

How to Intervene in a Bullying Incident

It is important for educators to respond quickly and consistently to bullying behavior in order to send the message that it is not acceptable. Research shows that consistent intervention procedures can stop bullying behavior over time. Whereas doing nothing at all will make the bullying infinitely worse. There are simple steps adults can take to stop bullying on the spot and keep students safe. According to NEA's survey, 98% of school staff believed it's their job to intervene when they see bullying occur. In contrast, 46% received training related to the policy and only 39% were directly involved in prevention efforts at their school.¹¹ This indicates that while educators are well intentioned, they need guidance, training and support to intervene effectively. This tool kit is intended to help educators know how to **identify bullying, intervene in a bullying incident, and advocate for bullied students.**

Steps to Take for Immediate Intervention

BEFORE

▶ Know Your Rights And Responsibilities

Intervening in a bullying incident is the right thing to do and there is a right way to do it. It is our responsibility as educators to know how and what we are expected to do, and how laws and policies support our actions. For example, when you intervene in a bullying incident, you are not infringing on the bullying student's right to free speech. It is also important to be aware of what your legal protections are (e.g., contract language, liability insurance, and school policies).

▶ Consistency is the Key

Ultimately, the steps to take to intervene should be trained and discussed as a part of a comprehensive school-wide bullying prevention program.

▶ Be Prepared

Research local resources (e.g., counseling, anger management) so that you are prepared to make any needed referrals.

HOW DO I INTERVENE?

"Students know I will listen to them, accept what they have to say, and try to help them when they are in need," he says. "Everyone deserves to feel safe at school, and when kids feel safe and know they are accepted for who they are, they will thrive academically and socially."

- Dave Seaburg, Teacher

NEA Bully Free: It Starts With Me Pledge Taker

DURING

▶ Stop the Incident Immediately

Separate the student doing the bullying and their target. Stand between them in order to block eye contact, ensuring you can observe both.

▶ Make Sure Everyone is Safe

Address any health needs or injuries. Get assistance from other school staff members if necessary. Make sure to ask the bullied student, "Are you okay?" Seek police or medical assistance immediately per your school policies, if:

- A weapon is involved
- There are threats of serious physical injury
- There are threats of hate-motivated violence (e.g., racism, homophobia)
- There is serious bodily harm
- There is sexual abuse
- There is robbery or extortion

▶ Give a Clear Message

Bullying is unacceptable. Remain calm as you address the students. Label the behavior as bullying. Cite relevant school or classroom rules (e.g., "Name calling is bullying. Bullying and not respecting others are both against the rules in our school."). If anti-bullying rules or posters are on nearby walls, point them out. Students who bully must hear the message that their behavior is wrong and harms others. Bullied students must hear the message that caring adults will protect them.

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● DURING

▶ **Prepare to Follow-Up After the Incident**

Don't send students away at this point, but do refrain from asking questions and trying to sort out the situation. This should be handled one on one, after the incident. Do not require students to apologize or make amends immediately when you stop the incident. Keep everyone calm as you first focus on safety. Then advise all parties to the bullying that you will be following up.

▶ **Support the Bullied Student**

Make eye contact with the bullied student, demonstrate empathy, and reassure the student that what happened was not their fault.

- Never tell the student to ignore the bullying
- Do not blame or punish the student for being bullied
- Do not tell the student to fight back

▶ **Encourage Bystanders**

If the bystanders did stand-up, reinforce their efforts. Let the bystanders know that you admire their courage and thank them for speaking up, which helps themselves and other students. If the bystanders did not intervene, give them examples of how to intervene appropriately the next time that they see bullying (e.g., get help from an adult, tell the person to stop). Research points to the important role bystanders can play during a bullying incident and in changing the school climate.¹²

● AFTER

▶ **Investigate and Document**

After a bullying incident, an investigation should be conducted. Remember to question all those involved individually. The incident also should be documented according to school procedures.

▶ **Consider Consequences for those who Bully**

If appropriate, impose immediate consequences for the student doing the bullying. Consequences work best when they are logical and communicated in advance. After the incident, keep a close eye on the student who bullied to prevent any retaliatory attempts, and make sure he/she knows that you plan to do so. Be sure to provide the necessary support for those who bully, such as counseling or anger management classes.

▶ **Avoid a "Working Things Out" Approach**

Do not require the students to meet and "work things out." They don't know how. They need adult intervention. Because bullying involves a power imbalance, such a strategy will not work and can actually re-traumatize the student who was bullied.

▶ **Be a Caring Adult for Bullied Students**

Continue to make sure the bullied students are supported well beyond the incident. Make sure they have the resources they need. Reach out to other staff members who can provide guidance and emotional support to students. Advocate for bullied students by making a concerted effort to stop bullying at your school. Come together as a school by involving parents and the local community in your efforts. Addressing bullying cannot and should not be done by the school alone. The entire community must be involved so that students feel safe in both their school and their community.

National Education Association
1201 16th Street, N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20036-3290

