

Teaching Problem Solving Can Prevent Bullying



From guest contributor, Dr. Michele Borba

Researchers have always recognized the benefits of kids learning to work together to solve their problems. After all, using problem-solving skills is one of the best ways to help kids and teens curb playground battles, deal with friendship tiffs, manage teammate squabbles and handle the social jungle, as well as boost resilience, empathy, academic performance, self-esteem, peacemaking skills, and character. New research by the American Psychological Association reveals another huge plus: Teaching problem solving may prevent bullying and reduce the odds of victimization.

Researchers from Louisiana State University-Baton Rouge and the University of California-Riverside began the study as a quest to see what individual or environmental characteristics might predict the likelihood of a child becoming a bully or victim. The team, lead by Clayton R. Cook, analyzed 153 studies on bullying that were published in the USA and Europe

over the past 30 years and involved kids from ages three to eighteen. The results, published by the American Psychological Association and entitled, "Predictors of Bullying and Victimization in Childhood and Adolescence: A Meta-Analytic Investigation," found crucial information to help prevent bullying and aggressive behaviors.

Kids, especially boys, who have trouble solving social problems are more at risk of becoming bullies, coming targets of bullying, or both.

"A typical bully has trouble resolving problems with others," Cook states, "and also has trouble academically." But so too does the typical victim who "is likely to be aggressive, lack social skills, think negative thoughts, experience difficulties in solving social problems." That applies to the child who is bullied *and* who bullies.

This is why problem-solving strategies should be an integral part of every school's bullying prevention program and school climate initiative.

Most bullying programs aim at merely changing student's knowledge or perceptions or implementing a school-wide approach such as posting "anti-bullying rules" or a peer-reporting system. Such approaches alone do not change the bullying behavior, and so the bullying or victimization continues. Aggressive habits are learned and and they can become entrenched.

Cook's findings are different because they provide insight into not only how to predict who will be more likely to be bullied or victimized, but also how to reduce—even prevent—the bullying cycle.

Of course, this is just part of the bullying solution, but finally we're discovering not only greater predictors, but also concrete and teachable strategies for parents and teachers alike.

A critical key to success in reducing bullying is to ensure that *all* students learn crucial skills for solving social conflicts, and the sooner the better. Conflict Resolution and Problem Solving should be an integral part of every school's bully-prevention program and safe and caring climate initiative as well in every parent's tool chest. But there are caveats.

Warning: Though problem solving is a valuable social skill that all kids must learn, researchers warn that using Peer Mediation to reconcile bullying could increase bully victimization. Keep in mind that the target does not have a conflict with the bully. And the bully's intention is to usurp power over his or her victim by intentionally causing pain. What's more, kids who are targeted generally cannot hold their own, and there is no equality in Peer Mediation.

So decide carefully if Conflict Resolution or Peer Mediation is the right approach. Always ask permission of the targeted child. Do they want to be in the conflict resolution process and face their tormentors? Even if they do, be sensitive, tread lightly, preserve confidentiality.

Teaching Kids to Take a STAND

Use the following as a guide to help children learn to solve problems peacefully. Each letter in the acronym, "STAND" represents one of the five steps in conflict resolution and helps kids recall the process. I developed the acronym for my special education students and have since taught hundreds of kids (and teachers) the STAND approach.

The complete steps to problem solving (and dozens of more research-based strategies) are from *End Peer Cruelty, Build Empathy: The Proven 6Rs That Create Inclusive, Safe and Caring Schools*. Each step takes time to teach and lots of practice to master. Use the "Baby step model" to help kids learn the STAND skill: Teach one step at a time adding the next part when

previous was mastered and kids can use it in the real world without adult guidance

- **Stop, look and listen to your feelings.** The first step to solving problems is teaching kids to calm down. The reason is simple: it's impossible to think about how solve a problem if you're upset. Once in control, you can begin to rationally figure out why you're upset and then find an answer to your dilemma.

Teach kids to take slow deep breaths to calm down or walk away until calm. If emotions are high amongst kids, intervene: "I see two angry kids who need to calm down so they can figure out how to solve their problem." You might need to separate the kids until their anger is under control.

- **Take turns telling the problem.** The trick here is to enforce these critical rules: No put downs or name-calling: you must listen to each other respectfully. No interrupting: each person gets a chance to talk. You might ask each kid to say what happened, summarize each view, and then end with, "What can you do now to solve this problem?" Make suggestions only when your kids really seem stuck.

Tell kids to start their explanations with the word "I" instead of "You" then describe the problem and how they want it resolved. Doing so helps the speaker focus on the conflict without putting the other kid down. For instance: "I'm ticked because you never give me a turn. I want to use the computer, too."

If emotions are high, give kids the option of writing or drawing their view of the problem instead of saying it to each other. It's particularly helpful for younger or less verbal kids. The goal should be to help each kid try and feel what it's like to be in the other kid's shoes. One way to do this is by having each kid put into their

own words what the other kid has told them.

- **List alternatives.** Next, kids need think of alternatives so they have ways to finding a resolution. Whether preschooler or adolescent, the basic rules of thinking of solutions are the same: Say the first thing that comes into your mind. Don't put down anyone else's ideas. Change or add onto anyone's idea. Try to come up with ideas that work mutually for both sides. Don't offer your help unless they really seem stuck! To keep kids focused, say they must come up with five different solutions before you return. Then leave for a few minutes. Setting an oven timer for just three minutes can be a goldmine for kids with short attention spans. Stretch the time depending on the children's age and problem solving skills.
- **Narrow choices.** Narrow the options down to a few choice. To help kids get closer to resolve the problem teach two rules. Eliminate any solutions that are unacceptable to either kid because they don't satisfy their needs. Eliminate any solutions that aren't safe or wise.
- **Decide the best choice and do it!** The final step helps kids learn how to make the best decision by thinking through the consequences of their choices. You can teach kids to think about the consequence of their remaining choices by asking: "What might happen if you tried that?"

Another way to help kids decide on the best choice is by helping them weigh the pros and cons of each remaining possibility: "What are all the good and bad things that might happen if you chose that?" "What is the one last change that would make this work better for both of us." Once students decide, the two shake on the agreement or take turns saying, "I agree."

5 Take Aways from the APA Findings

1. DON'T rescue. If you want kids to be able to learn to work things out, then step back and give him the opportunity to solve their own problems. Do make gentle suggestions, but *don't* offer solutions or rush too quickly to fix things or create remedies. Doing so robs kids of learning to solve problems.

2. DON'T wait. The sooner we teach children how to solve conflicts, the less we'll have to intervene. Problem solving can be taught to preschoolers but do teach the skills at a developmentally appropriate level.

3. DON'T teach skills in isolation. Real life practice is the best way for kids to learn skills. So *do* look for day to day opportunities: a tiff during a play date, a sibling battle over who gets the remote or who gets first pick at a game.

4. DON'T overlook real examples. Kids learn skills best by seeing them. Bickering with your partner? *DO* show your kids that you can fight fair. Dispute with the boss? Explain to your kids how you're trying to work things through. Family feud? Use Family Meetings (or Class Meetings) to teach problem solving.

5. DON'T assume kids know how to problem solve. A big mistake is assuming that kids acquire these skills on their own. *Don't* make that assumption. *Do* deliberately and intentionally teach problem solving.

End Peer Cruelty, Build Empathy: The Proven 6Rs of Bullying Prevention That Create Inclusive, Safe, and Caring Schools offers the strong elements of best practices and bullying prevention programs to form the 6Rs of bullying prevention: rules, recognize, report, respond, refuse and replace. More than a program, the 6Rs are a comprehensive process for reducing bullying from the inside out, involving the entire school community. Used on its own or to supplement

an existing anti-bullying program or positive school climate initiative, this guide will help you see real progress in your bullying prevention efforts...and a more peaceful future for your students and school.

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