



## Editorial

# Engaging Youth in Bullying Prevention Efforts

Urbanski J\*

Director of Safe and Humane Schools, Institute on Family and Neighbourhood Life, Clemson University, USA

## Editorial

Bullying is still one of the most common forms of violence experienced by children and youth and the belief that it is just a normal part of growing up remains prevalent, but it has long-lasting consequences that cannot be ignored. Historically, prevention efforts have been based entirely on reactive strategies; problem behaviors had to occur before remedial actions were taken [1]. Now we are seeing a paradigm shift with the development of proactive strategies in order to address potential problems before they occur.

School staff must take the lead in preventing bullying and protecting students, but they can't do it alone. Youth have an important role to play as well. Bullying is commonly understood as a group phenomenon in which peers play a variety of different and complex roles. Peers can increase the risk of involvement as well as provide protective influences. This article will focus on developing protective influences by involving students in bullying prevention efforts through promotion of youth voice, exploring youth engagement, and changing social norms.

Schools must meet the emotional and social developmental needs of students for bullying to decrease, for effective teaching and learning to take place, and for positive relationships to form. Social learning theory tells us that learning takes place through the interaction students have with their peers, teachers, and others making youth engagement an essential component of successful bullying prevention. Students are more likely to see or hear about bullying than adults so engaging them in initiatives to stop bullying allows for a more responsive approach to prevention.

However, if youth are given a seat at the table without a voice in designing strategies for bullying prevention, they are not full participants and the impact on reducing bullying may be limited. Youth play a unique and important role in effective, comprehensive bullying prevention efforts. The *Bullying in U.S. Schools 2019 Status Report* [2] notes that on average, 92% of girls and 80% of boys feel sorry for students who are bullied. This high level of empathy shows that most students do not approve of bullying. Involving youth in prevention efforts can channel this empathy into action.

What does this look like for schools and youth? Engagement of youth involves providing opportunities for young people to make decisions to improve the environment. Youth involvement should focus on learning as well as changing norms and behaviors. As part of a comprehensive bullying prevention program, allowing teacher's time to guide students in development of social-emotional skills can prevent students from resorting to pushing, teasing, or hurting peers as an emotional release. It can also help youth who are bullied and bystanders develop the skills they need to manage their fear and anxiety, communicate their needs, and get support [3].

Youth voice is critical for creating an environment where bullying is not accepted and treating others with respect is the norm. Research has shown that engaging youth voice is an essential element of effective organizational development among community and youth serving organizations, and can it promote systems change. In *The Importance of Youth Voice*, contributor Robert Shumer states:

*"One of the most important elements necessary to engage young people in learning, in civic activity, and in important youth development roles is voice: ensuring that young people are involved in the planning, the implementation, and the assessment of any effort" [4].*

There is often the assumption that student voice and student engagement are the same thing. They are not. While this article only touches on the subjects as they relate to bullying prevention, it is important to start by defining each. A broad definition of student voice is any expression of any learner about anything related to education while student engagement is a sustained connection a learner has towards any aspect of learning, school, or education.

Voice is very student centered with thoughts, feelings, visions, and actions of students at the core. Voice gives learners a chance to share their opinions about something they believe in and positions students as agents of change. It includes the extent to which students have opportunities to participate in decision making and design of projects as well as the extent to which teachers encourage students to express opinions and listen to student suggestions. Voice is about considering the perspectives and ideas of young people, respecting what everyone has to say, taking risks, listening, sharing, and working together. It doesn't mean drowning out other people's voices or ignoring adult voices.

The Centre of Excellence for Youth Engagement defines youth engagement as the sustained and meaningful involvement of a young person in an activity focused outside of themselves [5]. It describes students' attitudes towards school and recognizes young people's right to participate in decisions that impact them while acknowledging the skills and strengths they bring to the table. When engaged, youth make a psychological investment in what they are doing, try harder, and take pride in their success. They are also more likely to understand and incorporate the material into their lives.

The Center for Disease Control [6] highlights what works in successful youth engagement. Research shows:

- A broad approach is needed as bullying goes beyond the classroom and school.
- The focus should be on changing behavior and the environment rather than the individual.
- It is important to involve everyone with influence on youth – family, peer groups, schools, churches, local businesses, and recreational programs.

- Involvement in all aspects of the prevention program beginning with development shows youth a concrete result of their efforts, can inspire advocacy, and helps to create an environment where bullying is not acceptable.

- Simply providing information does not prevent bullying. Youth must be empowered to act if they see bullying or if it is happening to them.

Engaged youth can make meaningful contributions to comprehensive bullying prevention efforts helping to build program capacity and sustainability. They bring new energy and vitality to initiatives. It just makes sense that engaging them to direct this energy into action will make bullying prevention efforts more successful. It also ensures prevention efforts will be meaningful to them.

Students can contribute their views and experiences with bullying. They can take on leadership roles in the school to promote respect and inclusion, communicate about bullying prevention to their peers, and help develop rules and policies. They have credibility with peers allowing them to educate others about bullying and can also capture the attention of political leaders and the media making them key players in advocating for change. More specifically youth can:

- Develop and share anti-bullying materials to use in education campaigns and mobilize access to their peers broadening message delivery;
- Help in planning and delivering kick-off events;
- Be involved with selecting topics for class meetings and leading class discussions with peers or younger students;
- Plan and host a family meeting;
- Participate in service projects related to bullying prevention efforts in the school or community;
- Promote events such as International Day of Peace; and
- Incorporate bullying prevention into Spirit Week, Awareness Campaigns, and Athletic events.

Youth can and should also be a part of a social norms approach to bullying prevention to dispel myths that bullying is the norm among peers. Youth's attitudes and behaviors are highly influenced by what they believe their peers' attitudes and behaviors are. Adolescents who think their friends would approve of their participation in bullying are more likely to engage in bullying. To counteract this, instead of focusing on the negative behavior (e.g., youth engaged in bullying) a social norms campaign focuses on the positive behavior (e.g., youth who believe bullying is wrong).

Norms related to bullying can influence both bystander behavior and the behavior of youth to initiate bullying. However, perceptions can be inaccurate. Misperceptions of peers' attitudes and behaviors can lead youth to conform to a risky behavior, such as bullying, if they believe that is the normal behavior of their peers. Youth may overestimate the prevalence of bullying and falsely believe that name-calling, spreading rumors, teasing and other forms of social cruelty are approved of by their peers. They may underestimate their peers' empathy towards students who are bullied and believe it would invite ostracism to refuse to participate in or to take a stand against such behavior.

These misperceptions may cause young people to avoid acting as an ally to students who are bullied and to even

engage in negative behaviors that they are actually uncomfortable with. Over time these behaviors may become normalized for youth and they may become desensitized to the damaging effects on others. Correcting students' misperceptions by demonstrating that most young people don't find bullying to be acceptable can provide students with the awareness and confidence to act in a way that better aligns with their own beliefs, which quite often involve positive behaviors.

Involving youth in social norms campaigns can be an effective way to correct the misperceptions that may be contributing to bullying behavior. Older students, with some guidance from adults, have the verbal skills and cognitive capacity to reflect on their own behaviors and those of their peers, to analyze a broad range of social dilemmas, and to contribute solutions to problems they face. In addition, their desire to be part of a peer group can be utilized to garner the social support needed to change norms around bullying.

Social norms messaging related to bullying should focus on the difference between perceived and actual behavior. It is important to gather credible data and then use various communication strategies to consistently and creatively share the message. Knowing the habits and preferences of your audience is essential when planning these marketing efforts. Make sure the message is relevant to the lifestyle of youth, reflects the diversity of the community, and that the media used to convey it reflects the current youth culture. Messages should focus on the positive to counteract the belief that everyone is doing it. Social norms messaging should avoid scare tactics, should not emphasize harm or punishment, nor should they include images or elements that reinforce negative norms.

It is clear that young people have an important role to play in bullying prevention efforts. However, there is a complementary need for adult involvement. It is important for adults to provide enough support for successful youth engagement. Adults influence youth participation by creating the social context in which young people have opportunities to participate in planning, implementation, and assessment of prevention efforts. Adults need to create a safe, welcoming setting for young people to participate and must be willing to support, supervise, and engage with students as they lead bullying prevention activities. Only then can they organize and mobilize a group of interested young people who will engage to make a difference.

Schools put a significant amount of time, effort, and resources into bullying prevention efforts. However well planned those efforts might be, an initiative that does not connect with the target population is likely to fail. Engaging youth in your bullying prevention efforts is a way to maximize success.

## References

1. Haines MP, Perkins W, Rice RM, et al. (2005) A guide to marketing social norms for health promotion in schools and communities. National Social Norms Resource Center.
2. Luxenberg H, Limber SP, Olweus D (2019) Bullying in U.S. Schools 2019 Status Report. Hazelden Publishing.

3. Brackett MA, Rivers SE (2014) Preventing bullying with emotional intelligence. *Education Week*.
4. Williams A (2015) Youth voice. *National Dropout Prevention Center/Network Newsletter* (25)2.
5. Pancer SM, Rose-Krasnor L, Loiselle LD (2002) Youth conferences as a context for engagement. *New Dir Youth Dev* 96: 47-64.
6. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2010) Best practices user guide: Youth engagement—state and community interventions. U.S. Department of health and human services, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, National Center for Chronic Disease Prevention and Health Promotion, Office on Smoking and Health, Atlanta, USA.

**\*Corresponding author:** Jan Urbanski, Ed.D., Director of Safe and Humane Schools, Institute on Family and Neighbourhood Life, Clemson University, USA, Tel: 864-656-1836; Email: [jurbans@clemson.edu](mailto:jurbans@clemson.edu)

**Received date:** November 12, 2019; **Accepted date:** November 24, 2019; **Published date:** November 25, 2019

**Citation:** Urbanski J (2019) Engaging Youth in Bullying Prevention Efforts. *J Health Sci Educ* 3(5): e105.

**Copyright:** Urbanski J (2019) Engaging Youth in Bullying Prevention Efforts. *J Health Sci Educ* 3(5): e105.