Bullying Basics

Professional Development: - [Bullying](http://www.tolerance.org/category/professional-development/school-climate/bullying)

When nearly one in five students is bullied each year, it’s no wonder the topic is on educators’ minds. Teachers want to make their classrooms safe, supportive learning environments. Administrators want positive school climates. Both are looking for tools to reach these goals.

To meet their needs, Teaching Tolerance offers an abundance of professional development tools, classroom activities, magazine articles and blogs dedicated to the topic. When you have an immediate question, though, finding what you’re looking for among such extensive resources can be daunting.

That’s why we’ve put together this quick reference, answering questions we hear frequently from the Teaching Tolerance community. The information below will get you started and point you toward more in-depth resources.

**What is bullying?**

Bullying has three key components—unwanted, aggressive behavior; a real or perceived power imbalance, and repetition; and the potential to be repeated over time (stopbullying.gov). The combination of these three factors creates a situation that moves beyond conflict to become persistent persecution.

**What is the connection between bias and bullying?**

There’s a strong correlation between bias and bullying. The targets of bullies are often from a group marginalized because of a certain characteristic (such as race, immigration status, sexual orientation, religion, ethnicity, gender expression/identity or size) about which others hold prejudiced assumptions.

In a large study of California middle and high school students conducted by University of Arizona professor Stephen T. Russell, nearly 40 percent reported that they had been bullied within the past year. Analyzing the incidents, Russell concluded that 75 percent of all bullying came from some type of bias.

**What’s the most effective tool against bullying?**

Prevention. By creating an inclusive learning environment that supports all students, educators maintain a space that is inhospitable to those who would bully. Everyone—including administrators, teachers, cafeteria staff, bus drivers, assistants, substitute teachers, parents/guardians and students—has a role to play in creating an anti-bullying climate in your school, and the culture must exist from the cafeteria to the classroom.

* Watch Teaching Tolerance’s award-winning film, [*Bullied*](http://www.tolerance.org/bullied)*,*  to kick off your school’s middle or high school anti-bullying efforts.
* Break down social barriers by participating in [Mix It Up at Lunch Day](http://www.tolerance.org/mix-it-up/what-is-mix).
* Teachers and administrators should take these [5 Steps to Safer Schools](http://www.tolerance.org/activity/5-steps-safer-schools). How can educators and schools create learning environments free of anti-gay discrimination?

**1. Provide explicit support systems for LGBT students.**
Among the most effective ways to accomplish this in middle and high schools is through gay-straight alliances (GSAs), extracurricular clubs that bring students of all sexual orientations together. Research shows that students in schools with a GSA are less likely to feel unsafe, less likely to miss school, and more likely to feel like they belong at their school than students in schools with no such clubs.

**2. Serve as allies and role models.**
One day, middle school teacher Joann Jensen overheard a student saying, "This is so gay!" as she passed out a homework assignment. Jensen turned to him and said, "Really? Is that piece of paper homosexual?" The student didn't say it again, and the class got the message that such language wouldn't be tolerated.

"Being able to identify a supportive faculty member is a huge factor in academic success and feeling safe in school," says Eliza Byard of GLSEN. "Teachers have a crucial role to play simply by being visible allies."

**3. Employ inclusive and respectful curricula.**
"You can have one opinion personally, but deal with an issue entirely different professionally," says Bonnie Augusta, LGBT resource teacher for the Madison (Wisc.) school district.

Augusta shared an anecdote from a local elementary school. "We have a teacher who, from a religious perspective, thinks homosexuality is wrong," she says. "But in her unit on the definition of 'family', she includes same-sex families as an example. She says, 'If my students can't see themselves reflected in the curriculum, how are they going to learn to read?'"

**4. Include anti-gay bullying in anti-harassment policies.**
Identifying specific types of abuse and inappropriate behavior can provide guidance and clarity to educators when a student is being harassed and can prevent anti-gay bullying from being excused as "kids being kids."

It's not just the existence of a policy that matters, but also how accessible it is, says Augusta. For example, reporting forms should be available to students and staff, and a process should be in place to monitor for both repeat harassers and repeat victims.

**5. Advocate for statewide anti-discrimination laws.**
Wisconsin was the first state in the country to enact a law guaranteeing equal access to curriculum and extracurricular activities to all students, regardless of race, religion or sexual orientation.

* Students can learn about bullying and plan an anti-bullying initiative using this [**activity**](http://www.tolerance.org/activity/bullying-quiz).

**A Bullying Quiz**

**Objectives**

* Understand how evidence regarding behavioral patterns might challenge personal beliefs and assumptions about social behavior
* Use evidence about bullying behavior to inform daily decisions regarding social interactions and understand the necessity of making personal decisions in bullying situations
* Use factual information to consider consequences and alternatives of personal behavior choices

**Introduction**
Even students who have experienced bullying might be surprised by the statistics and studies about bullying. It's important for adults, student leaders and other educators to raise awareness about the prevalence of bullying and its detrimental effects for all involved.

The frequency with which students admit to bullying might surprise students who feel alone and isolated due to the wrath of a bully.

It is important, likewise, for students who are victims and bystanders to seek help when this kind of behavior emerges.

A common trait among bullies is lack of empathy, the inability to be aware of or understand other people's feelings. When a bully attacks a victim, the bully feels powerful and in control. He or she may blame the victim, justifying his or her aggression by saying the victim deserved bad treatment or asked for it. While it may not be possible to teach empathy, raising awareness about bullying has helped schools decrease the behavior.

Use the following quiz to mobilize young people and adults who work with them so an anti-bullying initiative can come together in your community.

**Activities**

* Ask students how they would define bullying, and write definitions or words on the board addressing the different kinds of bullying (violence, exclusivity and ostracism, rumors, etc.).
* Ask students to complete the [quiz](http://www.tolerance.org/images/teach/activities/bully_upper_handout1.pdf) (PDF) individually.
* Involve students in the follow-up discussion, using [questions](http://www.tolerance.org/images/teach/activities/bully_upper_handout2.pdf) (PDF) for reflection.
* Link: <http://www.tolerance.org/lesson/bullying-quiz>
* Examine the role principals play in creating an inclusive school culture with this [Professional Development video](http://www.tolerance.org/tdsi/asset/school-culture-and-student-diversity).
* Create a school climate or anti-bullying team using our [*Responding to Hate and Bias at School*](http://www.tolerance.org/publication/responding-hate-and-bias-school/appendix-worksheets)guide (see worksheet 1).

**Links:**

**Bullied:** [**http://www.tolerance.org/kit/bullied-student-school-and-case-made-history**](http://www.tolerance.org/kit/bullied-student-school-and-case-made-history)

**Mix It up Lunch Day:** [**http://www.tolerance.org/mix-it-up/what-is-mix**](http://www.tolerance.org/mix-it-up/what-is-mix)

**Five Steps to Safer Schools:** [**http://www.tolerance.org/supplement/5-steps-safer-schools**](http://www.tolerance.org/supplement/5-steps-safer-schools)

**Activities Quiz:** [**http://www.tolerance.org/sites/default/files/documents/bully\_upper\_handout1.pdf**](http://www.tolerance.org/sites/default/files/documents/bully_upper_handout1.pdf)

**Activities Questions:** [**http://www.tolerance.org/sites/default/files/documents/bully\_upper\_handout2.pdf**](http://www.tolerance.org/sites/default/files/documents/bully_upper_handout2.pdf)

**Professional Development Video:** [**http://www.tolerance.org/tdsi/asset/school-culture-and-student-diversity**](http://www.tolerance.org/tdsi/asset/school-culture-and-student-diversity)

**Responding to Hate and Bias at School Video:** [**http://www.tolerance.org/tdsi/asset/school-culture-and-student-diversity**](http://www.tolerance.org/tdsi/asset/school-culture-and-student-diversity)

**Activity:**

**How do I know if students are being bullied at my school?**

Just because you don’t see obvious bullying in your classroom doesn’t mean it isn’t happening at your school. Bullying often happens when—and where—adults aren’t present.

The only way to be sure your school is the inclusive environment you want it to be is to closely examine your school climate on a regular basis. This includes making sure students know how to report bullying and feel safe doing so. Sometimes just asking the right questions and letting students know they can talk to you makes all the difference.

Also remember that not all bullying looks the same. Harder-to-detect actions, such as spreading rumors or isolating a student from friends, can also constitute bullying. Students may hesitate to even call the harassment they’re enduring “bullying.” Other phrases, such as “there was drama” or “she was messing with me,” may clue you in on the situation.

* Start the process of [examining your school climate](http://www.tolerance.org/activity/examining-your-schools-climate) with our questionnaire.

**Examining Your School's Climate**

[Assessing and Improving School Climate](http://www.tolerance.org/category/professional-development/school-climate/assessing-and-improving-school-climate)

Use the following resources to assess your school's climate.

According to a survey conducted by Teaching Tolerance, the National Education Association and the Civil Rights Project, the vast majority of teachers say their schools are free of racial and ethnic tensions. Yet, [federal reports](http://www.ed.gov/offices/OCR/archives/Harassment/harass_intro.html) show that one in four students are victimized in racial or ethnic incidents in the course of a typical school year.

Students of color aren't the only victims, either: nearly 70 percent of girls say they've been sexually harassed, 75 percent of gay students report hearing anti-gay slurs at school, and more than a third of gay students say they've been physically harassed.

[**School Climate Questionnaire (PDF)**](http://www.tolerance.org/images/teach/activities/tt_school_climate.pdf)
This simple one-page questionnaire can be used to uncover differences in teacher and student perceptions, as an activity to open professional development programs related to school climate and safety, or as part of larger school-climate assessments that also include interviews, focus groups and other tools. It also can be adapted for use with parents.

<http://www.tolerance.org/sites/default/files/documents/tt_school_climate.pdf>

**Map It Out**
Teachers and students draw maps showing where they think social divisions exist at school, and compare views of the community as a whole.

[**Mix It Up Surveys (PDF)**](http://www.tolerance.org/sites/default/files/general/mixsurvey.pdf) **Link not activated**
Developed as part of Teaching Tolerance's [Mix It Up at Lunch Day](http://www.mixitup.org) program, these student surveys, one for early grades and another for middle and upper grades, can help clarify the social boundaries that exist in your school.

**Anti-Bullying Activities**
These lessons include diagnostic tools for early and middle/upper grades about the prevalence and severity of bullying in schools.

* Look for these [warning signs](http://www.tolerance.org/activity/warning-signs) a student may be being bullied.
	+ Your student may be bullied if he or she:
	+ leaves school with torn, damaged or missing clothing, books or other belongings;
	+ has unexplained cuts, bruises, and scratches;
	+ has few, if any, friends with whom to spend time;
	+ seems afraid to be in school, leave school, ride the school bus, or take part in organized activities with peers;
	+ has lost interest in school work or suddenly begins to perform poorly;
	+ appears sad, moody, teary or depressed;
	+ complains frequently of headaches, stomach aches, or other physical ailments; or
	+ avoids the cafeteria and/or doesn't eat.
* Review some easily identifiable [indicators](http://www.tolerance.org/activity/identifying-and-responding-bias-incidents) of bias-based bullying.

**Identifying And Responding To Bias Incidents**

A bias incident is conduct, speech or expression motivated, in whole or in part, by bias or prejudice.

**What is a Bias Incident?**
A bias incident is conduct, speech or expression motivated, in whole or in part, by bias or prejudice. It differs from a hate crime in that no criminal activity is involved. While hate crimes, if charged and prosecuted, will be dealt with in the court system, schools must handle bias incidents through grievance procedures and educational programs. Both hate crimes and bias incidents, however, demand a unified and unflinching denouncement from school leaders.

**10 Tips for Identifying Bias Incidents**
You may have a bias incident on your hands if:

1. Slurs and epithets are used -- e.g., "nigger," "beaner" or "faggot."

2. Hate symbols -- or inflammatory symbols like nooses -- are used.

3. The perpetrator(s) admit their conduct was motivated by prejudice or that they selected the target(s) based on their race, ethnicity, religion, disability, sex, sexual orientation or other identity factors.

4. The target(s) believe the incident was motivated by bias.

5. The target(s) openly engage in activities related to their race, ethnicity or other identify characteristics -- e.g., black students purposefully gathering under the "White Tree" in [Jena](http://www.tolerance.org/jena); LGBTQ students trying to start a gay-straight alliance at school.

6. There's been prior news coverage of similar bias incidents -- i.e., a [16 year old](http://www.cnn.com/2007/US/09/21/car.nooses/index.html?iref=mpstoryview) living 40 miles outside of Jena was questioned by police last week after they spotted him in a truck with a noose hanging out of the back (the adult driver was charged with DUI).

7. The acts are directed against members of groups whose presence in the community or school is opposed -- e.g., Mexican immigrant students in a community where [nativist groups](http://www.splcenter.org/intel/intelreport/article.jsp?sid=413) are active.

8. Ongoing school or community conflicts may have initiated or contributed to the act -- e.g., in Jena, a bias incident involving nooses ultimately gave rise to off-campus conflicts and violence.

9. Possible involvement by an [organized hate group](http://www.splcenter.org/intel/map/hate.jsp) or its members -- e.g., students who are skinheads taunt Jewish peers.

10. A pattern of incidents in which the targets and perpetrators are of a different race, religion, national origin, gender or sexual orientation -- e.g. over a period of weeks, school records show a growing number of incidents involving conflicts between Latino and Black students.

**Seven Steps for Responding to Bias Incidents**

1. Focus on safety first.
2. Conduct an investigation and get the facts.
3. Denounce hateful acts and address fears.
4. Involve everyone – teachers, counselors, staff, administrators, students, parents and community members – in finding solutions.
5. Support the victims.
6. Enforce appropriate consequences for perpetrators.
7. Work towards unity.

**Which students are most vulnerable to bullying?**

Any child at any school may be the target of bullying, but certain children are at higher risk. Teachers should be especially attentive to students who exhibit the following risk factors, defined by stopbullying.gov:

* Are perceived as different from their peers, such as being overweight or underweight, wearing glasses or different clothing, being new to a school, or being unable to afford what kids consider “cool”
* Are perceived as weak or unable to defend themselves
* Are depressed, anxious, or have low self-esteem
* Are less popular than others and have few friends
* Do not get along well with others, seen as annoying or provoking, or antagonize others for attention

**How do I know a student isn’t lying about being bullied?**

Kids typically resist reporting bullying—just admitting they’re being targeted can be embarrassing. They may also fear if they report the harassment, it will only bring more attention to the situation, escalating the bullying. If a child tells you he’s being bullied, believe him.

**Are remarks or behavior based on religious belief exempt from bullying rules?**

No. Any behavior that meets the definition of bullying above is indeed bullying—even if the motivation for said behavior is an individual’s religious beliefs.

**Now that I know bullying is occurring, what can I do to stop it?**

First and foremost, it is essential that you understand your school’s anti-bullying policies. Being familiar with these expectations allows you to respond appropriately and immediately. If you school doesn’t have an explicit anti-bullying policy, our [*Responding to Hate and Bias at School*](http://www.tolerance.org/hate-and-bias) guide can help you create one.

It is also important to remember that anti-bullying measures should address bullying behavior. Never label a child a bully. Bullying is an action, not an identity. When bullying is addressed constructively, it is possible to both support the bullied child and transform the behavior of the child who has been bullying others.

* These [bullying guidelines](http://www.tolerance.org/activity/bullying-guidelines-teachers) highlight appropriate and inappropriate educator responses to bullying.

**Bullying: Guidelines for Teachers**

Some anti-bullying policies actually do more harm than good. Educators can use the following tips to intervene appropriately when bullying occurs.

**THE DO's:**

***Stop the bullying immediately.***
Stand between the bullied student and the bully(ies), blocking eye contact. Don't send any bystanders away. To avoid escalating the tension, wait until later to sort out the facts. Talk to the parties involved separately once they are calm.

***Refer to school rules regarding bullying.***
Speak in a matter-of-fact tone of voice to describe what you heard or saw. Let all students know bullying is always unacceptable.

***Support the bullied child.***
Do this in a way that allows him or her dignity and to feel safe from retaliation. Make a point to see the child later in private if he or she is upset. Increase supervision to assure bullying is not repeated.

***Offer guidance to bystanders.***
Let them know how they might appropriately intervene or get help next time. Tell them you noticed their inaction or that you're pleased with the way they tried to help.

***Impose immediate consequences.***
Wait until all parties have calmed down. Do not require that students apologize or make amends that may be insincere. The consequences should be logical and connected to the offense. A first step could be taking away social privileges i.e. recess or lunch in the cafeteria.

***Notify colleagues and parents.***
Let the bully know he or she is being watched.

***Follow up and intervene as necessary.***
Support the bullied child and the bully, enabling them to vent feelings and recognize their own behavior. The bully may need to learn new methods of using his or her power and influence in the classroom.

**THE DON'Ts:**

***Do not confuse bullying with conflict.*** Bullying is a form of victimization, and addressing it as a "conflict" downplays the negative behavior and the seriousness of the effects. Educators should strive to send the message that "no one deserves to be bullied," and to let the bully know the behavior is wholly inappropriate.

***Do not use peer mediation.*** It can be very upsetting for a child who has been bullied to face his or her tormentor in mediation. Giving both parties an equal voice can empower the bully and make the bullied student feel worse. In addition, there is no evidence that peer mediation is effective in stopping bullying.

***Do not use group treatment for bullies.*** Some schools use therapeutic strategies such as anger management, skill-building, empathy-building and self-esteem building to reach the bully. In practice, group members can actually reinforce each others' bullying and antisocial behavior.

* “Beyond “examines the various players in a bullying incident.

Bullied Bystander and Beyond: A 14-year-old hangs herself. a 19-year-old jumps off a bridge. A 13-year-old shoots himself. Another loads his backpack with stones and leaps into a river. Still another swallows her father’s prescription meds to get rid of the pain and humiliation. A 17-year-old is found hanging outside her bedroom window. Two more 11-year-old boys kill themselves within 10 days of each other.

These young people all had two things in common: They were all bullied relentlessly, and they all reached a point of utter hopelessness. Bullying is seldom the only factor in a teenager’s suicide. Often, mental illness and family stresses are involved. But bullying does plainly play a role in many cases. These students feel that they have no way out of the pain heaped on them by their tormentors—no one to turn to, no way to tell others. So they turn the violence inward with a tragic and final exit.

Most of the bullying that helped cause these tragedies went on without substantial objections, indignation, intervention or outrage. The bullies were far too often excused, even celebrated. The bullied were usually mourned after their deaths. But at times they were also vilified in order to justify the bullies’actions. We are devastated by the final act of violence but rarely outraged by the events that lead up to it.

**An Act With Three Characters**
There are not just two, but three characters in this tragedy: the bully, the bullied and the bystander. There can be no bullying without bullies. But they cannot pull off their cruel deeds without the complicity of bystanders. These not-so-innocent bystanders are the supporting cast who aid and abet the bully through acts of omission and commission. They might stand idly by or look away. They might actively encourage the bully or join in and become one of a bunch of bullies. They might also be afraid to step in for fear of making things worse for the target—or of being the next target themselves.

Whatever the choice, there is a price to pay.

Actively engaging with bullies or cheering them on causes even more distress to the peer being bullied. It also encourages the antisocial behavior of the bully. Over time, it puts the bystanders at risk of becoming desensitized to cruelty or becoming full-fledged bullies themselves. If bystanders see the bully as a popular, strong, daring role model, they are more likely to imitate the bully. And, of course, many preteens and teens use verbal, physical or relational denigration of a targeted kid to elevate their own status.

Students can have legitimate reasons for not taking a stand against a bully. Many are justifiably afraid of retribution. Others sincerely don’t know what to do to be helpful. But most excuses for inaction are transparently weak. “The bully is my friend.” “It’s not my problem!” “She’s not my friend.” “He’s a loser.” “He deserved to be bullied—asked for it.” “It will toughen him up.” “I don’t want to be a snitch.” Many bystanders find it’s simply better to be a member of the in-group than to be the outcast. They’re not interested in weighing the pros and cons of remaining faithful to the group versus standing up for the targeted kid.

But injustice overlooked or ignored becomes a contagion. These bystanders’self-confidence and self-respect are eroded as they wrestle with their fears about getting involved. They realize that to do nothing is to abdicate moral responsibility to the peer who is the target. All too often these fears and lack of action turn into apathy—a potent friend of contempt *(see* [*resources*](http://www.tolerance.org/supplement/anti-bullying-resources)*).*

**The Rewards of Bullying**
Bullying often appears to come with no negative consequences for the culprits. Indeed, it can provide a bounty of prizes, such as elevated status, applause, laughter and approval. The rewards contribute to the breakdown of the bystanders’ inner objections to such antisocial activities. As a result, you soon see a *group* of peers caught up in the drama. Once that happens, individual responsibility decreases. The bully no longer acts alone. The bully and the bystanders become a deadly combination committed to denigrating the target further.

This “trap of comradeship” reduces the guilt felt by the individual bystanders and magnifies the supposed negative attributes of the target. “He’s such a crybaby. He whines when we just look at him.” “She’s such a dork. She wears such stupid clothes and walks around with her head hung down.” The situation becomes worse when the victim’s supposed friends stand idly by—or, worse, join in with the bullies. The hopelessness and desperation of the target is compounded by the realization that these “friends” abandoned him.

All this leads to more serious problems. The lack of sanctions, the breakdown of inner objections, the lack of guilt and the magnification of a target’s weakness all contribute to the cultivation of a distorted worldview. This worldview reinforces stereotypes, prejudices and discrimination. That, in turn, hinders kids from developing empathy and compassion—two essentials for successful peer relationships.

**The Fourth Character**
Another potential actor can bring the curtain down on this tragedy. This fourth character—the antithesis of the bully—gives us hope that we can break out of the trap of comradeship. This character can appear in three different and vital roles—those of *resister*, *defender* and *witness*. He or she actively resists the tactics of the bullies, stands up to them and speaks out against their tyranny. The fourth character might also defend and speak up for those who are targeted. Bullying can be interrupted when even one person has such moral strength and courage. This fourth character is a reminder that choices are possible, even in the midst of the culture of meanness created by bullying. Here are some examples:

* When the high-status bully in eighth grade told all the other girls not to eat with a new girl, Jennifer not only sat with the new girl, but took in stride the taunts and threats of the bully and her henchmen: “Miss Goody-Two-Shoes, you’re next!”
* When a group of teens mocked a student because of his perceived sexual orientation, Andrew refused to join in and shrugged off the allegations: “What, are you chicken?”and “You’re just like him.”
* When a group of 7-year-olds circled Derek, taunting him with racial slurs, another 7-year-old, Scott, told them “That’s mean.” He turned to Derek and said, “You don’t need this—come play with me.” The bullies then targeted Scott. Derek told him he didn’t need to play with him if the others were going to target him, too. Scott’s response: “That’s their problem, not mine.”
* When 15-year-old Patricia was tormented by her peers at a small-town high school, one senior named Brittne stood up for her. But Brittne’s courage cost her dearly. She was cyberbullied, verbally attacked at school and nearly run over on Main Street. For the girls’ own safety, they were moved to another school in an adjacent town. Brittne had been in line to be valedictorian. Moving meant she had to give that up, costing her several scholarships. Yet Brittne says, “I would defend her again.”

**Fifty Pink Shirts**
Bullying can be challenged even more dramatically when the majority stands up against the cruel acts of the minority. For instance, seniors David and Travis watched as a fellow student was taunted for wearing a pink polo shirt. The two boys bought 50 pink shirts and invited classmates to wear them the next day in solidarity with the boy who was targeted.

Most bullying flies under the radar of adults. That means kids can be a potent force for showing up bullies. But speaking out can be complicated, risky and painful. Even telling an adult can be a courageous act. As parents and educators we must make it safe for kids to become active witnesses who recognize bullying, respond effectively and report what takes place.

Establishing new norms, enforcing playground rules and increasing supervision are policy decisions that can help reduce the incidents of bullying. So can having a strong anti-bullying policy. It must include procedures for dealing effectively with the bully, for supporting and emboldening the bullied and for holding bystanders to account for the roles they played.

Merely attaching an anti-bullying policy to the crowded corners of our curriculum is not enough. With care and commitment, together with our youth, we must rewrite this script—create new roles, change the plot, reset the stage and scrap the tragic endings. We can’t merely banish the bully and mourn the bullied child. It is the roles that must be abandoned, not our children.

We can hold bullies accountable and re-channel their behaviors into positive leadership activities. We can acknowledge the nonaggressive behaviors of the kid who is bullied as strengths to be developed and honored. And we can transform the role of bystander into that of witness—someone willing to stand up, speak out and act against injustice.

Bullying takes place because some people feel a sense of entitlement, a liberty to exclude and intolerance for differences. We can use the stuff of everyday life to create a different climate in our schools. This new climate must include a deep caring and sharing that is devoted to breaking the current cycle of violence and exclusion. It’s a daunting task but a necessary one.

ACTUAL RESPONSES:

[**I am a white adult with**](http://www.tolerance.org/magazine/number-39-spring-2011/feature/bully-bullied-bystanderand-beyond#comment-2117)**:** I am a white adult with Italian-American heritage that has two children adopted from China. They are now 17 and 12 years old. Living in Western New York, I have seldom found relief when complaining about my children being bullied or treated differently. My younger daughter is now in a 6-1-1 program for emotional issues that stem primarily from her early experiences in an orphanage and more sadly, her experiences at the hands of white adults. In fact. if it weren't for the latter experiences, she wouldn't have the need of this program.

When we adopted our older daughter, we lived in the Hudson Valley in New York state and had few problems. But we moved when she was 5. Now, at least 2 or 3 times a year my children experience horrific emotional situations at the hands of white adults, and unfortunately that includes those in the education community. I also have been attack personally for standing up for them.

The most recent is my 12-year-old, who takes a small bus to her school with other children from this community. There is oneb downs syndrome child on the bus but the rest are there for emotional issues. None of these children are violent, by the way. The afternoon female bus driver and bus aide have picked on my daughter all year long. Four days ago they "wrote her up" for "refusing" to stop her sneakers from squeaking - yes, that's right, her sneakers were squeaking when she moved her feet! She was also written up for being "disrespectful" for defending herself and for finding the situation humorous.

My daughter is a good kid and avoids both talking to adults she doesn't know well and getting into any trouble. She is always described as enjoyable and well-behaved. Yet on Friday, she almost missed the morning bus - with a different driver who deals very well with the bus ride - because she was determined to clean the bottoms of her sneakers so they wouldn't squeak.

I have decided to fight this, since we have had to speak to the bus garage several times this year about the situation. What amazes me is that none of those involved have commented on how insane it is to harass a child over her sneakers squeaking, a not uncommon occurrence with sneakers.

As usual, I have yet to find an adult in this very white district to "do the right thing."

I will continue fighting this and have decided to spend the money to hire a lawyer who deals with school issues. There are many other things I could use this money for but after all these years of advocating for my children I am worn out and too angry to continue on this path alone.

I often hear educators complain about parents, but maybe parents would be easier to deal with if we didn't have to endure our children being abused by teachers and other employees of the district. Until schools start enforcing treating children with respect the situation will continue to deteriorate and our tax dollars will be wasted on the district hiring lawyers to defend bus drivers from listening to squeaking sneakers.

### My Hispanic son was targeted: My hispanic son was targeted for bullying by his fourth grade teacher. Teachers and the principal actually illuminated me to the horrible classroom dynamic. Peers began to follow the teacher's lead and excluded my boy daily. When I elevated concerns regarding teacher bully suddenly the teachers and principal changed position and publicly vilified my son, me and my husband. Nine families submitted 83 page testimony of five years of children suffering under this horrible teacher's care. Teacher behaviors included locking nine year old girl outside, alone and unable to join class, crying and confused, lengthy screaming tirades over perceived offenses, isolating specific children with armpit washing and publicly spraying with teacher's special aerosol deoderant as humiliation tactic, isolating one boy in front of class and instructing rest of class "to look him in the eye and think bad thoughts about him", sending students back to earlier grades because teacher felt they didn't belong in current grade, calling kids "stupid", throwing books and pens across room in bursts of anger and screaming, and so on. When I pulled my son to home school him, the principal frightened staff from ever speaking to me. I tried to bring up concerns at a school site council meeting and the principal sent me a threat to arrest letter. Even though the meeting was recorded and transcript proves my behavior was fine and principal is lying, district stands behind principal and bully . Other concerned parents who took a stand were vilified and had to remove their kids and privately educate them. Bully teacher has even more power to abuse and continues to torment small children.

Remainig parents are too afraid to take a stand. We are finding this is acommon dynamic in schools. Too few will have moral courage to stop bullying.

* Two new Teaching Tolerance guides, [*Speak Up at School*](http://www.tolerance.org/speak-up-at-school) and [*Responding to Hate and Bias at School*](http://www.tolerance.org/hate-and-bias), provide detailed information about responding to bullying incidents on both individual and institutional levels.

**What role do students play in preventing and responding to bullying?**

Because bullying so often happens when adults aren’t present, it’s especially important that students be empowered to stand up against bullying and biased language.

[*Speak Up at School*](http://www.tolerance.org/speak-up-at-school)is a great place to start. It provides strategies for speaking up against biased speech from peers. The [*Speak Up Pocket Guide*](http://www.tolerance.org/blog/pocket-guide-makes-it-easy-speak) is another great way to start the conversation and keep bullying top of mind throughout kids’ days.

Students should also be informed about the school’s anti-bullying policies—including how to appropriately report bullying behavior. Kids are an invaluable resource when it comes time to update these policies as well. By including them in meetings and conducting student bullying surveys, educators can take advantage of their students’ on-the-ground perspective.

<http://www.tolerance.org/publication/speak-school>

<http://www.tolerance.org/blog/pocket-guide-makes-it-easy-speak>

**My school wants to include language about anti-gay bullying in its bullying policy. Bullying is bullying, right? Why give special protection to specific groups?**

Students who are perceived by their peers as being “different”are at heightened risk of being bullied. Because of this, certain groups of students—such as LGBT students, children with special needs and English-language learners—are statistically more likely to be bullied. By specifically mentioning them in anti-bullying policies and providing them specific supports, schools are more likely to create an inclusive atmosphere that neutralizes that heightened risk.

* Learn ways to support at risk students and their families with our [ELL Best Practices Collection](http://www.tolerance.org/ell-best-practices-collection).

<http://www.tolerance.org/ell-best-practices-collection>

* **Students live in a world of digital communication. How can I ensure none of my students are targeted by cyberbullying?**
* It would be impossible for educators to follow every tweet or Facebook post of their students, but teachers and administrators do have a responsibility to keep abreast of the digital landscape their students live in. Include questions on your annual anti-bullying survey about the social-media climate of your school. Talk with students about their online communication, and set the same inclusive expectations that apply to hallway and classroom conversations.
* Teaching Tolerance’s new guide, *Responding to Hate and Bias at School,* has an entire section on [preventing cyberbullying](http://www.tolerance.org/publication/responding-hate-and-bias-school/stay-current-stay-connected).

<http://www.tolerance.org/publication/stay-current-stay-connected>

**Do teachers ever bully?**

Unfortunately, yes. We addressed the problem in “[Bully at the Blackboard](http://www.tolerance.org/magazine/number-40-fall-2011/bully-blackboard)” in the Fall 2011 issue of *Teaching Tolerance* magazine. It is essential for every person at a school be aware of biased-language and other forms of bullying, regardless of their source.

<http://www.tolerance.org/bully-at-blackboard>

**A Wake-Up Call**The incident, which drew nationwide attention, was a wake-up call for Roane County Schools in Tennessee.

“For something like this to happen was so crushing to us, so against everything we believe in,” says Toni McGriff, director of the 18-school district. During the accreditation process last year by the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools, students on the elementary campus were interviewed about bullying, among other things. According to McGriff, one boy is heard on tape saying,“Oh, in this school, we don’t have bullying. I’ve heard about it. But we don’t have it.” The school is also a demonstration campus for the district’s school-wide Positive Behavior Support program, in which students are recognized for respectful behavior and earn points toward donated prizes and acknowledgment at community events.

“You might assume that every child [already] knows what appropriate behavior looks like,” says McGriff. But they—as well as teachers—bring their own backgrounds and experiences to the classroom, where respecting others is crucial to a positive learning environment. She says that she and her school principals “are trying so hard to instill that you don’t mistreat others—whether you call that disrespect, harassment or bullying,”that it’s become part of the district’s culture at all levels. And yet, the incident this spring has educators there wondering what they could have done differently.

**An “Undiscussable”**
Dr. Stuart Twemlow is familiar with the situation faced by McGriff and her district. A psychiatrist, he also is the director of the Peaceful Schools and Communities Project at Baylor College of Medicine’s Menninger Child and Family Program. Twemlow is well-known for his research on teacher bullying, including a 2005 study in which 45 percent of sampled teachers said they had bullied a student at some point in their careers.

But little other research on the topic has been done, and statistics that might give a broader perspective on the problem are even more scarce. The most definitive assessment of safety in schools is the Indicators of School Crime and Safety survey. The annual survey is jointly carried out and reported by the National Center for Educational Statistics and the Bureau of Justice Statistics. But the most recent report from 2010, which uses 2007 data, does not include survey questions or any school reporting on the issue—although there are statistics on students who bully teachers.

Twemlow appreciates the honesty of the teachers he sampled, “because there is no doubt that there are ‘undiscussables’in schools,” and teacher bullying is one of them, he says. And while he has helped write professional development manuals that address the issue, he has also cowritten an e-book with the provocative title Why School Anti-Bullying Programs Don’t Work.

And why is that the case?

“Any number of programs that are shown to be effective will not be successful… when the money runs out or the people that are passionate leave,” he says.“The issue is sustainability … if you were to see bullying as a process, not a person, then your whole approach would change. There will always be new teachers, new students and new situations.”

The process, explains Twemlow, means that schools must understand the power dynamics among bullies, victims and bystanders. He tells the story of a student who reported to him that his teacher had been calling him by a girl’s name all year, despite his anguish.

“I couldn’t believe it,” he says. “This was a respected senior teacher who loved children; she was not a bad teacher.”Confronted, the teacher admitted what she’d been doing and was devastated to realize she had been bullying the child all year. She had forgotten the inherent power that was part of her position.

“What teachers need to know is that our brains are hard-wired to obey those in charge,” says Twemlow. “And, for a small child, the teacher is the one in charge. Teachers have to respect that they’re seen that way.” Regardless of age, victims without the power to change the situation are at risk for low self-esteem, anxiety, increased absences and poor academic achievement.

Bystanders, such as other teachers or administrators, have their own power—either to end the bullying they witness or to allow it to continue. In the Roane County elementary school, a colleague witnessed at least part of the incident, confronted the teacher and reported her actions to school administrators. But too often, bystanders are held back by conflicting loyalties or the fear of retaliation.

With the dynamics of all three in play, Twemlow says, a typical character education program isn’t enough to address the issue.

[*Speak Up at School*](http://www.tolerance.org/speak-up-at-school) gives practical advice to help educators speak up against biased language and intolerance from students, peers, and even administrators.

[**http://cdna.tolerance.org/sites/default/files/general/Speak\_Up\_at\_School.pdf**](http://cdna.tolerance.org/sites/default/files/general/Speak_Up_at_School.pdf)

**I’ve heard people say bullying isn’t serious; it’s just a matter of kids being kids. Is this true?**

This is a dangerous myth. Bullying causes serious harm to children, including depression, school avoidance, drug use and poor grades. It also is part of the progression up the “[Pyramid of Hate](http://www.adl.org/education/courttv/pyramid_of_hate.pdf)” described by the Anti-Defamation League and Survivors of the Shoah Visual History Foundation.

[**http://www.adl.org/education/courttv/pyramid\_of\_hate.pdf**](http://www.adl.org/education/courttv/pyramid_of_hate.pdf)

**Isn’t it better to let kids learn how to deal with bullying on their own?**

Just as society doesn’t expect victims of other types of abuse (such as child maltreatment or domestic abuse) to “deal with it on their own,” we shouldn’t expect this from the targets of bullying. Adults have critical roles to play in helping to stop bullying (stopbullying.gov/respond).

**Why not just reassign students who are being bullied to different schedules, lockers or homerooms?**

By forcing the targets of bullying to modify their behavior, you are in essence punishing them for the harassment they are suffering rather than engaging with the real issue—the bullying behavior of another child or other children. This, and other similar approaches—like telling an LGBT student to dress differently to avoid bullying—are both offensive and ineffective. Far better is to address the bullying incident head-on, thus moving toward an inclusive school climate that will prevent further problems.

**Are zero-tolerance anti-bullying policies necessary?**

No, they are not. Zero-tolerance policies [have been shown to be ineffective](http://www.tolerance.org/blog/how-many-studies-does-it-take) in addressing any type of misbehavior, including bullying, and they carry heavy consequences for students, such as higher drop-out and incarceration rates. Policies that reward positive behavior—such as reparative justice, Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports, and behavior contracts—are far more effective discipline tools.

Every time a new study is released showing black students are suspended at far higher rates than any of their peers, the public seems shocked. Words like “race” and “school to prison pipeline” and “discrimination”find their way into headlines—and then the issue fades away yet again.

How many studies does it take for our society to demand the eradication of a disciplinary model that is discriminatory in impact and profoundly ineffective?

This week, we add yet another study to the pile—this one by the [Civil Rights Project](http://civilrightsproject.ucla.edu/resources/projects/center-for-civil-rights-remedies/school-to-prison-folder/federal-reports/upcoming-ccrr-research/losen-gillespie-opportunity-suspended-ccrr-2012.pdf) (CRP) at the University of California Los Angeles—showing racial discrepancies in out-of-school suspensions. Analyzing data from nearly 7,000 school districts across the country, the authors found that one in every six black students were suspended during the 2009-2010 school year, as opposed to one in 13 American Indian students, one in 14 Latino students, one in 20 white students and one in 50 Asian students. Black students were also more likely to be suspended repeatedly.

Race isn’t the sole risk factor. The report also shows that when disability and gender are combined with race, the risk for suspension skyrockets. In some districts, suspension rates for male students of color with disabilities sometimes exceeded 33 percent.

As always happens in the wake of these studies, some people rush to deny that race plays any role in these statistical discrepancies. Russell Skiba of the Center for Evaluation and Education Policy at Indiana University told [*Ed Week*](http://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2012/08/07/01zerotolerance.h32.html?tkn=WQLFCTr9j5hvVxHtBrLhc4zBCxpY9hdtyhca&cmp=clp-edweek) some schools claim students of color simply misbehave more than their white counterparts. When [Teaching Tolerance wrote](http://www.tolerance.org/blog/cut-your-chances-suspension-don-t-be-black) about a 2010 study, we heard: “Principals don’t care if you’re black or white,” “getting suspended isn’t a matter of DNA,” “this analysis proves nothing.”

The pushback is understandable. It’s uncomfortable, even painful, to recognize that, in 2012, race still plays such a powerful role in the educational opportunities afforded to children and youth. But, taken as a group, the studies conducted over the past 10 years provide compelling evidence that we have to confront the role that race plays.

It is difficult to know, and impossible to quantify, the internal motives of those who disproportionately assign out-of-school suspensions to black students. What we do know is that that a significant percent of the suspensions given to black students are in response to “disrespect,” “excessive noise” or “disruption,”—behaviors that are subjectively judged.

White students are typically [suspended for objective, observable offenses](http://www.google.com/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=4&ved=0CEAQFjAD&url=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.indiana.edu%2F~equity%2Fdocs%2FSkibaAERAParsingDisciplinaryDisproportionality.pdf&ei=NswjUNuDA8Gi2gWjnIDgDw&usg=AFQjCNHjL7KISLAlTFMakaaY5W0YI8kaSQ) such as smoking or vandalism. This suggests that administrators in schools with disparate suspension histories, when given the latitude, consistently interpret the behavior of black students more harshly.

Michael Thomas, of the Council of State Governments’ Justice Center told [*The New York Times*](http://www.nytimes.com/2011/07/31/opinion/sunday/one-way-to-guarantee-more-trouble-for-schools.html)that“We have enough data to show it’s more than just poverty and any greater misbehavior. My guess is it’s very subtle interactional effects between some teachers and students.” Intentional or not, this tendency restricts the opportunities of black students.

The choice to suspend a student doesn’t happen in a vacuum. A study of Texas schools conducted by the [Justice Center](http://justicecenter.csg.org/resources/juveniles) in 2010 showed that even schools with similar demographics had widely varied rates of suspension, suggesting that school climate plays a significant role in how suspensions are doled out. Zero tolerance policies, SROs and metal detectors create a punitive culture within a school that increases suspension rates.

The cost of these policies and practices is high—both for students and for our society as a whole. Students who are given out-of-school suspensions are more likely to drop out of school and to face future incarceration.

The good news is that across the country states and districts are turning away from zero tolerance and out-of-school suspensions because they recognize the damage they cause. Part of that process is examining your school’s policies to see if a problem exists. Teaching Tolerance has tools to help you.

Our [School Climate Survey](http://www.tolerance.org/tdsi/question/school-policies-and-processes) is a good place to begin evaluating the discipline situation at your school. [“I Don’t Think I’m Biased”](http://www.tolerance.org/magazine/number-37-spring-2010/i-don-t-think-i-m-biased) helps teachers assess their own biases, and [Understanding the Influence of Race](http://www.tolerance.org/tdsi/uir_racial_bias) puts you on the first step of a positive path.

Policies that reward positive behavior and encourage self-management—such as reparative justice, Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports, student courts and behavior contracts—are far more effective discipline tools than zero-tolerance suspensions. Schools are realizing this.

By providing support and training for teachers and encouraging social and emotional strategies in the classroom, educators build a positive school environment that supports the education of all their students equally and leads to smaller achievement gaps and lower dropout rates.

If enough schools make the switch, maybe we’ll start seeing headlines with the words “academic success,” “progress” and even “equality.”

**Bullying is a complex issue—one that deserves careful consideration and response. To explore all of Teaching Tolerance’s anti-bullying resources, go to** [**http://www.tolerance.org/search/apachesolr\_search/bullying**](http://www.tolerance.org/search/apachesolr_search/bullying)

*SOURCE:* <http://www.tolerance.org/supplement/bullying-basics?utm_source=WhatCounts+Publicaster+Edition&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=Teen+white+supremacist+arrested+for+planned+bombing&utm_content=Bullying+Basics>