

Reducing bullying and cyberbullying

Ten easy tips for educators can help prevent bullying in schools and online

By Elizabeth Englander and Kristin Schank

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This fall, there are new and revamped laws in many states that address K-12 bullying and cyberbullying. In Massachusetts, we have one of the most comprehensive and far-reaching laws in the country. As in many states, K-12 teachers in Massachusetts have new responsibilities to respond to, report, and address bullying and cyberbullying. Here at the Massachusetts Aggression Reduction Center (MARC), we've developed 10 tips to help faculty cope with what can seem an overwhelming task.

1. Keep "responding" and "reporting" separate in your mind.

What behaviors do you have to report for possible formal discipline? Also, how should you respond when you see inappropriate (possibly bullying or definitely bullying) behaviors? Always respond by making it clear that you are disturbed by what you saw. Should you respond to a behavior that you might not normally report (such as laughter at a child's expense)? The answer is yes. Remember that even if it's not a "reportable" behavior—respond to it! Ignoring even mild bullying behaviors is essentially the same as endorsing them.

2. Focus on the small stuff.

It's useful to understand the difference between "gateway" behaviors and blatant bullying. Gateway behaviors facilitate or reinforce bullying—they make disrespect seem normal (which facilitates bullying) or even rewarded (like laughing along with a bully). The difficulty is that there are usually no solid rules against gateway behaviors—so adults often ignore them. But research shows us how toxic they can be. In 2009 and 2010, MARC researchers found that it was the gateway behaviors that dominated victim reports. Focusing on the small stuff means understanding that we need to educate kids about the impact of even small behaviors and react when we see them happening. How to respond? Explain that even small behaviors really impact others. Tell the child that you don't want to see behavior that might be interpreted as rude, and instruct the child to stop. Make it a classroom rule. Then, repeated instances become insolence towards you—which is a possible matter for school discipline.

3. The Cyber Stuff: Approach & Coach.

Although kids are comfortable with technology, they are not necessarily knowledgeable about it—don't confuse the two. We all need to talk with kids about technology. Don't worry about how much you know or don't know. Ask kids what's happening online with them. Ask them to tell you (or show you) what they're up to online. And keep in mind that even if you might not know how to do a particular thing, you do know that even online they should watch what they say and be civil to others. Don't hesitate to make that message loud and clear!

4. The Rumor Mill is still the leader in social problems.

Online and offline, rumors today fly at an incredible rate. In our research, bullies tell us that spreading rumors online is the by far the most common thing they do to others. So if we do anything to stop bullying, let's be sure to focus on the RUMORS.

5. Talk to kids about how to handle things when they get mad at each other.

Kids today often vent electronically when they're mad instead of trying to resolve the problem. Faced with the choice between a difficult face-to-face conversation, versus the ease of venting online, they may often conclude that it makes more sense to go electronic. The problem is that by doing so, they usually escalate the conflict instead of resolving it. In bygone days, kids didn't need to be coached on the benefits of talking face to face when they're upset—but today they often do. In our research, girls particularly showed a tendency to do this.

6. Don't neglect elementary school students.

Both bullying AND cyberbullying start young. Although we tend to neglect these topics until middle school, the fact is that the seeds of bullying are sown at a young age. And that includes cyberbullying: in a study conducted in 2008, the Corporation for Public Broadcasting found that 72 percent of all first graders used the internet at least once a week during the summer. Anecdotally, at MARC we have seen cases of cyberbullying involving second graders. The good news is that young elementary students are very willing and able to internalize rules about behavior. Thus, it is important to teach them that being a good person on the computer is just as important as being a good person on the playground! MARC offers a curriculum on bullying and cyberbullying for grades K-5. You can read about it on our web site and [request a copy online](#) ^[1].

7. To get the kids to report, you must connect with them emotionally—on some level.

We're not saying you should be best friends with your students; only that your students need to know that you care about them and their welfare. Kids today are still reporting bullying to adults at very low levels. Boys particularly, in our research, are not reporting to educators. Why aren't kids reporting? More than 80 percent of the boys and girls in our research revealed that when they did report, no action was taken as a result. They took a big risk in "telling," but as far as they knew, nothing was done. Of course, confidentiality laws (both federal and, in many states, local) prohibit educators from telling a person specifics about any action taken against another student. But these laws don't prohibit you from telling a student, "We're not ignoring your report. We are working on it." and that's exactly what reporters need to hear.

8. Girls may need particular attention, socially.

In our research, male cyberbullies tended to attack strangers, acquaintances, or kids who were friends long ago. Girls, on the other hand, tended to attack their friends or those with whom they were recently friends. This is a finding of particular concern because it means that girls are attacking the very foundations of their social support. Adolescence is a time when kids are learning how to form the long-term friendships that they will depend upon as adults. So be aware of the girls you teach: they may need your help in learning to appreciate and protect their social infrastructure—not attack it.

9. Take a moment to reinforce patient, kind, and friendly behaviors.

We all know that the carrot works better than the stick. When you notice a child being particularly good-hearted—especially in a potentially difficult situation, like when helping a classmate understand something, or sticking up for another child—be sure to let them know that you personally appreciate and admire their behavior. Better yet, use a classroom recognition system for the students who behave so well.

10. Enlist the kids in your efforts.

Although adults can be key players, it's the kids themselves who are the ultimate arbiters of their group's social behavior. Ask your students what kinds of bullying problems they notice, and what rules they believe should address those problems. Then sit back and watch them enforce their own rules with enthusiasm!

The Massachusetts Aggression Reduction Center is an academic center at Bridgewater State University in Massachusetts. We offer K-12 schools in Massachusetts free programs and services by running a training program for graduate and undergraduate students in higher education. Everyone benefits: future educators receive unique field training and K-12 schools receive high-quality, no-cost programs and services. Our web site (www.MARCCenter.org) offers many free downloads, games, tips, and curricula for all schools, and parent downloads which are available in English, Spanish, and Portuguese.

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