



Opinion Article

Bullying Prevention for Any Learning Environment

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The COVID-19 pandemic altered the educational landscape. What did not change is that attention to the learning environment remains crucial to school success, regardless of whether in a school building, remote learning, or some combination of both. This article will explore how an evidence-based bullying prevention program can serve as a framework for creating a positive school climate that supports students in any learning environment.

As a result of the pandemic and the closing of school buildings, educators and students faced and may still be facing:

- Changes in daily routines;
- A lack of predictability;
- Isolation; or
- Fears about safety.

Just as students experience learning differently when in a school building, students had very different experiences learning during the pandemic and are having different experiences returning to school. Many students are excited to go back to school. They are missing connections with friends, missing their teachers, and missing the routine of school. Others may have thrived in a virtual learning environment. Without having to navigate the educational system or social structure of school, fewer distractions, and the ability to work independently, it may be easier to focus when learning virtually. Students who did not feel connected to school or those who were bullied at school may fear, or even dread, going back to a school campus.

As can be expected, schools and classrooms where in-person learning is taking place do not look the same as they did before they closed in 2020. Parents are not walking their child to class. Masks and face shields are a normal sight. Desks are separated and may have plexiglass shields between them. There may be differences in how teachers and students can interact with each other due to social distancing guidelines. With much removed from the classroom, it may feel less welcoming and devoid of personality and warmth. Those who are in a classroom where they spend the entire day in the same space with the same people and very little movement may be getting tired of each other.

Students learning virtually, may be missing interaction with friends. After a year of virtual learning, it may be harder to keep students engaged and motivated. After spending months at home with family, separation anxiety may be an issue for some as they prepare to return to a school building. It may take some time to get back into the routine of going to school or to adapt to a hybrid schedule.

Hybrid learning, when students are in the school building for only part of the day or week, comes with its own challenges. While offering more flexibility and the

opportunity for some in person learning, there are logistical challenges to overcome. If there is a dedicated teacher for the virtual component of hybrid learning, students may end up with a teacher they have not built a relationship with. If the same teacher is teaching both in person and remote learners, it can be difficult to keep both the students physically present in the classroom and those learning remotely engaged to deliver an equal learning experience.

Educators also need to be vigilant and prepared for how COVID shaming may manifest in classrooms. Social stigma caused by fear and anxiety can result in labeling, stereotyping, discrimination, bullying, or harassment. Students may be bullied for learning from home or bullied because they are going to campus. Verbal bullying and spreading rumors may now include who was exposed, who tested positive, or who had COVID. Wearing masks, not wearing masks, or the kinds of masks worn may be a new reason for bullying. There is also the potential for an increase in cyberbullying given the increased use of technology.

All told, these have been very complex and unusual times and schools play an important role in supporting students and staff as they navigate through new routines and remaining uncertainties. Evidence-based bullying prevention is a protective factor that can serve as a framework for building an inclusive learning climate and should be part of a school's overall prevention plan to create a sense of community that will help students and staff feel safe and supported no matter where instruction takes place.

Research tells us that a multi-tiered, multicomponent, approach to bullying prevention is more likely to be effective. An evidence-based approach includes universal strategies designed to build an inclusive school climate. Everyone learns what bullying is and is not, why it is not acceptable and how to respond effectively. Targeted and intensive interventions support students who are involved in bullying incidents. Staff training teaches adults how to intervene when bullying is witnessed, suspected, or reported. Regularly scheduled class meetings provide students with an opportunity to connect with a caring adult they can confide in and encourage positive peer connections which can help prevent victimization. This type of comprehensive bullying prevention effort:

- Creates a supportive learning environment and builds a sense of community;
- Promotes positive interactions among and between adults and peers;
- Mitigates the negative consequences of bullying; and
- Includes time to specifically provide instruction in social-emotional learning skills.

A positive school climate is associated with high or improving attendance rates, test scores, promotion rates, and graduation rates. Conversely, a negative school climate can

harm students and create opportunities for violence and bullying. This was true prior to COVID and still applies now. However, a positive school environment has taken on an even more important function - helping children and youth become more resilient and recover from the difficult stressors of the pandemic. Trauma takes away a person's control. Creating a safe environment for learning can help give it back, placing educators in a unique position to restore a sense of safety by creating a classroom with structure and consistency to support all students.

It has been a school year like no other. But what has stayed the same? Safe supportive relationships promote resilience, provide protective factors, and create conditions in which every person can learn, grow and thrive. This is true with or without a pandemic and regardless of the learning environment. The emotional well-being and physical safety of students remain an integral part of a successful learning environment. Physical safety is being addressed through social distancing and other COVID related guidelines schools have in place. In addition, schools can and should also address emotional safety. An evidence-based bullying prevention program can help buffer the stress and emotional effects of a new way to do school by creating an atmosphere where students feel welcome, respected and comfortable; facilitating supportive adult-child relationships; teaching social-emotional skills that help students recognize and manage their emotions; setting expectations; and creating routines for managing classrooms. Having this type of learning environment that is safe and well-managed, respectful and supportive remains critical, no matter where instruction is taking place.

Disclosure

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