



# Positive Peer Intervention

## Research Insight into Strategies to Increase Peer Intervention in Hurtful Situations

### OVERVIEW OF THE SITUATION

Most bullying and other social cruelty, especially at the secondary level, is socially motivated, that is to attract attention and gain social power.<sup>1</sup> This especially appears to be the case with cyberbullying, where being hurtful online often generates significant attention.<sup>2</sup> Students who are targeted have lower social status and are often perceived as “different.”<sup>3</sup>

The majority of these hurtful situations occur in the presence of other young people, not adults. This is especially true when young people use digital technologies.

Despite being advised to tell an adult if they are bullied, the majority of students do not report bullying or other social cruelty.<sup>4</sup> The majority of students think school staff make things worse when they intervene.<sup>5</sup> Unfortunately, the research backs up students’ perceptions of the lack of adult effectiveness.<sup>6</sup>

However, it is also probable that another factor in the lack of reporting and intervention by adults often makes things worse is that teens have a developmentally appropriate desire to handle personal relationship situations independently.<sup>7</sup>

The majority of students think that those who engage in bullying are “cool” and “popular.”<sup>8</sup> This most likely is an assessment of the personal power and social status of these students in the eyes of other students. But students do not personally like to see bullying behavior and do not admire those who are hurtful.<sup>9</sup> Thus, there is a significant misperception of the actual norms.

Many students would like to help when they see someone being hurtful.<sup>10</sup> When students do intervene, they are often successful in getting the hurtful situations to stop.<sup>11</sup> But publicly confronting someone engaged in bullying presents risks of retaliation or humiliation. Bullied students who have supportive friends experience less distress.<sup>12</sup> Students admire those who step in to help.<sup>13</sup>

Unfortunately, when bullying situations do occur, most students do not step in to help.<sup>14</sup>

How can schools increase positive peer intervention?

- The misperception of the social norms have to change by effectively communicating the actual positive norms of disapproval of hurtful behavior and admiration for those who step in to help.
- Students must know specific skills they can use to step in to help, that will reduce the risks or retaliation or embarrassment.
- The school climate must support positive peer intervention.

### FROM WITNESS TO HELPFUL ALLY

The current state of the research on positive peer intervention is similar to the fable of the wise men describing an elephant. The following is a

synthesis of the current research--an effort to describe the entire “elephant.”

### The Choice

When students witness bullying or other social cruelty, they have a choice. They can be:

- A **Hurtful Participant**. Joins in or supports the harm.
- A **Passive Observer**. Ignores what is happening or walks away.
- A **Helpful Ally**. Steps in to help.

How Helpful Allies can help in a variety of ways:<sup>15</sup>

- **Reach Out**. Reach out to be kind to the person being hurt or left out & help friends resolve conflict
- **Say, “Stop.”** Publicly or privately tell the person being hurtful to stop
- **Report Concerns**. Tell an adult who can help

It is important that we move beyond a focus on those incidents that would be considered “bullying” to address all forms of social cruelty, including: bullying, discriminatory harassment, sexual harassment, disrespect or “put downs,” conflict or “drama,” exclusion from school activities, physical harm or threat, dating abuse, retaliation, hazing, and those who are hurtful by mistake.

### Factors that Support or Discourage Positive Peer Intervention

Based on research into peer intervention, the factors that appear to support positive peer intervention include:

- Noting a hurtful situation.
- Interpreting it correctly.
- Feeling personally responsible.
- Having sufficient personal power.
- Having effective intervention skills.
- A supportive social environment.<sup>16</sup>

Based on research that considered bystander interventions, the factors that appeared to discourage witness intervention included:

- Diffusion of responsibility--“Someone else should be responsible.”
- Audience inhibition--“I could fail or embarrass myself.”
- Social influence--“No one else is doing anything--nobody else thinks this is wrong.”<sup>17</sup>

Research conducted by Embrace Civility in the Digital Age revealed when asked about what they perceived as barriers, students’ top responses were:

- I did not know what I could do.
- It was not my business.

- School staff should have done something.
- Others might have teased me if I tried to help.
- The one being hurtful could have retaliated.
- I could have failed and embarrassed myself.

Clearly, gaining effective skills to avoid embarrassment or retaliation and a school climate where stopping hurtful behavior is everyone's "business" is important.

## INCREASING POSITIVE PEER INTERVENTION

To increase positive peer intervention requires addressing both Personal Factors and Social/Environmental Factors. The four Personal Factors that must be addressed include: Motivation, Personal Power, Self-efficacy, Rationalizations. The Social/Environmental Factors include: Friendships, Climate, Perceived Expectation of Peers.

### Personal Factors

Motivation is grounded in a feeling of personal responsibility for well-being of others, acceptance of differences, affective empathy, and a feeling of personal connection.<sup>18</sup>

Motivation can be increased by a focus on social emotional competencies and personal values. However, as most students do not like to see bullying and want to intervene, lack of feeling of personal responsibility is likely not a determining factor in the rate at which students intervene.

Trying to increase motivation by telling students that "bullying causes suicide" is not only ineffective, it is DANGEROUS because this could lead distressed, bullied students to consider suicide an option.<sup>19</sup>

Motivation can be increased through a focus on social, emotional, and cultural competencies.

The Personal Power factor relates to comparative social status between the aggressor, target, and witnesses.<sup>20</sup> If a witness is not as powerful as higher social status aggressor, intervention raises a risk of embarrassment or retaliation. If a witness is not as strong as the aggressor, intervention raises the risk of physical harm. Also, if witness becomes associated with lower social status target, there can be a risk of embarrassment, teasing, or damage to their reputation.

It is not likely possible to dramatically change the Personal Power or social status of witnesses, so the strategies to address the Personal Power issue must be creative:

- Seek to influence those witnesses who do have higher Personal Power to be Helpful Allies, by focusing on strategies to increase their skills and motivation.
- Lower the Personal Power barrier using a positive norms approach that will reduce the perceived Personal Power of those engaging in aggression and increase the perceived Personal Power of those who step in to help.
- Provide guidance on strategies to help that avoid direct confrontation, to reduce the risks associated with status.

Self-efficacy includes both effective skills and confidence in those skills.<sup>21</sup> The confidence factor is likely related to the student's feelings of Personal Power.

Assist students in gaining effective skills to positively intervene that reduces the risks of embarrassment or retaliation.

- Teach students the importance of using private strategies, such as reaching out to be kind, privately telling a friend to stop being hurtful, or reporting to an adult who can help.

- Teach a safer strategy to publicly say, "stop," such as working as a team and then quickly walking away.

When people see a negative situation and think they should do something, but don't, they often Rationalize why they did not help, to get rid of the feelings of guilt.<sup>22</sup> The common rationalizations of witnesses who wanted to intervene, but didn't are:

- **Spin It.** "It was a prank."
- **Deny Personal Responsibility.** "Someone else was responsible."
- **Deny the Harm.** "It wasn't that bad."
- **Blame the Victim.** "It or she deserves it."

Directly teach students about these rationalizations so they can learn to recognize when they are using a rationalization to make themselves think that they really did not need to help.

### Social/Environmental Factors

Students who witness bullying may have Friendships with either aggressors or targets.<sup>23</sup> Those witnesses who are friends of targets are likely to reach out to help their friends. The friends of aggressors are more likely to join in, encourage, or support their friend who is being hurtful. If a witness is friends with both, he or she may help to resolve or mediate the conflict, or may just do nothing. Those who are friends with neither could step in to help, do nothing, or join in the harm, all depending on Personal Factors.

- Encourage those who are friends of targets to step in to help by increasing their skills in doing so. Encourage those who are friends with aggressors to tell their friends to stop by increasing their skills to do so and increasing their motivation by pointing out that as a perceived supporter of someone who is hurtful, their reputation can also be damaged.
- Ensure students have effective conflict resolution skills to enable them to help resolve conflicts between friends.
- Address Personal Factors and Perceived Peer Norms to increase the willingness of students who are not close friends with either of the participants to intervene.

Issues related to Climate include a variety of factors.<sup>24</sup> The school must maintain a culture of acceptance and all staff members must demonstrate a celebration of differences. School staff must reinforce the importance of shared responsibility and of intervening. Staff interventions must be effective if one objective is to increase student reporting of serious hurtful situations. It is also necessary to ensure that expressed or assumed "rules" do not interfere with positive intervention. Students should know that stopping to help or report a serious concern is considered an excused tardy.

Regularly assess climate issues related to conditions to reduce bullying or other hurtful behavior and support positive peer intervention. Be exceptionally attentive to the effectiveness of adult interventions.

The Perceived Expectations of Peers has been identified as a **critically important factor**.<sup>25</sup> What students think other students think about those who are hurtful, those who support those being hurtful, and those who step in to help is highly influential.<sup>26</sup>

The social norms theory suggests that people misperceive the attitudes and behaviors of others and this influences their own actions.<sup>27</sup> When people learn about the actual positive norms of their peer group, they are more willing to abide by those norms.

As noted, many students think that other students think that those who are hurtful are "cool" and "popular," but they, themselves, do not like to see these hurtful acts.<sup>28</sup> Ensuring accurate understanding of the

disapproval of bullying and admiration of those who step in to help is imperative.

The Youth Health and Safety Project made effective use of local surveys to reduce bullying behavior.<sup>29</sup> This project collected school-based data about young peoples' perspectives on bullying. This data was used to create posters that demonstrated the school's norms related to bullying. The use of messaging that incorporated the locally-derived positive social norms, specifically that the majority of young people did not like to see others engage in hurtful behavior, led to a reduction in the reported incident rate of bullying.

Create activities that allow students to realize the actual norms held by their peers--disapproval of hurtful behavior and admiration of those who step in to help.

Gary McDaniel, Clinical School Social Worker said this: "Students are very interested in what they and their peers think and are responsive to what student leaders have to say. When we set up a situation where we have student leaders telling their peers what the school survey shows they think about how they treat each other, nothing any expert says can ever compete with that."

## INCREASING POSITIVE PEER INTERVENTION

To increase positive peer intervention, the following key strategies are recommended.

### Positive Peer Norms

It is necessary to increase students' understandings that the majority of their peers disapprove of those engaging in hurtful behavior, so that being hurtful is not viewed as a way to gain attention or establish popularity.

It is also necessary to increase student awareness of the degree to which their peers truly admire those who step in to help and do not admire those who support their friends who are hurtful.

- Use local survey data or discussion questions that will assist students in gaining a better understanding of the actual norms, rather than the perceived norms. Create posters using survey data that informally demonstrate the positive social norms.<sup>30</sup>
- Implement a strategy that places students in a leadership role in delivering the positive social norms messaging. Some approaches to consider include:
  - Use older students to teach those who are younger.
  - Divide students into teams and have each team provide insight on strategies to their peers.
  - Establish a student team that will provide informal messaging, PSAs, and develop other activities.
- In incidents that are witnessed by staff, pay attention to the role any helpful allies might have played and positively acknowledge their positive behavior.

### Effective Skills

Provide students with the opportunity to learn specific Helpful Ally skills, with a focus on intervention actions that have reduced risks of embarrassment or retaliation.

- The specific skills include these:
  - Reach out to be kind to those who have been targeted or left out. Most students know how they can do this. Have students present and discuss their ideas for how to do this.

- Help friends resolve conflict. Provide an easy to follow process that can help to reach a solution.
- Privately tell a friend to stop being hurtful and to make things right. Provide a process to follow.
- Work as a team to publicly say "stop." Using the power of a larger group in public situations can help to reduce risks. Have students present and discuss their ideas on how to safely and effectively tell someone to stop.
- Report serious concerns to an adult. Students must know when and how to report such concerns.
- To help students gain such effective skills:
  - Address the perceived barriers and the rationalizations both they and those being hurtful might use.
  - Advise that private strategies are safer, but also teach safer public strategies.
  - Reinforce their own strategies. Use discussions to solicit their thoughts on effective strategies.
  - Focus on restoration of the hurtful situations, not the threat of adult punishment.

## POSITIVE SCHOOL CLIMATE

Students must perceive themselves as important partners in the overall effort to promote positive relations and reduce bullying and other hurtful behavior. Students will model the attitudes and behavior of school staff. Two key questions staff must ask themselves:

- Do all staff at this school always model the importance of treating all students with respect and avoid actions that regularly humiliate students in front of their peers?
- Do all staff promptly and effectively intervene in hurtful situations they witness or are reported? Guidelines for such intervention are set forth in *Initial Intervention Guidelines*.

Nancy Willard, M.S., J.D. is the Director of Embrace Civility in the Digital Age. She is author of *Engage Students to Embrace Civility* and creator of a student leadership, positive relationship skills program, *Embrace Civility*. Website: <http://embracecivility.org>. Email: [info@embracecivility.org](mailto:info@embracecivility.org).

- 1 Salmivalli, C. (2010) Bullying and the Peer Group: A Review. *Aggression and Violent Behavior*, 15, 112-120.; Salmivalli, C., & Peets, K. (2008). Bullies, victims, and bully-victim relationships. In K. Rubin, W. Bukowski & B. Laursen (Eds.), *Handbook of peer interactions, relationships, and groups* (pp. 322-340). New York: Guilford Press.
- 2 Patchin, J. W. & Hinduja, S. (2012). Cyberbullying: An Update and Synthesis of the Research, pp. 13-36. In J. W. Patchin and S. Hinduja (Eds.), *Cyberbullying Prevention and Response: Expert Perspectives*. New York: Routledge.
- 3 Id. at 8-9.
- 4 Robers, S., J. Zhang, J.L. Truman, and T.D. Snyder, *Indicators of school crime safety*: 2012, Bureau of Justice Statistics: Washington, DC. p. 1-203. <http://nces.ed.gov/programs/crimeindicators/crimeindicators2012/>
- 5 Bradshaw, C.P., Sawyer, A.L. & O'Brennan, L.M. Bullying and Peer Victimization at School: Perceptual Differences Between Students and School Staff. *School Psychology Review*, Volume 36, No. 3, pp. 361-382 (2007).
- 6 Davis, S. & Nixon, C. (2013) *Youth Voice Project: Student Insights into Bullying and Peer Mistreatment*. Research Press: Illinois.
- 7 Yeager, D.S., Fong, C.J., Lee, H.Y., & Espelage, D. (in press). Declines in Efficacy of Anti-Bullying Programs Among Older Adolescents: A Developmental Theory and a Three-Level Meta-Analysis, *Journal of Applied Developmental Psychology*.
- 8 Juvonen, J., Wang, Y. & Espinoza, G. (2013) Physical Aggression, Spreading of Rumors, and Social Prominence in Early Adolescence: Reciprocal Effects Supporting Gender Similarities? *J Youth Adolescence*. 42:1801-1810.
- 9 Rodkin, P., Farmer, T., Pearl, R., & Van Acker, R. (2006). They're cool: Social status and peer group supports for aggressive boys and girls. *Social Development*, 15, 175-204.
- 10 Rigby, K., & Slee, P. T. (1991). Bullying among Australian school children: Reported behavior and attitudes toward victims. *Journal of Social Psychology*, 131, 615-627; Rigby, K., & Johnson, B. (2006). Expressed readiness of Australian schoolchildren to act as bystanders in support of children who are being bullied. *Educational Psychology*, 26, 425-440.
- 11 Hawkins, D. L., Pepler, D. J., & Craig, W. (2001). Naturalistic Observations of Peer Interventions in Bullying. *Social Development*, 10(4): 512-527; Henderson, N. R., & Hymel, S. (2002). Peer contributions to bullying in schools: Examining student response categories. Poster presented at the National Association of School Psychologists Annual Convention, Chicago, February; O'Connell, P., Pepler, D., & Craig, W. (1999). Peer involvement in bullying: Insights and challenges for intervention. *Journal of Adolescence*, 22(4), 437-452.
- 12 Sainio, M., Veenstra, R., Huising, G., & Salmivalli, C. (2011). Victims and their defenders: A dyadic approach. *International Journal of Behavioral Development*, vol. 35 no. 2 144-151.
- 13 Based on unpublished research the author has conducted.
- 14 Salmivalli, C., Lappalainen, M., & Lagerspetz, K. (1998). Stability and change of behavior in connection with bullying in schools: A two-year follow-up. *Aggressive Behavior*, 24, 205-218; Rigby & Johnson, supra; Henderson & Hymel, supra; O'Connell, et. al, supra; Salmivalli (2010), supra.
- 15 I do not use the term bystander, because this implies standing by. Upstander is a contrivance.
- 16 Salmivalli, C. (2010). Bullying and the peer group: A review. *Aggression and Violent Behavior*, 15, 112-120; Hawkins, Pepler, & Craig, W., supra.
- 17 Latane, B., & Darley, J. M. (1968). Group inhibition of bystander intervention in emergencies. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 10, 215-221
- 18 Salmivalli, C., & Voeten, M. (2004). Connections between attitudes, group norms, and behaviors associated with bullying in schools. *International Journal of Behavioral Development*, 28, 246-258; Gini, G., Albiero, P., Benelli, B., & Altoe, G. (2007). Does empathy predict adolescents' bullying and defending behavior? *Aggressive Behavior*, 33, 467-476; Pöyhönen, V., Juvonen, J., & Salmivalli, C. (2010). What does it take to stand up for the victim of bullying? The interplay between personal and social factors. *Merrill-Palmer Quarterly*, Vol. 56: Iss. 2, Article 4; Menesini, E., Codecasa, E., & Benelli, B. (2003). Enhancing children's responsibility to take action against bullying: Evaluation of a befriending intervention in Italian middle schools. *Aggressive Behavior*, 29, 10-14; Simona, C.S., Caravits, P.D., & Salmivalli C. (2008) Unique and Interactive Effects of Empathy and Social Status on Involvement in Bullying *Social Development*, Vol. 18, No. 1., pp. 140-163.
- 19 Centers for Disease Control (2014) *The Relationship Between Bullying and Suicide.: What We Know and what it Means for School*. <http://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/pdf/bullying-suicide-translation-final-a.pdf>
- 20 Salmivalli (2010), supra.
- 21 Bandura, A. (1995). Self-efficacy in changing societies. New York: Cambridge University Press; Gini, et. al., supra.; Pozzoli, T. & Gini, G. (2010) Active defending and passive bystanding behavior in bullying: the role of personal characteristics and perceived peer pressure, *Journal of Abnormal Child Psychology*, Aug;38(6):815-27.
- 22 Bandura, A. (1991). Social cognition theory of moral thought and action. In W. M. Kurtines & J. L. Gewirtz (Eds.), *Handbook of moral behavior and development* (Vol. 1, pp. 45-96). Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- 23 Ferrans, S.D., Selman, R.L. & Feinberg, L.F. (2012) Rules of the Culture and Personal Needs: Witnesses' Decision-Making Processes to Deal with Situations of Bullying in Middle School. *Harvard Educational Review*, Vol. 82 No. 4 Winter.
- 24 Thornberg, R. (2007) A classmate in distress: schoolchildren as bystanders and their reasons for how they act, *Social Psychology of Education*, Vol. 10, No. 1. pp. 5-28 and Goldammer L, Swahn MH, Strasser SM, Ashby JS, Meyers J. (2013) An examination of bullying in Georgia schools: demographic and school climate factors associated with willingness to intervene in bullying situations., *West J Emerg Med*; 2013 Aug;14(4):324-8.
- 25 Pozzoli & Gini, supra.; Rigby & Johnson, supra.; Salmivalli (2010), supra.
- 26 Berkowitz, A.D. (2010) Fostering Healthy Norms to Prevent Violence and Abuse: The Social Norms Approach. In Kaufman, K. Ed, *The Prevention of Sexual Violence: A Practitioner's Sourcebook*, NEARI Press. Page 3.
- 27 Id.
- 28 Juvonen, et. al., supra; Rodkin, et. al., supra.
- 29 <http://www.youthhealthsafety.org/bullying.htm>.
- 30 The Youth Health and Safety Project has made effective use of local surveys to reduce bullying behavior. <http://www.youthhealthsafety.org/bullying.htm>.