bullying can cause health, psychological, and educational problems for children who are bullied. Children and youth who are bullied are more likely than other children to be depressed, lonely, and anxious; have low self-esteem; be absent from school; feel unwell; and think about suicide.

Law enforcement officers also should try to prevent bullying because research shows that bullying others can be a sign of other serious antisocial and violent behavior. Children and youth who frequently bully their peers are more likely than others to

- Abuse alcohol and other drugs in adolescence and as adults
- Get into fights, vandalize property, and drop out of school
- Engage in early sexual activity
- Have criminal convictions and traffic citations as adults
- Be abusive toward their romantic partners, spouses, or children as adults

How can law enforcement officers contribute to a successful bullying prevention program in school?

Changing bullying behavior in the schools requires a coordinated approach. Law enforcement officers can help stop the spread of fear and violence in our schools by assisting in the implementation of a comprehensive bullying prevention program.

1. Enlist the support of school administrators.

A plan to implement a bullying prevention initiative can be successful only with the support of the highest authority in the school. Unfortunately, some school administrators don't believe that there is a bullying problem in their school.

- To convince them of the seriousness of bullying, share with them research findings about the nature, prevalence, and effects of bullying.
- Consider collecting your own data about bullying at the school to share with your administrator and fellow staff members. You may want to administer an anonymous student questionnaire (grades three and higher). A number of bullying prevention programs include such questionnaires. Be careful to protect student privacy. Many surveys are subject to the Protection of Pupil Rights Amendment (PPRA) and the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA). Assure students that their

responses will be kept confidential and that their answers can't be tracked back to them.

- Consider collecting and mapping incidents of reported bullying at your school. Free computer programs (e.g., www.schoolcopsoftware.com) are available that may help you to analyze and map incidents that occur in and around your schools.

2. Select and implement a research-based bullying prevention program.

Research existing bullying prevention programs that your school might adopt.

Visit www.FindYouthInfo.gov for information about such programs and tips about what to consider in selecting effective programs.

Work with your administrator and other staff to select a program that best fits the needs of your school, while considering the proven effectiveness of the model. Work actively with your colleagues to implement the program with fidelity.

3. Be accessible to students and staff.

Get to know students by name and work to develop trusting relationships with them. Encourage them to come to you with concerns about bullying or other issues.

4. Create an anonymous reporting system in your school.

Many students are bystanders to bullying, and many do not take action against bullying that they see or know about. Creating a system that promotes

anonymous reporting of bullying incidents gives passive bystanders an opportunity to be active bystanders. Consider providing a locked box for anonymous reports of bullying. Locate the box in an area of the school that is private but easily accessible. Investigate the reports thoroughly and sensitively. Alerting responsible adults about bullying incidents and increasing supervision can significantly reduce their frequency.

5. Institute passive surveillance.

In other words, be watchful. Observe from behind blinds of a window that overlooks the playground or a stage curtain that overlooks the lunchroom. Use information gathered from anonymous reports to strategize where and when you should increase supervision.

6. Work with other staff to create a safety plan for children who are bullied.

Consider establishing a code phrase that could be used by the child to alert a teacher or other adult to bullying behavior without drawing undue attention to the child who was bullied.

7. Suggest the implementation of behavior contracts as a type of creative probation.

If a bullying behavior constitutes a crime, visit with your prosecuting attorney to see whether you can develop an intervention plan for the child who bullied. Consider the statute of limitations for misdemeanor crime in your state and propose that you be given some discretion in how these children are charged when bullying incidents violate the law. Ask the prosecutor to help you develop a behavior contract and offer to monitor this child's behavior for the next few months at school. If successful, the child who bullies can escape prosecution (much like a diversion), and the court's case log can be reduced. If unsuccessful, the child who bullies would face this charge in addition to any other charges as a result of continued bullying behavior.

References and Resources

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