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Preventing Bullying Involving Students with Disabilities: A Three-Tier Strategy

by Ronald G. Slaby, PhD, Kim Storey, EdD and Ed Donnelly, MEd
Education Development Center, Inc. (EDC)

The Bullying Problem for Students with Disabilities

The research is clear that students with disabilities are generally at an unusually high risk for becoming involved in bullying. Compared to their peers without disabilities, students with disabilities have been found to be:

- More worried about school safety and being injured or harassed by peers^[1]; and
- 2 to 3 times more likely to be victims of bullying.

Besides being more likely to become victims of bullying, students with disabilities experience bullying that is repeated more often, lasts longer, and usually directly related to their disabilities.^[2]

In addition to their greater risk of victimization, some students with disabilities bully others in ways that are related to their disability. They may bully others, at least in part, because they become easily provoked and frustrated, misread social cues, misunderstand another's intent, lack peer support and protection, and/or use bullying to retaliate or seek negative attention. They also may exhibit behaviors that others misperceive as intentional bullying.

Bullying is different from disagreements, conflicts, and fights. Bullying is usually defined as a particular form of physical or emotional harm-doing that is (1) intentional, (2) repeated, and (3) power imbalanced. Although many students may be targeted by

bullies because they seem less powerful in one key area (e.g., their size, social status, or lack of friends), students with disabilities may be particularly vulnerable for involvement with bullying based on their relation to each of the three factors that define bullying.

Students with disabilities may:

- Misperceive a bully's harmful intentions or fail to comprehend the negative social consequences of their own behavior;
- Inadvertently invite repeated bullying by not fully realizing that they are being bullied or by responding in ways that seem to encourage further bullying; and/or
- Be perceived, due to their disability, as lacking the power or ability to respond effectively to bullying or to seek the support of friends or adults.

State Anti-Bullying Laws Addressing Students with Disabilities

In the last 13 years, 48 states (with the exceptions of Montana and South Dakota) have passed anti-bullying legislation (Bullypolice.org). However, not all of these laws include language that addresses bullying prevention for students with disabilities. Massachusetts provides a clear example of how some states are requiring educators to apply bullying prevention and intervention strategies specifically to

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Ronald G. Slaby, PhD

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students with disabilities. The law also states that it is the responsibility of school personnel to ensure this right.

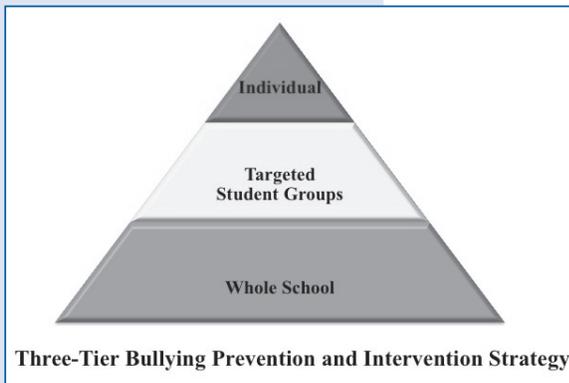
The Massachusetts Bullying Prevention and Intervention Law is built on the premise that all students—no matter their race, creed, ethnicity, nationality, sexual orientation, or physical or mental abilities—have an inherent right to an education free from any form of bullying.

All Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) have a check box that asks the question:

Does this student have social-emotional needs that might make him or her a target for bullying?

The IEP team must determine whether the student has a disability that affects social skills development or whether the student may participate in, or be vulnerable to, bullying, harassment, or teasing because of his or her disability. If so, the team must consider what should be included in the IEP “to build each student’s social skills and proficiencies to avoid and respond to bullying, harassment, or teasing.” [3]

A Three-Tier Strategy to Prevent Bullying Involving Students with Disabilities



There is a clear and compelling need for educators throughout the United States to adopt a systematic and comprehensive strategy for effectively preventing and stopping bullying involving students with disabilities. The Bullying Prevention and Research Institute (BPRI) at EDC has partnered with the Boston Public Schools (BPS) to develop and

implement a strategy that meets this need. The BPRI strategy introduces professional development, family outreach, education, intervention, and resource tools designed to address the problem of bullying involving students with disabilities at each of three levels: whole school, targeted student groups, and individual.

Level 1: The Whole School Strategy

Many students with disabilities who are at risk for being involved in bullying need the

help and support of everyone in the school. Classmates along with all the teachers, staff, students, and parents in a school need to understand that:

Bullying is never acceptable.

Bullying is against the law.

No one deserves to be bullied.

The law requires that all school personnel receive training in understanding bullying and effective ways to prevent it. Teachers are required to report bullying and to intervene in bullying situations. Assemblies, poster contests, and other school-wide initiatives need to involve all students—with and without disabilities—in understanding, respecting, and supporting each other.

The Whole School Strategy creates a safe, secure, respectful, and inclusive school climate in which all students—with and without disabilities—actively prevent bullying involving students with disabilities.

Level 2: The Targeted Student Group Strategy

Schools often ignore what may be the biggest source of their bullying problem—the skills-building needs of students without disabilities. Students would benefit from participating in structured small-group interventions, facilitated by trained teachers and counselors, where they practice positive social interactions and develop bullying prevention skills. These groups—which may include students with and without disabilities—can occur during class, lunch, recreation, or afterschool.

The Targeted Student Group Strategy prepares specific groups of students to understand and respect students with disabilities, and to practice the skills they need to prevent and respond to the bullying of students with disabilities.

Level 3: The Individualized Strategy

Students with disabilities who are at risk for or are involved in bullying need to develop specific strategies tailored to their special needs. For students with disabilities, this individualized strategy is largely addressed through their IEPs.

Through specific goals tailored to the needs of the individual student, students with

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disabilities can learn and practice skills to protect them from bullying. For example, students may be taught to understand when they are being bullied and to practice using assertive responses, such as “Stop!” or “Leave me alone!” or by asking others to help.

In addition to IEPs, individualized intervention may be needed for students, both with and without disabilities, who show persistent and severe patterns of involvement with bullying. The Saturdays for Success Program—a joint project of BPS and EDC—was designed to address this need.

Saturdays for Success is a skills-building program for students referred for problems with bullying and/or victimization. It provides an educational alternative to suspension for bullies and an intervention for victims through targeted counseling, intervention sessions, and group activities. All students attend eight consecutive weekly sessions for four hours each Saturday morning. Peer leaders, recruited from individual schools, are students who have expressed or shown interest in becoming actively involved in bullying prevention. Based on observations and anecdotal evidence, the program is very successful in meeting its goals. Students are engaged with the program activities, and actively involved in developing new social skills and practicing bullying prevention strategies. When they return to their schools, victims report that they are not victimized anymore; bullies engage in more positive social interactions with their peers; and peer leaders actively help to create and maintain bullying-free school environments.

Conclusion

It is clear that bullying is hurtful—not only to the bullies, victims, and bystanders, but to the entire school and community. Over the past 35 years, new laws and societal changes have opened public schools for all children. As our schools and communities have become more inclusive, it is critical that all school personnel recognize, understand, and address the needs of all students.

Students with disabilities are at a very high risk for becoming involved with bullying, but this reality can be changed. Bullying involving students with disabilities can be stopped and prevented through education and interventions specifically designed to address the unique characteristics of bullying for students with disabilities. To be

maximally effective, implementation should be delivered at all three levels: whole school, targeted student groups, and individual. Through this three-tier strategy, the entire school and community will come to understand that bullying is not acceptable, and will be prepared to take responsible and effective action to ensure that ALL students have the opportunity to learn in a bullying-free environment.

References

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Resources

Eyes on Bullying is a resource for teachers, parents, and other adults who care for children and youth. It provides information, insights, strategies, and activities to address bullying.

Eyes on Bullying toolkit: <http://www.eyesonbullying.org/pdfs/toolkit.pdf>

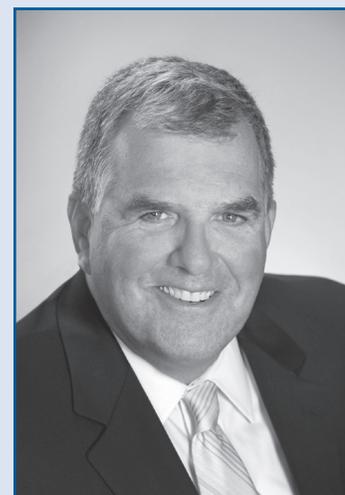
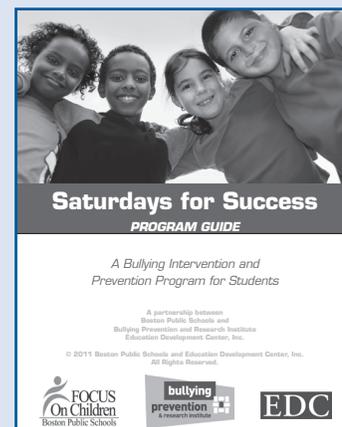
Eyes on Bullying website: www.eyesonbullying.org

Boston Public Schools Anti-bullying Resources
www.bostonpublicschools.org/antibullying

*For more information contact
Susana Valverde at svalverde@edc.org
or Kim Storey at kstorey@edc.org.*



Kim Storey, EdD



Ed Donnelly, MEd