Communicating about bullying

Bullying is a widespread and serious problem that can happen anywhere. It is not a phase children have to go through, it is not “just messing around”, and it is not something to grow out of. Bullying can cause serious and lasting harm.

Although definitions of bullying vary, (please see CT General Statutes on bullying) most agree that bullying involves:

• Imbalance of power (People who bully use their power to control or harm, and the people being bullied may have a hard time defending themselves.);
• Intent to cause harm (Actions done by accident are not bullying; the person bullying has a goal to cause harm.); and
• Repetition (Incidents of bullying happen to the same person over and over by the same person or group.).

Bullying can take many forms, such as:

• Verbal (name-calling, teasing);
• Social (spreading rumors, leaving people out on purpose, breaking up friendships);
• Physical (hitting, punching, shoving), and
• Cyberbullying (Using the Internet, mobile phones or other digital technologies to harm others).

There are a number of things educators can do to make schools safer and prevent bullying. The following are suggestions for how to approach bullying in schools:

• Assess bullying in your school. Determine where and when bullying occurs.
• Increase adult supervision in bullying “hot spots.” Work with support staff, such as cafeteria staff, bus stop and playground monitors and bus drivers, who may observe bullying incidents that unfold outside the classroom.
• Involve students, parents, teachers, and staff in bullying prevention. Establish a school safety committee and task force with a coordinator whose job it is to plan, implement and evaluate the school’s bullying prevention program.
• Encourage teachers and staff to file incident reports of bullying. Keep track of critical incidents, and assess and evaluate your bullying prevention program.
• Create policies and rules. Create a mission statement, code of conduct, and school-wide rules that establish a climate in which bullying is not acceptable. Disseminate and communicate widely.
• Integrate bullying prevention material into curriculum and school activities. Implement curriculum-based, class-level discussions and activities about bullying (e.g., role-playing activities) at each grade level.
• Promote extracurricular activities. Reinforce positive social interactions in an inclusive environment.
• Raise awareness about your bullying prevention initiative. Launch an awareness campaign to make the objectives known to students, parents, and community members.
• Establish a school culture of acceptance, tolerance and respect. Take advantage of staff meetings, assemblies, classes and parent meetings, newsletters to families, the school website, and the student handbook.

→ Avoid what does not work.

In recent years, increasing numbers of educators, health professionals, parents, and other adults who interact with students have come to understand the seriousness of bullying. Many proven and promising prevention and intervention strategies have been developed. Unfortunately, some misdirected intervention and prevention strategies also have emerged.

Research has shown that the following are strategies that do not work or have unexpected negative consequences.

• Zero tolerance or “three strikes and you’re out” policies: These policies have the potential to exclude large numbers of students from school, discourage reporting of bullying, and deprive students who bully from the good role models they so need.

• Conflict resolution and peer mediation: Bullying is not a conflict between two people of equal power with equal blame for the situation. Also, facing those who have bullied them may further upset students who have been bullied.

• Group treatment for students who bully: Group members tend to reinforce bullying behavior in each other.

• Simple, short-term solutions: Focusing on bullying in a piecemeal way (e.g., in-service training, school assembly, lessons taught by individual teachers) will do much less to prevent bullying than a school-wide initiative.

→ Recognize the warning signs and share them with staff and parents.

There are many warning signs that could indicate that someone is involved in bullying, either by bullying others or by being bullied. However, these warning signs may indicate other issues or problems, as well.

Someone who is being bullied may:

• Come home with damaged or missing clothing or other belongings.
• Report losing items such as books, electronics, clothing, or jewelry.
• Have unexplained injuries.
• Complain frequently of headaches, stomachaches, or feeling sick.
• Have trouble sleeping or have frequent bad dreams.
• Have changes in eating habits.
• Hurt himself or herself.
• Be very hungry after school from not eating his or her lunch
• Run away from home.
• Lose interest in visiting or talking with friends.
• Be afraid of going to school or other activities with peers.
• Lose interest in school work or begin to do poorly in school.
• Appear sad, moody, angry, anxious or depressed when he or she comes home.
• Talk about suicide.
• Feel helpless.
• Feels like he or she is not good enough.
• Blame himself or herself for his or her problems.

(More)
• Suddenly have fewer friends.
• Avoid certain places.
• Act differently than usual.

Someone who is bullying others may:
• Become violent with others.
• Get into physical or verbal fights with others.
• Get sent to the principal’s office or detention a lot.
• Have extra money or new belongings that cannot be explained.
• Be quick to blame others.
• Not be willing to accept responsibility for his or her actions.
• Have friends who bully others.
• Need to win or be best at everything.

**Effects of bullying**

Bullying has serious and lasting effects. While these effects may also be caused by other factors, research has found bullying has significant effects for those who are bullied, those who bully others, and those who witness bullying.

People who are bullied:
• Have higher risk of depression and anxiety, including the following symptoms that may persist into adulthood:
  • Increased feelings of sadness and loneliness,
  • Changes in sleep and eating patterns, and
  • Loss of interest in activities.
• Have increased thoughts about suicide that may persist into adulthood. In one study, adults who recalled being bullied in youth were three times more likely to have suicidal thoughts or inclinations.
• Are more likely to have health complaints. In one study, being bullied was associated with physical health status three years later.
• Have decreased academic achievement (GPA and standardized test scores) and school participation.
• Are more likely to miss, skip, or drop out of school.
• Are more likely to retaliate through extremely violent measures. In 12 of 15 school shooting cases in the 1990s, the shooters had a history of being bullied.

People who bully others:
• Have a higher risk of abusing alcohol and other drugs in adolescence and as adults.
• Are more likely to get into fights, vandalize property, and drop out of school.
• Are more likely to engage in early sexual activity.
• Are more likely to have criminal convictions and traffic citations as adults. In one study, 60% of boys who bullied others in middle school had a criminal conviction by age 24.
• Are more likely to be abusive toward their romantic partners, spouses or children as adults.
People who witness bullying:
• Have increased use of tobacco, alcohol or other drugs.
• Have increased mental health problems, including depression and anxiety.
• Are more likely to miss or skip school.

Cyberbullying
Cyberbullying, instead of happening face-to-face, happens through the use of technology such as computers, cell phones and other electronic devices. Cyberbullying peaks around the end of middle school and the beginning of high school.

Examples of cyberbullying include:
• Sending hurtful, rude, or mean text messages to others;
• Spreading rumors or lies about others by e-mail or on social networks; and
• Creating websites, videos or social media profiles that embarrass, humiliate, or make fun of others.

Bullying online is very different from face-to-face bullying because messages and images can be:
• Sent 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, 365 days a year;
• Shared by a very wide audience; and
• Sent anonymously.

Effects of Cyberbullying
Research on cyberbullying has found that students involved are more likely to:
• Be unwilling to attend school;
• Receive poor grades;
• Have lower self-esteem; and
• Have more health problems.
• Cyberbullying can have particular affects on those who are targeted. Research has found that young people who have been cyberbullied are significantly more likely to:
• Use alcohol and drugs,
• Skip school, and
• Experience in-person bullying or victimization.

What schools can do about cyberbullying
Schools play an important role in ensuring that activities of kids, teens and young adults are in a safe environment, in school or in cyberspace. To prevent cyberbullying:

⇒ Educate students, teachers, and other staff members about cyberbullying, its dangers, and what to do if someone is cyberbullied.
⇒ Discuss cyberbullying with students. They may be knowledgeable about cyberbullying, and they may have good ideas about how to prevent and address it.
⇒ Be sure that your school’s rules and policies address cyberbullying.
⇒ Closely monitor students’ use of computers at school. Use filtering and tracking software on all computers, but don’t rely solely on this software to screen out cyberbullying and other problematic online behavior.
Investigate reports of cyberbullying immediately. If cyberbullying occurs on campus or through the school district’s Internet system, you are obligated to take action. If the cyberbullying occurs off-campus, you can still help. Remember even cyberbullying that occurs off-campus can affect how students behave and relate to each other at school.

- Closely monitor the behavior of students involved in all forms of bullying.
- Investigate to see if those who are cyberbullied need support from a school counselor or school-based health professional.
- Notify parents of students involved in cyberbullying.
- Talk with all students about the negative effects of cyberbullying.
- Notify the police if the aggressive behavior is criminal. The following may constitute a crime:
  - Threats of violence;
  - Child pornography and sexting;
  - Taking a photo image of someone in a place where he or she would expect privacy;
  - Harassment, stalking, or hate crimes;
  - Obscene or harassing phone calls or text messages;
  - Sexual exploitation; or
  - Extortion.

For more information about bullying, check out www.StopBullying.gov, an official U.S. Government website managed by the departments of Health & Human Services, Education and Justice.

*Contributed by Judy McDaniel, communications consultant*
Article for staff newsletter – I

What is bullying?

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An act of bullying may fit into more than one of these groups, and bullying has serious and lasting effects. While these effects may also be caused by other factors, research has found bullying has significant effects for those who are bullied, those who bully others, and those who witness bullying.

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Bullying intervention

Adult intervention is one of the best defenses against bullying. Both parents and educators need to recognize the warning signs, intervene when bullying happens and send the message that bullying is not okay.

There is no set formula for the best way to intervene when you suspect or observe a bullying incident. You must consider a variety of issues, including the safety of all children, the age and gender of the children involved, the circumstances surrounding the bullying, the form and type of bullying, and the role of bystanders.

Here are some actions you may want to consider when you suspect that bullying has taken place or when you observe bullying behavior:

- Intervene immediately. Separate the students involved. Do not immediately ask about or discuss the reason for the bullying or try to sort out the facts.
- Request more information. Get the facts. Speak to students involved (participants and observers) in the incident separately, and ask what happened.
- Tell the students you are aware of their behavior. Talk to the students involved separately.
- Make it a teachable experience. Helping bystanders understand what has happened and why may be important for preventing future incidents.

Remember to:

- Report the incident to the right person. (Insert the name and contact information for the person in your school or school district to whom a bullying incident should be reported.)
- Consider an appropriate intervention based on the severity and history of the incident and the students involved.
- Follow up with the students involved to ensure the bullying does not continue.

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Contributed by Judy McDaniel, communications consultant