

# Social Emotional Learning Toolkit

Adapted from CASEL's Social and Emotional Learning and Bullying Prevention—to download the full PDF [click here](#)

SEL is an educational movement gaining ground throughout the world. It focuses on the systematic development of a core set of social and emotional skills that help children more effectively handle life challenges and thrive in both their learning and their social environments. The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) defines SEL as the processes through which children and adults acquire the knowledge, attitudes, and skills they need to recognize and manage their emotions, demonstrate caring and concern for others, establish positive relationships, make responsible decisions, and handle challenging social situations constructively.

## CASEL has identified five core categories of social and emotional skills:

- Self-awareness—accurately assessing one's feelings, interests, values, and strengths/ abilities, and maintaining a well-grounded sense of self-confidence
- Self-management—regulating one's emotions to handle stress, control impulses, and persevere in overcoming obstacles; setting personal and academic goals and then monitoring one's progress toward achieving them; and expressing emotions constructively
- Social awareness—taking the perspective of and empathizing with others; recognizing and appreciating individual and group similarities and differences; identifying and following societal standards of conduct; and recognizing and using family, school, and community resources
- Relationship skills—establishing and maintaining healthy and rewarding relationships based on cooperation; resisting inappropriate social pressure; preventing, managing, and resolving interpersonal conflict; and seeking help when needed
- Responsible decision-making—making decisions based on consideration of ethical standards, safety concerns, appropriate standards of conduct, respect for others, and likely consequences of various actions; applying decision-making skills to academic and social situations; and contributing to the well-being of one's school and community

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The logo for 'The BULLY Project' is a yellow circle with a black smiley face at the bottom. The text 'The BULLY Project' is written in black, with 'The' in a smaller font above 'BULLY', which is in a large, bold, sans-serif font, and 'Project' in a smaller font below it.

The  
**BULLY**  
Project

# Social-Ecological Perspectives on Bullying

Although the definition of bullying focuses on the aggressive behavior of individual students, bullying is actually a group phenomenon, playing out in a social context. It is important to remember that many students engage in some form of bullying behavior on a periodic basis, and that most students are teased or experience some form of peer harassment during the school year. Peers are also present as bystanders during most bullying episodes and play a pivotal role in either the prevention or the promotion of bullying.

There are numerous individual, peer-level, school-level, familial, and community factors that influence bullying. At the level of the peer group, social theories describing why bullying increases during late childhood and early adolescence include homophily theory, dominance theory, and attraction theory. Homophily theory states that people tend to form friendships and spend time with those who are similar to them in certain key ways. Students tend to hang out with others who bully at the same frequency, and among these bully-prone groups, bullying frequency increases over time. According to dominance theory, students use bullying as a strategy for moving higher in the social pecking order, particularly during the transition from elementary school to the middle grades, when patterns of social hierarchy are being established. Attraction theory posits that as children enter middle school, their attraction to aggressive peers increases.

Family interaction patterns may also influence peer interaction patterns. Children who are both victims and perpetrators of bullying at school are much more likely to also bully and/or be victimized by siblings. Parents of children who bully others are more likely to lack emotional warmth and be overly permissive. Parents of victimized children, in contrast, are more likely to be highly restrictive, controlling, and over-involved.

## The Connection Between SEL and Bullying Prevention

Given these contributing social factors, preventing and reducing bullying requires a focus on the social, emotional, and moral climate of the school, as well as on the social and emotional competence of the entire school body. The most effective interventions typically use a whole-school approach consisting of some combination of school-wide rules and sanctions, teacher training, classroom curricula, conflict resolution training, and individual counseling. Anti-bullying programs exclusively directed at the bully, the victim, or both, without involving other students or addressing larger school climate issues, are less likely to be effective.

In order to successfully address bullying problems, the entire school must comprise a culture of respect. Expectations for how staff and students treat one another should be clearly reflected in school policies, and the rules for classroom interaction should be consistently modeled by adults and enforced and reinforced in all school settings.

At the student level, schools using an SEL framework teach students skills in the areas of self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationships, and responsible decision-making. These core SEL skills are the foundational competencies that students need in order to deal with bullying. The six skills often overlap and complement one another, as illustrated below.

### Self-Awareness and Self-Management Skills

Recognize and manage emotions in order to respond to conflict in calm and assertive ways. In order to handle conflicts effectively, children need to be able to recognize when they are getting angry, and learn to calm themselves before reacting. Children who frequently bully others tend to have trouble managing anger and to strike out aggressively. Children report that the need to relieve stress and having a bad day are the primary reasons they bully others.

A recent study found that students expressing higher levels of sadness and emotional instability are more likely to be bullied. Hyperactivity and emotional outbursts are the two factors most likely to annoy and provoke peers. Such provocation increases the likelihood of being victimized and not supported by peers over time.

Research suggests that many victims (43 percent) respond to being bullied in an aggressive, retaliatory, or emotionally reactive manner that both prolongs and escalates the bullying episode. These victims lack effective emotional regulation skills and may yell, scream, or cry in response, thereby rewarding the aggressor and making themselves more vulnerable to further victimization.

### Social Awareness

Be tolerant and appreciative of differences, and interact empathetically with peers. Research suggests that children often lack empathy for the victims of bullying, and that they view being different from the social ideal, or social norm, as the cause of bullying. When active bystanders were asked why they chose to intervene, they were likely to attribute feelings of empathy for the victim and a general concern for the well-being of others as motivating factors. Bystanders are also more likely to intervene when they have positive feelings and attitudes toward the victim.

## Relationship Skills

Research suggests that having high-quality friendships, or at least one best friend, can help prevent children from being victims. Interventions that help peer-rejected children learn how to positively communicate with peers (e.g., ask questions, show support, make suggestions) can help them be more accepted by peers, less likely to be bullied, and more likely to be assisted by peers if targeted by a bully.

Resist social pressure to enable, encourage, or directly participate in bullying, and actively defend victims. Studies have revealed that when bystanders observe bullying, they spend most of their time either actively participating in the act or passively encouraging the aggressor by serving as an audience; less than one-quarter of the time do they try to assist the victim.

### **There are a variety of reasons that bystanders don't come to the assistance of victims:**

- They are intimidated by the social or physical power of those doing the bullying
- They fear retaliation
- They are reluctant to challenge group norms supporting bullying
- They don't recognize the act as bullying
- They lack a sense of personal responsibility or self-confidence
- They don't know what to do to help

Be able to seek help from peers or other adults when needed. Research suggests that victims and bystanders typically do not seek help from peers or adults when they are unable to solve the problem on their own. Self-identified victims are particularly likely to blame themselves for their victimization and to “suffer in silence.”

## Responsible Decision Making

Think through and resolve social problems effectively and ethically.

Effective social problem-solving requires an accurate assessment of the situation. Research indicates that children who frequently bully tend to misinterpret social interactions as being more hostile, adversarial, or provocative than their peers do. These children also tend to hold more supportive beliefs about using violence and are less confident about using nonviolent strategies to resolve conflict.

Not surprisingly, these students' relationships with friends and family members tend to be fraught with conflict.

Problem-solving also requires an evaluation of possible and likely consequences. Youngsters who are both bullies and victims tend to be emotionally volatile and to react aggressively before thinking through the consequences. Bullies may narrowly consider the positive short-term consequences of bullying for themselves, but are less likely to consider the negative consequences of their actions on others or on their own relationships over time. Because of the potentially anonymous nature of cyberbullying, students may be even less likely to recognize and consider the effects that these actions will have on the victims.

Victims also often lack effective social problem-solving skills. Problem-solving strategies are 13 times more effective at de-escalating conflicts than are the aggressive, retaliatory, or emotionally reactive responses most frequently used by targeted children. Even among victims who use a problem solving strategy in response to bullying, the vast majority employ a passive strategy, such as avoiding, acquiescing to, or ignoring the bully, instead of a more effective assertive strategy, such as talking with others to find a solution or asking others for help.

# Applying an SEL Framework to Bullying

To effectively reduce bullying behavior, schools need to provide students with instruction and practice in applying their SEL skills to a variety of bullying situations. An SEL framework provides a supportive foundation for these prevention efforts. The most important components are parent training, improved playground supervision, disciplinary methods, school conferences or assemblies that raised awareness of the problem, classroom rules against bullying, classroom management techniques for detecting and dealing with bullying, and the work of peers to help combat bullying. Building on these findings and other SEL research, the following strategies can help schools apply an SEL framework to bullying prevention.

## School-Wide Approaches

### Assessment

Schools need to conduct an assessment in order to determine how often bullying occurs, the forms it takes.

### Awareness and Training

All adults who oversee groups of children (staff and volunteers) need to be trained to respond to bullying incidents. School staff, students, and parents need to be aware of what bullying is, the various forms that it can take, the factors that put children at risk for victimization, the warning signs that a child has been victimized, and what they should do when bullying occurs. Adults and students need to examine their own beliefs about bullying and its causes and consequences.

### Rules and Reporting Procedures

When staff reach a consensus on what bullying is and agree to intervene to prevent and reduce it, rates of bullying can drop significantly. To help establish the moral climate of the school, school-wide rules prohibiting bullying need to be developed, with students as part of the process. The rules then need to be clearly communicated and distributed in writing. Examples of rules a school might establish are as follows:

- We will not bully others.
- We will try to help students who are bullied.
- We will include students who are easily left out.
- When we know somebody is being bullied, we will tell an adult at school and at home

### Discipline Policy

The discipline policy should clearly indicate that bullying is not acceptable, specify the consequences for policy violations, and be consistently enforced.

However, the traditional punitive and reactive responses to bullying, such as zero-tolerance policies and security equipment and personnel, often cause problem behaviors to increase rather than diminish.

Such responses are also not effective ways to improve school climate or academic engagement.

The consequences for policy violations around bullying should instead include some form of remediation that helps students understand the incident and practice prosocial behaviors.

## **Adult Supervision**

As determined by the assessment, all areas where bullying tends to occur (e.g., hallways, cafeteria, playground) should be adequately monitored by adults.

## **Adult Models of Behavior**

Adults in the school need to model respectful and caring behavior toward students and one another, and demonstrate social problem-solving skills. For example, a principal who has lunch with a small group of students once a week demonstrates caring for the students on the part of the administration (and also promoted cohesiveness among the students by helping them learn more about one another). Adults also need to model active bystander behavior by intervening quickly when bullying incidents occur and by not dismissing or minimizing bullying.

## **Promoting Positive Peer Interactions**

Creating opportunities for students to interact with one another in cooperative, positive, and inclusive ways can help generate cohesion and compassion among students and encourage them to apply the SEL skills they have been taught. At times when adult supervision is less available, such as during recess, problem behaviors among students can be reduced by giving them access to a variety of games and sporting equipment.

## **Classroom Approaches**

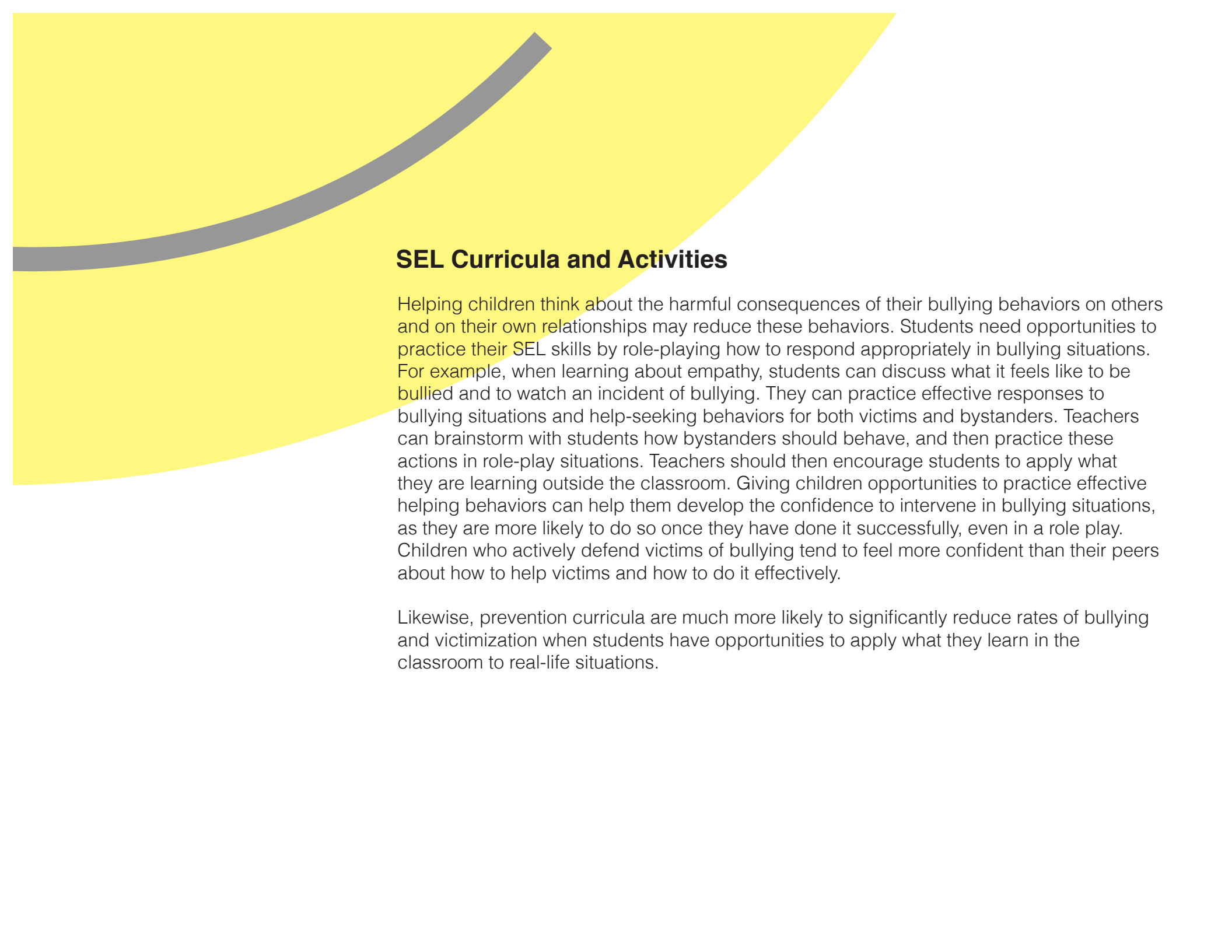
### **Classroom Climate**

Teachers play an enormously important role in setting the classroom climate. If aggressive norms become established and are not corrected, the students in these classrooms display more aggressive acts in future years. Teachers need to establish respectful standards of conduct for interactions and take action when student norms support aggression. Teachers need to work with students to develop classroom rules for respectful interactions, and to hold periodic classroom meetings to discuss bullying.

Classroom activities and discussions that help change students' views about the “coolness” of bullying may represent an important strategy for reducing bullying. Because of their social power among peers, “high status” bullies can have a particularly negative impact on the overall classroom climate—and when the peer group norms favor bullying, aggressive acts among both boys and girls increase, particularly at the middle school level. However, if other students and adults disapprove of bullying, and this disapproval is reflected not only in the school rules but also in the established classroom climate, students may suffer a “social cost” when they bully, and may be less likely to do so.

Teachers should model inclusive behaviors, making a special effort to reach out to peer-rejected and withdrawn students and to encourage students to be inclusive of their peers. There is evidence that when teachers are warm and caring to everyone, including aggressive and peer-rejected children, all students in the classroom are less rejecting of their peers. Peer-rejected children should have a valued and respected place in the classroom, for example, as an “expert” in some content or skill area or as a classroom assistant.

Teachers should work to promote caring learning communities through such strategies as class meetings, group celebrations, and cooperative group work.

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## **SEL Curricula and Activities**

Helping children think about the harmful consequences of their bullying behaviors on others and on their own relationships may reduce these behaviors. Students need opportunities to practice their SEL skills by role-playing how to respond appropriately in bullying situations. For example, when learning about empathy, students can discuss what it feels like to be bullied and to watch an incident of bullying. They can practice effective responses to bullying situations and help-seeking behaviors for both victims and bystanders. Teachers can brainstorm with students how bystanders should behave, and then practice these actions in role-play situations. Teachers should then encourage students to apply what they are learning outside the classroom. Giving children opportunities to practice effective helping behaviors can help them develop the confidence to intervene in bullying situations, as they are more likely to do so once they have done it successfully, even in a role play. Children who actively defend victims of bullying tend to feel more confident than their peers about how to help victims and how to do it effectively.

Likewise, prevention curricula are much more likely to significantly reduce rates of bullying and victimization when students have opportunities to apply what they learn in the classroom to real-life situations.



## Interventions

Beyond classroom curricula, students who are victimized, who witness bullying, or who regularly bully others need extended opportunities to practice relevant SEL skills, such as anger management, assertive communication, and social problem-solving. Pairing at-risk children with more well-adjusted and socially competent peers through a buddy system may help less socially and emotionally competent children develop these skills, and may also help protect at-risk children from further victimization.

Schools also need to establish a support system for victims of bullying, as some may need therapeutic interventions to address their resulting psychological issues, such as depression and anxiety. Victimized children who are in pernicious bully-victim dyads with another child may benefit from the intervention of a school psychologist or social worker.

## Parental Involvement

Since family interaction patterns can contribute to both bullying behavior and victimization, it's important to help parents reflect on their own parenting styles and behavior, and to provide them with specific guidance on handling conflicts at home. Parents also need guidance on how to best encourage the adoption of prosocial values and promote social and emotional skill development.

In addition, since many victims are more likely to confide in their parents before other adults, parents need to be aware of what bullying is and what they should do at home and in concert with the school if their child is either a victim or a perpetrator of bullying. Schools can use awareness- and skills-building resources as a starting point for school-family dialogues about bullying.

## Summary

Bullying is a pervasive problem in many schools. Unfortunately, many attempts to reduce the problem—such as engaging bullies and victims in peer mediation, punishing bullies, telling victimized children to ignore the bullying or to work things out on their own, inserting a few bullying prevention lessons in the curriculum, or adopting an anti-bullying policy without any of the needed supports—are not effective and are unlikely to have a lasting impact.

However, schools can take specific steps to improve the school climate and create more positive interactions among students. When schools embed bullying prevention efforts within an SEL framework, these efforts become a natural extension of the underlying SEL practices in the school and are more likely to succeed. By fostering an overall climate of inclusion, warmth, and respect, such schools can promote the development of core social and emotional skills in students and staff alike. Students with greater social and emotional competency are less likely to

Just as bullying involves the entire school community, bullying prevention likewise requires the school community as a whole to get involved and take appropriate action. Schools that create a positive school-wide learning environment simply are not conducive to bullying, and these behaviors are much less likely to occur or continue.