
RESPONSIVE CLASSROOM®

NEWSLETTER

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Bullying Prevention & the *Responsive Classroom Approach*

Bullying is a top issue on educators' minds. Those using or exploring the *Responsive Classroom* approach frequently ask, "Is this approach a bullying prevention program? If not, how does it relate to bullying prevention?"



The *Responsive Classroom* approach is not a program for addressing any particular issue.

Rather, it's a general approach to educating children that gives teachers and administrators strategies for creating a safe school environment in which harmful behavior is less likely to thrive. The approach focuses on building community and teaching children important social skills, such as cooperation, assertion, responsibility, empathy, and self-control. It also gives teachers strategies for helping children find constructive ways to deal with their problems.

Bullying is an immensely complicated issue with many dimensions. But regardless of the specific steps a school needs to take to address its bullying problems, the *Responsive Classroom* approach provides a strong, positive environment in which such efforts can succeed. For NEFC, developer of the *Responsive Classroom* approach, bullying is an issue of ongoing concern, one that we continue to grapple with. In this article, we offer our responses to questions we frequently hear from teachers and administrators about this important topic.

Q: What is bullying, and how widespread is it in U.S. schools?

A: Bullying is repeatedly making fun of, embarrassing, or scaring another person. Studies by groups such as the National Association of School Psychologists suggest that over five million children are bullied frequently, and over six million consistently bully others. Stan Davis (see resource list at end of article) says those numbers make bullying the most common form of violence in American society.

Q: What has research shown about how bullying damages children?

A: We all know the connections between bullying and tragedies such as

Columbine, in which the shooters were boys who'd been bullied for years. But research by Dan Olweus and others (see resource list at end of article) has shown that even aside from these violent tragedies, bullying damages all children. Those bullied are more likely to be truant, to be depressed, and to hurt themselves and others. Bullies are more likely to grow into adults who are dangerously aggressive. Bystanders, too, are negatively affected. They may feel frightened and confused; they know what they're seeing is wrong but they're afraid—or don't know how—to intervene.

But researchers have also found that bullying (and the damage it causes) is not inevitable, not a rite of passage or a necessary part of childhood. We can teach children other ways to behave.

Q: What can educators do to address bullying?

A: Whatever anti-bullying programs and strategies schools choose, we believe several elements are important:

First, make sure all adults are involved—that they know about any bullying going on in their school and accept responsibility and authority for stopping it.

Second, explicitly teach and give children plenty of opportunities to practice kind and respectful behavior and language.

Third, do the teaching in the class-room, school-wide, and, as needed, with individual children. As Olweus points out, any anti-bullying method will be more effective if implemented at all three of those levels. Involving parents is important, too.

Not to be overlooked is empowering the children who see bullying happening. These bystanders have power, especially if they're taught to say "Stop. We don't like what you're doing." And they can say to the bullied child, "Come and play with us," which defeats the bully's attempt to isolate the victim.

Q: What practical *Responsive Classroom* techniques help educators prevent bullying?

A: Many *Responsive Classroom* practices, although not designed to deter bullying specifically, are consistent with those that anti-bullying experts have found to be effective. It's very important, for example, that children gather together regularly as a class to get to know each other and appreciate both similarities and differences. Morning Meeting, a key *Responsive Classroom* component, provides just this kind of regular class gathering.

Setting clear expectations is important, too. The *Responsive Classroom* approach to discipline does that through having students share their hopes for learning and then guiding them to create rules that enable everyone to fulfill their hopes.

Teachers then introduce logical consequences that will apply when children don't observe the rules the class has made together. Those logical consequences would come into play when, for example, one child criticizes another's clumsiness on the

playground. Such behavior violates any rules about respecting or taking care of each other, so a logical consequence is appropriate. Depending on the situation, the consequence might be a time-out, losing the privilege of participating in the activity, or losing the privilege of being at recess that day.

The *Responsive Classroom* approach also gives children plenty of opportunities to practice positive behaviors and language. Teachers use modeling and role playing to teach positive social behaviors, and they strengthen social learning by connecting it with academic studies. They actively teach problem solving, independence, assertion, and self-control. Teachers also encourage reflective discussion about what behaviors children think are working well and where they could improve.

Q: What about recess and bus, two places where bullying often happens?

A: The *Responsive Classroom* approach gives the adults at school strategies for structuring recess and being out there on the playground, involved with the children. Not only does this help prevent bullying, but if any bullying happens, adults can see it and stop it immediately.

As for the bus, the *Responsive Classroom* approach teaches students expectations for bus behavior and encourages adults to debrief with students about their bus rides. Bus drivers and school staff are encouraged to talk together about what's happening on buses. Then the whole school community problem solves together.

Key Anti-Bullying Resources

Davis, Stan. 2005. *Schools Where Everyone Belongs: Practical Strategies for Reducing Bullying*. Champaign, Illinois: Research Press.

Olweus, Dan. 1993. *Bullying at School: What We Know and What We Can Do*. Malden, Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishers.

Wessler, Stephen L. 2003. *The Respectful School: How Educators and Students Can Conquer Hate and Harassment*. Alexandria, Virginia: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.

Honest Talk: One Teacher Tackles Bullying Head-On

October sunshine plays over serious faces as the fifth graders contemplate new charts their teacher, Nicole Doner, has posted. "Bullying," one reads, "repeated acts meant to make fun of, embarrass, or scare someone." Nicole tells the group, "We're going to have an honest discussion about bullying."

She then invites the students to describe times when they were bullied. The children speak up willingly: "I was called names." "There was a club against me." "I was pushed down some stairs." "People made fun of my hair."

"How did you feel?" queries Nicole. The answers spill out: "Scared and sad." "Like I didn't have any friends." "Awful." "Unsafe." "Angry." "I wanted to cry." "Ugly." As the children speak, Nicole writes their words on a chart titled "When I Was Bullied."

Later, when the time is right, the children will tackle the harder side of the topic—their experiments with bullying others: bossing, tripping, pushing, saying mean things, making others cry. Nicole will write their words on a chart called "When I Bullied Someone Else." Then Nicole will help them generate ideas for a final chart, "How Do We Stop Bullying?"

In this class at H.O. Wheeler Elementary in Burlington, Vermont, serious discussions on difficult topics such as bullying unfold easily. That ease is possible because of the careful work Nicole and the children do, beginning during the crucial first weeks of school and continuing throughout the year, to establish and maintain a culture of caring and respect. During the first six weeks of school, Nicole spends lots of time helping children talk about why they come to school, what they hope to do and learn. The students get to know each other and to see that they share a lot, even if they're different in some ways. This creates a culture in which the children have the sense of safety and the basic skills they'll need to speak out, listen, and solve problems together.

Early on, Nicole makes sure that behavior expectations are clear—and one of those expectations is that no form of bullying will be tolerated. By explicitly and carefully teaching peacemaking skills, Nicole enables students to feel safe enough to talk openly and honestly about bullying and other difficult issues.

"Until we talked about bullying," Nicole says, "I don't think my kids realized how serious it is and how seriously adults take it. They thought 'it happens,' that it's a rite of passage. Now, they know that bullying's not all right, and that they can choose to behave differently."

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