

Creating Just and Caring Communities

Created by the Bullying Prevention Initiative at the Harvard Graduate School of Education

How can we develop just and caring communities for children? How do we create communities where adults take responsibility for children and where children are inspired and taught to care about those who are different from them, to think clearly about and pursue justice, and to stand up for themselves and others?

Parents, school staff, sports coaches, religious leaders and many other adults have roles to play in creating these communities. What concretely can these adults do?

A Road-Map for Schools

Stopping bullying is vital for all young people to thrive. But it isn't enough. We have to create school environments where children develop key social, emotional, and ethical capacities, and we need to stop bullying before it starts. Preventing bullying begins with creating just and caring communities. In just and caring communities, children, teenagers, and adults are expected to be respectful, responsible, and ready to stand up for what is right, and children and adults are given the support and tools they need to act responsibly. Decades of research indicate that just and caring school communities promote stronger academic, social, emotional and moral outcomes in children.

Schools commonly have mission statements that describe values such as caring, honesty, and respect. But walk in the hallways and cafeterias of many of these schools and one hears homophobic slurs, cruel insults, and students taunting and degrading classmates.

At the heart of creating caring communities in schools is closing this rhetoric-reality gap. This means moving beyond posters in hallways and assembly chants; it means that adults work to assure that values of respect and responsibility live and breathe in every aspect of schools and schooling. Here are some concrete things that can be done to close this gap and to create just and caring school communities that promote respect and prevent bullying.

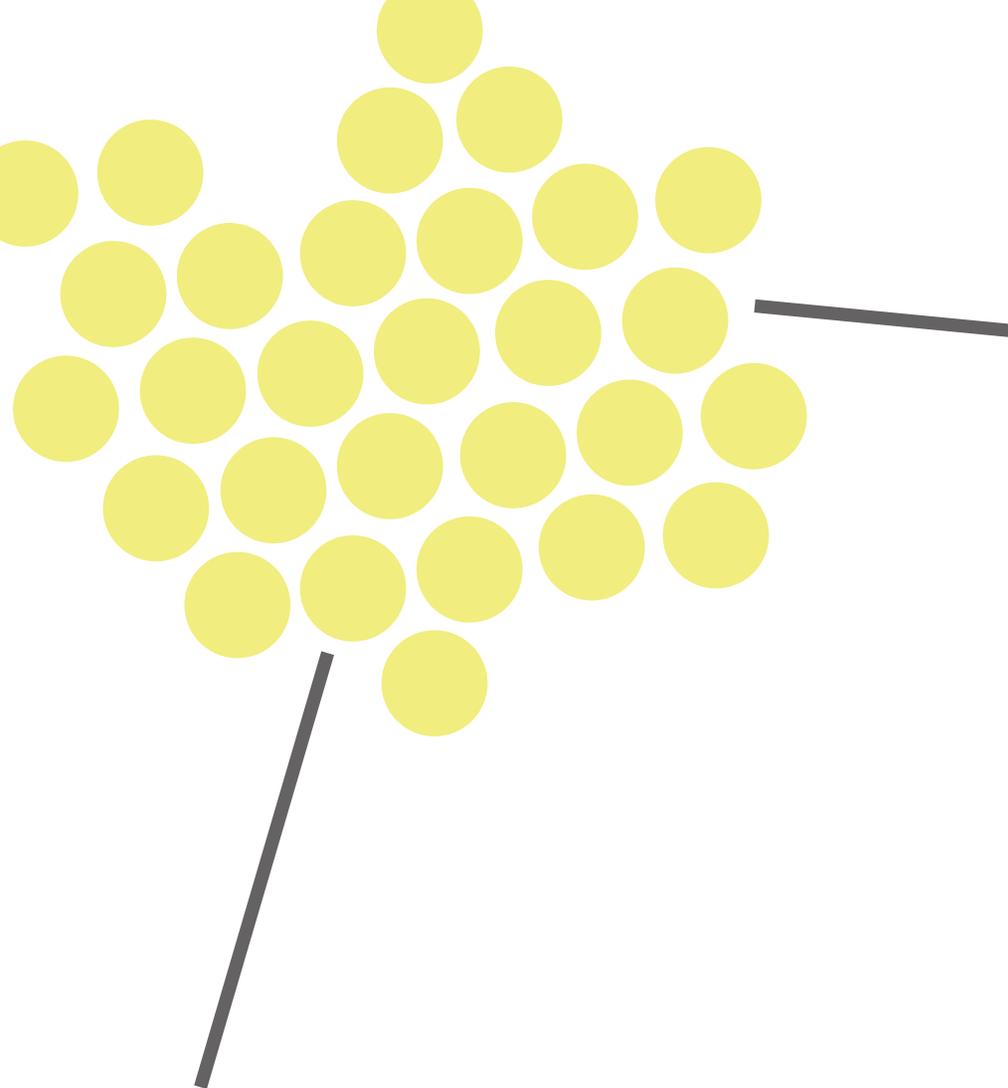
How do experts define bullying?

Bullying isn't always easy to define or recognize. Many young people may not see their own or others' behavior as bullying, using other words like drama, meanness, or teasing. And even adults who care deeply about young people may not see how derogatory language like "you're so gay!" can contribute to a hostile school culture.

Experts define bullying as aggression or harassment that one or more people direct toward another person. The person who is targeted usually has less social or physical power. Bullying can include physical aggression, taunting, threats, and exclusion. Often, these behaviors are targeted toward someone because of his or her sexual orientation, gender, race, or other characteristics that seem "different."

Bullying is a relationship problem. It is affected by social norms and can change across different situations. Over time, the same person can be a bully, a victim, or a bystander. And while the consequences for victims are easiest to see, bullying also hurts those who participate in the bullying, those who stand by, and the whole community.

The
BULLY
Project



Use Data and Get Serious About Accountability

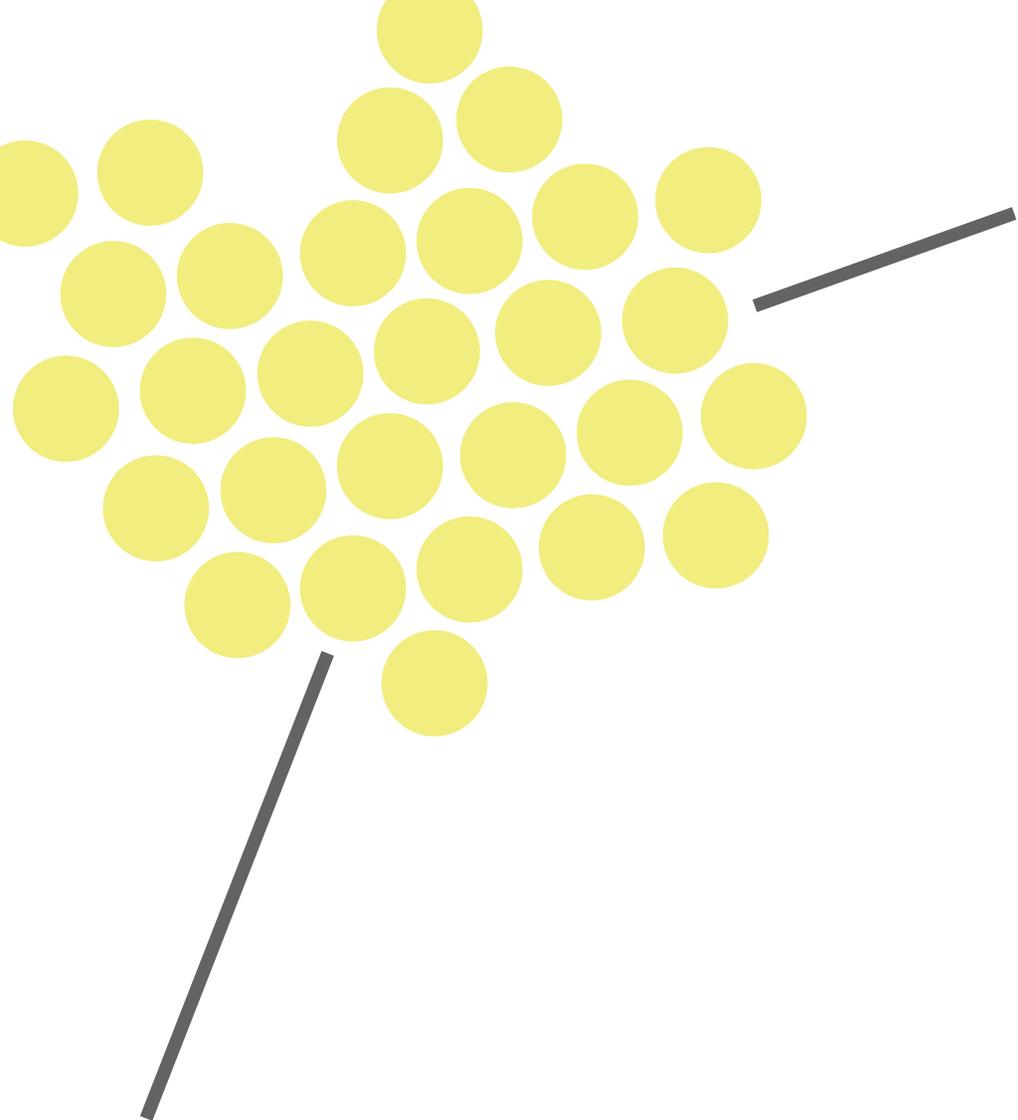
There is a simple way to test whether your school is truly committed to creating just and caring communities and preventing bullying: are you willing to collect data and hold yourself accountable? The old adage “what gets assessed gets addressed” doesn’t apply to just academics. Collecting data from students and staff is a critical foundation for efforts to build a just and caring school community. Too often schools adopt curricular programs that claim to curb cruelty and bullying, but they have no idea whether these programs work, or even if they are implemented with fidelity. That is why good surveys are essential. Ask students and staff questions about how often, when, and where bullying occurs. Ask students whether there are adults and peers they can talk to if they feel threatened, and about their feelings about the school climate and culture more broadly. Find out whether students believe that staff and classmates care about them, about whether students are proud of the school, and about whether they have symptoms of depression, anxiety, or loneliness.

Data aren’t useful if only some have access to them. Share the results with students, families, and staff to create impetus for change and to establish genuine accountability. Use data to select intervention programs that target the school’s biggest needs. And crucially, use data to determine whether strategies are actually working, and be ready to change course if necessary. Finally, be willing to share data with district administrators in an effort to build a broad knowledge base that can support more effective and aligned practices district-wide.

Adopt High-Quality, Evidence-Based Prevention Programs

Many schools use anti-bullying or social-emotional learning programs that simply don’t work. Schools should adopt evidence-based interventions. These interventions should be selected based on how effective they are in addressing the problems identified from data. The most effective programs tend to be comprehensive and seek to improve school climate and school relationships, and they feature targeted lessons on social and emotional skills, diversity and acceptance, and self-regulation skills such as being reflective and intentional about one’s actions.

Even the best programs have to be implemented well to be effective. Intervention programs should be an integral part of the school’s mission and adults in the school must be committed to them. A weekly half-hour lesson with no follow-through or application to students’ behaviors in the hallways rarely has any impact. School leaders need to build staff buy-in and commitment, which means that teachers and other school staff should be involved in decision-making. Further, minimize the number of prevention programs or new initiatives that your school is participating in at one time and focus on unifying and connecting efforts so that participation rates are high, implementation is consistent and monitored, and programs and initiatives are used across contexts. Ensure you allocate the necessary resources; successful prevention efforts require time, and the most effective last at least two years and allow for consistency between years.

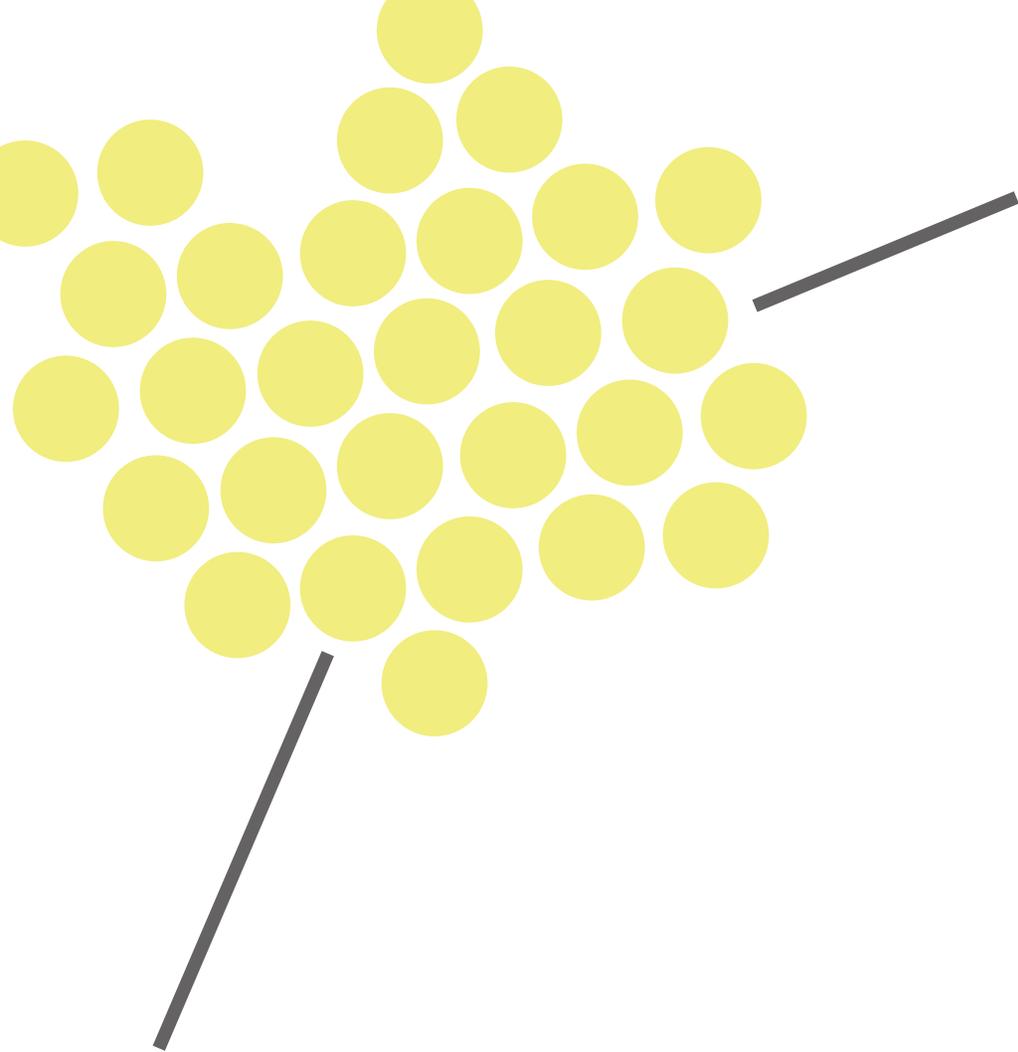


Big Actions are Important, But Everyday Actions are Too

When it comes to forming caring communities and preventing bullying, big actions are important, like standing up for someone who is being harassed and speaking up when school policies treat some students unfairly. But smaller actions are important, too. Change begins with establishing expectations and norms for how young people and adults treat each other every day. Students should be expected, for example, to say hello to people who are usually excluded, treat visitors with respect, and to pay attention to whether language contains slurs that could be hurtful to others. A caring school community articulates explicitly these day to day forms of decency and models and reinforces these behaviors for young people. Students are encouraged to be reflective and to engage in dialogue. Differences among students are recognized as a strength and opportunities are created to celebrate difference. Programs can help schools establish a positive, caring culture, but they can't do it alone. School staff must be purposeful about creating these communities, and they need to carve out at least some time at several points during the year to reflect, based on data, on whether their school is functioning as a just and caring community and to take up new strategies if necessary.

Bullying Has Strong Roots in Adult Attitudes and Behavior

We have a tendency to blame bullying on youth or a small group of “bad kids,” but bullying has roots in adult attitudes and behavior. Too often adults are passive bystanders when they witness either students or other adults act inappropriately or cruelly. Teachers and all school staff need more training and support in how to foster trusting relationships with students, promote just and caring communities, prevent bullying and intervene effectively when bullying occurs. Few educators receive this training. Without training, too often adults miss opportunities to help or, even worse, turn their backs because they don't know what to do. Training must be provided to all staff in the school community, not just teachers. Administrative staff, bus drivers, cafeteria workers, and coaches play crucial roles, especially because many bullying incidents happen on playgrounds, school buses, and in school hallways and bathrooms. Training should include opportunities for staff to learn about strategies, share best practices, reflect on challenges and lessons learned, and identify areas in need of improvement.



Work with Parents

Many schools don't view parents as valuable partners. Some schools even see parents as a disturbance. But parents are the strongest influence on children's social, emotional, and moral development, and schools need to find ways to work with parents, even difficult parents, in developing children's capacity for caring and responsibility. Your school can, for example, support and train teachers so they are more effective in parent-teacher conferences and better able to establish alliances with parents. You can establish systems for two-way school-home communications so that families know what's going on in the school community and so that they are informed and empowered to become involved with prevention and intervention efforts. You can share school culture and climate data with parents, welcome them as members of the community, and provide advice and resources that help families reinforce what students learn at school. You can create contracts with parents that state what you as a school will do to create a just and caring community, but also what parents are expected to do. Parents should be expected, for example, to consider not only the needs of their own child but the needs of other children in the school building, and they should expect their children to treat their school as a community to which they have obligations.

Students Must Play a Central Role

Although adults play vital roles in creating caring school communities, students play vital roles as well. It is students who have the most wisdom about their social environments, and it is students who have the most leverage with other students. And when students feel ownership of their communities and believe they have a stake in them, they can be powerful agents of change. Adults should share data on school culture and climate with students and provide opportunities for students to serve in leadership positions in school culture and climate initiatives, consult students in understanding problems and pursuing solutions, and help students develop their own social, emotional, and moral capacities. Too often, the things that adults do to protect young people disempower them. Anti-bullying efforts that focus solely on reporting incidents to authorities or on punishing the perpetrators don't give young people the opportunities and skills they need to stand up for themselves and others, to solve problems, and navigate challenges. This doesn't mean that adults shouldn't step in. It means that they have to work with young people, not around them.

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