Social-Emotional Learning Can Help Prevent Bullying

Research-based, schoolwide social-emotional learning (SEL) programs are foundational to preventing bullying.

Every state works to protect students from bullying, yet bullying is pervasive and challenging to prevent.

Bullying is not merely:

- Kids not getting along, kids being mean to one another, or even kids fighting with each other

Bullying is:

- A perceived power imbalance coupled with unwanted aggressive peer behavior that happens or is likely to happen multiple times[1]

Bullying can cause physical, social, emotional, and academic harm to all those involved—not just the victim, but the perpetrator and bystanders as well.[2]

Effective bullying prevention is possible.

Schools can prevent bullying through anti-bullying programs in concert with SEL.[3] In a bullying prevention strategy, schools can:

- Train adults to foster a positive classroom environment and to be aware of and understand bullying behaviors, risk factors, and warning signs[4]

- Foster safe, supportive, and inclusive environments[5]

- Strengthen young people's social-emotional skills, such as empathy, emotion management, and social problem-solving, often through a universal, school-based SEL program[6,7]

- Connect youth to mentoring programs, after-school activities, and caring adults[8]

Including SEL in this strategy is vital.

SEL bolsters bullying prevention efforts because it:

- Fosters positive classroom norms—which all kids in the classroom can promote—that discourage bullying[9]

A culture of inclusion is the best antidote to bullying. What is true of preventing in-person bullying is true of preventing cyberbullying.

- Teaches relationship skills, including peer support, to protect against bullying[10]

- Strengthens social problem-solving skills, which can help prevent both bullying perpetration and victimization[11]

- Supports emotion-regulation skills to reduce bullying behavior and victimization[12]

- Cultivates empathy to reduce bullying behavior and increase bystander intervention[13]

Schools should not use zero-tolerance policies, which are ineffective and can exacerbate bullying.[14] These policies can hinder student achievement and disproportionally impact marginalized student groups.[15]

How can norm-setting help reduce bullying?

Kids look to be accepted by their peers: if they get positive feedback and peer acceptance from bullying behaviors, that's creating a norm. On an individual level, kids can be dissuaded from engaging in bullying behavior if they hold a negative attitude toward bullying; it's important that anti-bullying beliefs be clearly expressed in the classroom, as kids are influenced by their peers and class climate.[16]

SEL in concert with schoolwide bullying prevention efforts is effective because it can bolster positive and respectful learning environments, thus influencing social norms in the school, and because it can address some of the complex social-emotional factors of bullying.[17]

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Policy Recommendations

- Create a framework for schools to provide periodic research-based training and education on bullying prevention for all adults that work with young people.

- Create a framework for schools to provide periodic research-based bullying prevention programs and strategies for young people.

- Replace zero-tolerance policies with equitable, evidence-based strategies that foster a school culture of safety, support, and inclusion.

- Create a framework for schools to implement SEL as a schoolwide intervention that promotes and aligns with bullying prevention.

- Provide sustainable and appropriate funding for SEL and bullying prevention efforts.

- Establish mechanisms to continuously improve bullying prevention policies and practices.

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