CirclePoint

Executive Summary

CirclePoint
BULLYING PREVENTION PROGRAM

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www.circlepointprogram.org

The following is an excerpt from the *CirclePoint Guide for Educators*, pilot edition, parts 1.1, "Executive Summary," and 1.2, "Program Mechanisms and Approach: Detail and Rationale," pages 1-10.

1.1 Executive Summary

The *CirclePoint* program provides all groups in a school community with a variety of complementary and overlapping tools and strategies designed to prevent and reduce bullying by both dominance and relational aggression. These tools and strategies are based on the following mechanisms:

1. Modern understanding of bullying: tools and strategies are based on current research.
2. Full spectrum: addresses bullying, in depth, using both dominance and relational aggression.
3. Whole community empowerment:
   a. Education: the whole community (educators, parents, and students) receives an education on bullying to ensure an accurate understanding of the topic; required to enable both adults to successfully address bullying problems and students to use empowerment techniques.
   b. Target empowerment: the education of students on ways to react to aggression to render it ineffective and how to work with an adult, if desired, to get bullying to stop.
   c. Bystander activation and empowerment: the education of students on ways they can stop bullying of their peers, support targets, make aggressive behavior less rewarded, and influence social norms to make bullying less acceptable by using intervention techniques that don't put the students at risk for retaliation or affect their social status.

d. Teacher strategies for the classroom: proactive and reactive actions teachers can take that prevent and stop bullying, identify targets, activate bystanders, and influence students to reject bullying behaviors.

e. Parent guidance: education on bullying and proactive and reactive steps parents can take to prepare their children for aggression that they may face, to monitor their children for bullying involvement, and to effectively work with administration to resolve a bullying problem.

f. Administrator tools: new ways for administrators to resolve bullying problems (see "Constructive Discipline Process," below).

4. Target Support System: a network of educated adults (ideally all adults in the school: teachers, administrators, and support staff) who can help targets to heal from the damage caused by bullying, educate them on bullying, and work together to get the bullying to stop through empowerment techniques or adult intervention.

5. Constructive Discipline Process: a change to the discipline code that eliminates initial punitive consequences for bullying and offers aggressors the chance to change their behavior; this change eliminates barriers to student reporting, allows aggressors to be open and honest, allows for accurate investigations and determination of underlying causes, satisfies targets, allows for a constructive dialogue with the parents involved, reduces parent/administrator conflict, and provides for a constructive consequence if the behavior continues.

6. Chain of Custody Awareness: the notification of all the adults who monitor the students involved in a bullying problem during the school day—teachers, lunchroom monitors, playground monitors, etc.—so they can stop further actions of aggression and report it to administration.

7. Objective terminology: the use of specific language when communicating about a bullying problem that eliminates emotional reactions and enables constructive dialogue.

8. Clear definition of bullying: the use of a definition of bullying that clearly describes the problem.

9. Student survey: the surveying of students at the start of the program and periodically, if necessary, to help determine the size of the bullying problem and student social norms as they relate to bullying acceptance.

10. Rapid implementation: the program is designed to be implemented in one month. The program uses self-study materials to eliminate the time and costs involved in formal training classes. Classroom time for student education is kept at a minimum.

11. Measurement: the incorporation of measurement components to establish baselines and assess progress and effectiveness across multiple program areas.

12. Self-contained nature: no external support or services, such as survey processing or follow-up training, are required after implementation.

13. Self-reinforcing nature: the program changes the way the school community addresses bullying; it delivers education, process, and culture change. Once the program is adopted, the approach becomes second nature and self-reinforcing. The only follow-up work required after implementation is the self-directed education of new staff.

1.2 Program Mechanisms and Approach: Detail and Rationale

1.2.1 Modern Understanding of Bullying

Note: Bullying is described in detail in Part 2.

When the phenomenon of bullying began to be studied in earnest in the 1970s, bullying was identified as a group problem. However, programs created to address bullying treated it as an individual problem and a discipline problem and used mechanisms, such as rules against bullying, adult intervention, and punishment of aggressors, to try to tackle the problem. And researchers were puzzled as to why these programs did not work, and in some instances made the problem worse.

Modern research has provided a much better understanding of the nature and drivers of bullying, the harm caused by bullying, and why rules against bullying and punitive consequences for the behavior are of very limited effectiveness or are counterproductive. We know today that the driver of the majority of bullying is social status; students who bully are trying to maintain or improve their standing among their peers. We also know that to adolescents (around third grade for boys, as early as kindergarten for girls), social status becomes the highest priority for students, even above following rules and friendship. This leads students to bully even though they know it is wrong and may carry punitive consequences and not report bullying as doing so may harm their own social standing, especially if the group norm is not to tell on friends. We know that punishing a student for bullying can actually enhance his or her social status and thus is counterproductive. An effective bullying prevention program must use mechanisms to address the group nature and social status aspects of bullying as well as to handle the less frequent instances of when bullying occurs with disregard to how it impacts social status.

Just as importantly, the dual nature of the harm caused by bullying, specifically at the individual and peer group levels, is better understood. A characteristic of the target is frequently used to justify the aggression, making the bullying personal, and the bullying, as a group action, results in the rejection of the target by his or her peers. Bullied targets start to view these characteristics as individual flaws, and also believe that these "flaws" are the reason for the peer group rejection and are barriers to peer acceptance. Critical to an effective bullying prevention program are mechanisms that can repair this harm by helping targets to see that the characteristics are not flaws and

the basis for peer group rejection, helping targets to better deal with future aggression, helping to foster peer group acceptance of the target, and making rejection of bullying behaviors a peer group norm. Simply stopping the aggression does not achieve any of these goals, which are fundamental to addressing the bullying problem.

1.2.2 Full Spectrum: Dominance and Relational Aggression

Note: Bullying types and subtypes are described in detail in Part 2.

All too often, bullying is thought of as simply the visible form of aggression that can be seen by adults. Bullying using overt aggression, called "dominance aggression," is largely practiced by but not limited to boys and is pervasive in peer groups starting at around third grade. However, there is another form of bullying, "relational aggression," which is largely covert and mainly practiced by girls and can start as early as kindergarten. Relational aggression is very challenging to address, as not only are the methods largely covert, but frequently the target herself is unaware that the bullying is happening until the damage is done, i.e., her social relationships are damaged or severed and her social status has precipitously dropped. While many programs include relational aggression in their definition of bullying, they rarely have any mechanisms specifically designed to address it. This program contains mechanisms designed specifically to address both dominance and relational aggression.

1.2.3 Target Empowerment to Stop Bullying Incidents and End Bullying Relationships

Note: The target empowerment techniques covering dominance and relational aggression are described in Part 3.

Targets will be provided with information on how bullying works and ways (empowerment techniques) that they can react to aggression to render it ineffective. Targets will also get information on how to engage and work with an adult to get a bullying problem to stop. This information is provided via age-appropriate self-study materials (a comic for students in grades K–6, a guide for students in grades 7 and up) and through the Target Support System. Teachers can also use the comic and handbook as a guide for role-playing activities that allow students to practice the empowerment techniques.

1.2.4 Bystander Activation and Empowerment to Stop Bullying Incidents and Change Peer Norms

Note: The direct and indirect bystander empowerment techniques are described in Part 3.

Bystanders will be provided with information on how bullying works and ways (empowerment techniques) that they can directly or indirectly intervene in a bullying situation to stop the bullying.[1] Indirect empowerment techniques allow for intervention that minimizes the risk of retaliation and harm to social status, two key barriers to intervention. Students in the "caring majority" who want to do something about bullying but don't know how to do it will now be able to act, which can influence peer

group norms about bullying. Bystanders are activated through self-study materials (the comic and guide), teacher encouragement (classroom strategies), and parental influence and support (parent guide). The self-study materials illustrate multiple intervention techniques, teachers who recognize and understand the social structures of their students will encourage bystanders to act and support each other, and parents will proactively suggest that their children act when witness to bullying. Teachers can also use the comic and handbook as a guide for role-playing activities that allow students to practice the empowerment techniques. While direct intervention methods will be acknowledged, students will be encouraged to intervene indirectly.

1.2.5 Classroom Strategies for Teachers

Note: Part 7 focuses on classroom strategies as well as other actions for teachers.
Teachers play a key role in bullying prevention in that they more than anyone have an opportunity to understand the social relationships between students and the roles the students play in bullying episodes. An understanding of the group nature of bullying will allow teachers to identify the roles each student plays in each bullying situation so as to positively influence individuals and groups within the peer group. Teachers will also be provided with strategies that they can use to provide direct and indirect support for targets and bystanders through proactive and reactive actions. Teachers will also seek to identify targets and stop repeated aggression, and will be part of the formal Target Support System.

1.2.6 Parent Empowerment

Note: Parents are provided with a separate guide covering bullying, empowerment, and proactive and reactive actions they can take.
Like other community members, parents are provided with educational information on bullying, proactive and reactive actions to take with their children to influence positive behaviors and encourage them to come forward if they are having a bullying problem, and how to help their children and engage with administration should their child become involved in a bullying problem. Parent education is intended to provide parents with similar skills in dealing with bullying as teachers and to ensure that parents work objectively and in partnership with educators on resolving problems. The information also allows parents to serve as part of the Support System if selected by a target for help.

1.2.7 Target Support System

Note: The Target Support System is described in detail in Part 5.
One aspect of a school environment that is important to preventing and reducing bullying is a support system to help students affected by aggression.2 Due to the traditional understanding of the nature and mechanics of bullying, schools tend to

fall short in this area. The support system in place in many schools is a process that allows students to file bullying reports, a disciplinary code that punishes aggressors, and guidance personnel to help troubled students.

However, bullied students often don't use this process or seek adult help for a number of reasons. Some bullied students believe being bullied is their own fault. Some students believe admitting to being bullied is admitting to a weakness or having a flaw; how bullying is viewed in certain cultures can play a significant role in why students keep silent. Students fear that if they tell adults and the aggressors are punished as a result, they will suffer retaliatory bullying. A bullied student may fear that an adult will talk with the aggressor, which will confirm to the aggressor that he or she is harming that student. Students who are bullied feel shame and want as few individuals as possible to know about the bullying. And perhaps most importantly, most students who are bullied want to solve the problem themselves; if an adult intervenes, it can signal to both the aggressor and the target that the target is not able to solve the bullying problem on his or her own, which never fully ends the bullying relationship. And bullying is largely about social status. Getting an adult to step in and stop bullying is generally not rewarded by peers; targets know that in order to regain peer acceptance, they need to demonstrate that they are at least the equal of their aggressor. And nothing in the traditional support system reverses the personal harm caused by bullying. In short, the support systems many schools have in place do not serve the needs of those who are bullied. And a major downside of this lack of support is that when students do not engage adults about a bullying problem, the risk of tragic outcomes—for themselves and/or others—increases.

A core element of the *CirclePoint* program is a comprehensive Target Support System consisting of all adults in the school—teachers, administrators, and support staff—who will be able to confidentially and effectively provide support to bullied students using a clearly defined five-step process based on the Solution-Focused Brief Counseling approach. The inclusion of all adults in the Support System allows a target to choose the adult he or she most trusts and ensures that adult will have the knowledge and skills to help. The support process will allow students a measure of control and will allow students to seek help in private, without fear of aggressor retaliation or appearing weak, and to work with an adult on determining the best course of action to get the bullying to stop.

The Support System uses a five-step "transformational discussion" (listen, empathize and heal, educate, empower, and take action) expected to last approximately 15 minutes to help reverse the harm of bullying. Each step should deliver benefit, so discussions for which the time available is less than 15 minutes can still be beneficial to the target. The discussion will not only allow targets to see bullying differently—depersonalized and demystified—but will also allow targets to see themselves differently. The students will have an opportunity to use empowerment techniques to

stop the bullying on their own, if they so choose, or they can ask the adult they choose to engage with to get the bullying to stop. The school will clearly describe this process to the students upon implementation and follow the process to ensure trust between students and school staff is maintained. A support system reduces the chances that a bullied student will take his or her own life or will attempt to harm others[3] and increases the likelihood that bullied students will come forward and ask for help.[4]

The school will need to "market" the Target Support System to convince the students to use it. The students will be informed that all conversations with adults will be confidential, adults will work collaboratively with them, and aggressors will not be engaged by adults unless requested by the students (in other words, the target has the right to reveal or withhold the identity of the aggressor(s)). Most importantly, students must know that identified aggressors will not initially suffer punitive consequences based on information provided during discussions.

1.2.8 Constructive Discipline Process

Note: The Constructive Discipline Process is described in detail in Part 6.
Research has shown that another aspect of a school environment that is important to preventing and reducing bullying is a fair system of disciplinary rules applied equally to all students.[5] However, a system based on the traditional bullying prevention model—rules and punishment—is nearly impossible to achieve. Students want to see that all adults in the school community uniformly reject bullying and call out students for this behavior. But bullying behavior is very difficult to spot; peers, with their intimate knowledge of social relationships, will know when bullying is occurring, yet teachers and other educators will not always recognize it. And when bullying occurs in the presence of educators but the educators do nothing to stop it, it conveys the message to students that bullying is permissible and may reinforce the feeling of targets that the bullying is their own fault.

Punitive consequences are largely ineffective as an approach to stop bullying. Research shows that aggressors don't always view their behavior as harmful, making punishment feel like an injustice.[6] Similarly, aggressors punished for bullying a student with annoying or irritating personality traits may similarly feel that punishment is an injustice. A target who has finally had enough and retaliates against the aggressor is often punished without further investigation as to what caused the retaliation, which also feels unjust. Aggressor denial and claims that the target started it or antagonized the aggressor, in order to avoid punishment, can make the fair application of discipline guesswork on the part of administration. Punishment can lead to retaliatory bullying, especially if the aggressor gets the sense that adults were informed of the bullying by the target. Punishment for aggression can also enhance the status of the aggressor among his or her peers. Aggressors will continue with their behavior even when faced with significant punitive

consequences. Immediate punitive consequences for aggression serves as a barrier to reporting of aggression by targets and other students for two reasons: students are frequently told not to tell on a peer if it will get the peer in trouble; a student who reports information that results in punishment to an aggressor risks retaliation by the aggressor. Finally, because there is no clearly delineated set of behaviors that constitute bullying—identical forms of aggression can be bothersome to one person but bullying to another—there is no way to codify specific behaviors for discipline. And once a bullying relationship is established, where the target is harmed and lives in fear of the aggressor or has damaged friendships in cases of relational aggression, the behavior necessary to sustain the bullying—such as smirks or the mere presence of the aggressor for dominance aggression and shunning for relational aggression—can easily fall below the threshold for disciplinary action.

The *CirclePoint* program addresses all these problems by recommending a change to the discipline process that eliminates initial punishment for an aggressor. In this Constructive Discipline Process, when adults become aware of a bullying problem and they initiate a conversation with an aggressor, the aggressor is informed that the behavior is harmful, is given an opportunity to stop the behavior, and is told that a consequence will be applied if the behavior does not stop. This approach should be satisfactory to the target, the aggressor, and their parents, as the target gets the immediate relief desired and the aggressor is not punished. Adults then monitor social situations involving the aggressor and target (Chain of Custody Awareness) for any further aggression. Should the aggression continue, the consequence, which the aggressor and his or her parents have already been informed about and have agreed to, is applied. The consequence is constructive in three ways: 1. it stops the bullying; 2. it eliminates the benefit the aggressor receives from the bullying; and 3. it does not penalize the target. Because bullying—specifically overt forms of physical and verbal aggression—is a social interaction, the consequences involve removing the aggressor from the same environment as the target in which the bullying occurs, e.g., the aggressor having to eat lunch in a classroom, being segregated to another area of the playground, or, if the aggression occurs on the bus, finding an alternative form of transportation. And because initial punishment is eliminated, targets and bystanders will feel more comfortable making adults aware of a bullying problem as the threat of retaliation is reduced.

Further, the educational components of the program instruct adults on the nuances of bullying so that they understand the type of bullying involved, which aids in investigations. Adults involved in the discipline process are sensitized to those instances where aggression on the part of the student is in response to sustained bullying so that consequences can be appropriately applied to those who engaged in the bullying. In addition, the augmentation of the discipline code sets the stage for a more constructive problem resolution process with the parents of the involved

students by making the school and parents partners in achieving a positive outcome; the focus of the discipline process changes from one of punishment to one of behavioral change.

1.2.9 Chain of Custody Awareness

Note: The Chain of Custody Awareness is described in both Part 6 (formal part of Constructive Discipline Process) and Part 7.

The "chain of custody" consists of all the adults who teach or monitor an aggressor and target during the course of a school day. A common problem in schools is that an aggressor who knows that certain teachers are aware of his or her bullying will wait until he or she is in the presence of an unaware teacher to bullying. In this program, when the administration becomes aware of a bullying problem and formally engages the aggressor, the administration will notify the aggressor and target's chain of custody to make the adults aware of the problem so they can monitor the students to ensure the bullying stops, intervene if the aggression continues, and report any instances of aggression to administration. Chain of Custody Awareness can also be used informally by teachers who suspect a bullying problem that is not validated by the target in order to have other teachers observe the involved students to confirm a problem and intervene if necessary.

1.2.10 Objective Terminology

The language used in a bullying program plays a role in the outcome. The word "bully" is a dehumanizing label. The term "bullying" is frequently overused; both students and adults refer to instances of nonharmful aggression as bullying. Both terms also are interpreted differently by members of different cultures and ethnicities. The use of these terms among those involved in resolving a bullying problem can elicit strong emotional reactions that can impede or prevent successful resolution. In this program, the term "bully" is avoided; instead, the term "aggressor" is used, as it objectively defines the individual in terms of the behavior used. The term "bullying" will be used only after an investigation has clearly established the facts and determined that bullying is, indeed, occurring.

The program refers to those harmed by bullying as "targets" and not the more common "victims" due to the latter's stigma and suggestion of helplessness. Although "affected targets" is a more accurate term given that most students at some point are subjected to aggression, the term "targets" is used for simplicity. The use of "target" also helps minimize emotional reactions, as the term is a purely objective descriptor of the receiver of the bullying behavior.

Teachers and administrators should be sensitive to the emotional power of the words "bully" and "bullying" and should avoid them when engaging with students and parents until after all the facts are known; the action of both or all parties is

understood; and the intent, whether admitted or implied by repeated aggression, is clear. Using these words at the start of an incident investigation may hinder the investigation and could make a constructive outcome challenging if not impossible.

In addition, terms and definitions related to this program are concrete and easy for students to understand. The program recommends that adults avoid abstract terms like "culture," "values," and "character" in conversations and communications with students but instead use concrete terms that can prescribe action.

1.2.11 Clear and Concrete Definition of Bullying

Some schools and programs use definitions of bullying that include abstract and even intellectually questionable terminology, e.g., "power imbalance," that make understanding bullying challenging for adults and students alike. The definition of bullying used in this program is clear and concrete; it is a modified version of the one used by Boston Public Schools[7] at the time of this publication:

> Bullying involves an individual or a group repeatedly causing emotional harm to another person through physical or verbal actions and/or social rejection. These harmful actions can be direct and overt, such as physical actions or verbal taunts; indirect and covert, such as the use of gossip and rumors to socially isolate the target; or conducted via social media channels (internet, email, texting, etc.).

To put it more simply, bullying is repeated aggression toward an individual that causes emotional harm.

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