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About this Guide

The *CirclePoint Bullying Prevention Program* is a research-based multi-mechanism community empowerment program that educates all members of a school or educational community—administrators, teachers, support staff, parents, and students—on bullying and provides them with role-appropriate actions, strategies, and processes to prevent, reduce, and resolve bullying problems. The program seeks to effect change at the individual level to stop harmful aggression and repair the damage caused by bullying, at the peer group level to make bullying less accepted, and at the community level to create an empowered membership that can work cooperatively to provide a safer, more enjoyable, and more productive environment for students.

This guide provides an overview of the *CirclePoint* program mechanisms, an overview of bullying, and describes a set of proactive and reactive actions that parents can take with their children to prevent bullying from starting, help influence their children to make the right decisions when witnessing a bullying incident, and successfully resolve problems should they arise.

This guide uses the terms “parent” and “parents” to describe the functional role of one or more adults with primary responsibility for a student outside of school. The adult(s) can be biologically or legally related to the student and can include a biological parent or stepparent, grandparent, other family member, or legal guardian.

Introduction

Bullying can be very frightening. Parents lose sleep at the thought of their children suffering emotional harm from bullying and can feel like they are living a nightmare if their children do become bullying targets. Stories abound in the media describing the horrors of bullying and those rare instances where bullying leads to tragedy for the target or peers. And the lack of transparency that frequently characterizes the problem—targets who won’t talk or ask for help, aggressors who deny their actions, bystanders who are silent—makes this frequently misunderstood problem seem even more mystifying, unmanageable, and impossible to solve.

The good news is that bullying behavior, while nuanced and complex, can be easily understood. And once the mechanics and drivers of bullying are understood, the problem becomes less daunting and frightening and more preventable, manageable, and resolvable. Not only can bullying be prevented and stopped constructively, but the harm that bullied children experience can be reversed. Parents can play a leading role in helping their children to avoid becoming involved in a bullying problem, to change aggressive behavior that is harming a peer, to increase the likelihood that they will make the right decisions when observing another student being bullied, and can work constructively to resolve a bullying problem.

1. Bullying Overview

The following is a high-level overview of bullying mechanics. Please review this section before the rest of this guide as it will help set the context for the mechanisms used in the program and the parent strategies. For more detailed information on the topics in this section, please see the *CirclePoint Guide for Educators*, a reference copy of which may be available from your child's school.

Key Terms: A common language used by all community members is necessary for communicating about this topic. The program uses the following terms:

- **aggressor:** a student who is using aggressive or bullying behavior
- **target:** a student negatively affected (hurt, isolated, excluded, etc.) by the bullying behavior
- **bystander:** a student who witnesses a bullying incident

The traditional terms used when communicating about the individuals involved in a bullying problem, i.e., “bully” and “victim,” are problematic and will not be used: the term “bully” when applied to a person is a label and is dehumanizing; the term “victim” carries connotations of helplessness. Both of these terms can unnecessarily evoke strong emotional responses that make resolving a bullying problem more challenging. “Aggressor” and “target” are objective descriptors.

In addition, the term “bullying” will be used in a specific way by school administration. The term will generally be used in individual student cases when the aggression continues after the aggressor has been informed that his or her behavior is harmful and must stop. Using the term prior to that point can make resolution difficult in that the aggressor may not have realized or recognized that his or her behavior was harmful, and using the term can evoke a strong oppositional or defensive response from the aggressor and his or her parents. In addition, the term is frequently misapplied to single or limited instances of aggression; using the term only if aggression continues after aggressor engagement leaves no question as to the nature of the student's behavior. Please note that the specific use of this term administratively is not meant to minimize or dismiss the harm caused, delegitimize the need by the target to have the aggressive behavior stop, or excuse the behavior; it is simply intended to make resolution of the bullying problem easier.

Definition: Bullying is when repeated aggression by one or more students causes emotional harm to another student.

- Please note that it is not the aggression itself that is bullying but rather the effect that the aggression has on the target. As such, there are no specific behaviors that can be categorized as bullying; it is how the target is affected by the behavior

that determines whether the behaviors are bullying. Aggressive behavior (not specifically bullying) between students is normal, natural, and serves an important purpose in student growth and development. Aggression (again, not bullying) is pervasive in student social interactions.

- Harm caused by aggression is not always intentional, and the aggressor may not be aware of the harm he or she is causing. The aggressor may be trying to have fun, entertain peers, curry favor with a higher-status student, or want to be included in a peer group. Harm can be a byproduct of the aggression.

Types: Aggression that results in bullying can be physical, verbal, or relational (harms friendships).

- When physical, the aggression can involve bodily contact, such as pushing or shoving, or can involve non-contact, such as intimidating body language to make the target fearful. Note that aggressors who use physical aggression rarely intend to cause serious physical harm.
- When verbal, the aggression can include taunts, insults, teasing, and mocking. Often, a unique characteristic of the target is referenced as part of the aggression.
- When relational, the aggression involves acts that not only exclude the target from groups but also cause harm to the target's friendships. Examples include starting and spreading a secret petition against or false rumor about the target, sending pictures to the target showing friends having fun in activities that do not include the target, and forming groups that exclude the target. Targets of relational aggression frequently do not know the aggression is occurring until after the harm (damaged or severed friendships) has occurred.

Methods: Bullying can occur face-to-face (overtly), such as through physical and verbal aggression; behind a person's back (covertly), such as through intentional excluding and passing of rumors; and online (cyberbullying), using social media channels such as email, texting, Pinterest, Instagram, and Facebook.

Type of bullying by gender: Both boys and girls use physical and verbal aggression that results in bullying. Girls are mainly the ones who use relational aggression that results in bullying.

Reasons for bullying: The majority of bullying is related to social status—to maintain or increase the social status of the aggressor or decrease the social status of the target. Around grade 3 for boys, and as early as kindergarten for girls, social status becomes the number one priority for students, even above following rules (for approximately 75% of students) and friendships (for approximately 33% of students).

- Students use physical and verbal aggression to demonstrate superiority (dominance) over another student. This aggression usually occurs in front of peers, who reward aggressors with admiration and respect (increase in social status). Physical and verbal aggression is also sometimes used in conflicts.
- Students use relational aggression to harm friendships and isolate the target (decrease in social status). Students will use relational aggression to harm a target as a way of indirectly trying to address conflict; instead of directly addressing a conflict, students will try to secretly get back at the person who offended them. In addition, relational aggression is frequently used to eliminate a social threat; a student who possesses a special skill, talent, or possession or who starts to excel in sports or academics, resulting in her standing out positively among her peers, may become a bullying target by those who feel socially threatened or inferior.
- Note: the priority of status for students, and the fact that aggression/bullying can enhance status, explains why punishing students for bullying is generally ineffective and frequently counterproductive, and why rules against bullying are generally ineffective.

Target selection: Aggressors frequently use a characteristic of the target as justification for overt bullying. The most common characteristic used by aggressors is a deviation from the norm in body weight or height. Students may be targeted, however, for any characteristic, frequently one that the majority of other students do not possess (unique physical characteristic, religion, ethnicity, culture, etc.). However, any student can be targeted, as aggressors can always find a unique characteristic as an excuse to bully. In a classroom where bullying occurs, there are generally only one or two targets.

Target harm: Targets are harmed on three levels: 1. they start to believe that they are flawed in some way; 2. they are excluded by their peers; 3. they believe that they will never be accepted by their peers due to this flaw. In a peer group such as the students in a classroom, a single target is more likely to believe that the bullying is his or her own fault. In a peer group with two or more targets, the targets are more likely to perceive the bullying as unkind behavior by the aggressor(s).

The reversal of harm requires change on two levels. On a personal level, targets need to understand that a characteristic used as an excuse to bully is not a flaw. In cases of relational aggression, targets need to understand that relationship harm is a product of the aggression and not a personal rejection. On a peer group level, the target's peers need to include the target as a member of the group and stop defining themselves in terms of the target's characteristic(s). Adults and targets themselves are able to effect change on a personal level; achieving inclusion by the peer group is more challenging since it requires change on the part of those students who may not be directly involved in the bullying.

Groups and roles: Bullying is largely a group activity; rarely is bullying activity limited to the **aggressor** and **target**. Other students usually play a role:

- Students who join the aggressor in using physical or verbal aggression are called **assistants**. Although these individuals did not initiate the aggression, they are playing the same role as the aggressor.
- Students who do not use aggression but stand on the side of the aggressor and any assistants and use body language and verbal expression (i.e., laughter) to demonstrate agreement with the aggressor/assistants are bystanders called **reinforcers**.
- Students who observe the bullying but remain neutral (neither support the aggressor/assistants nor help the target) are bystanders called **observers**.
- Students who are asked to participate in relational aggression, such as by signing a petition to exclude another or to pass along a rumor, but refuse to participate, are bystanders called **objectors**.
- Students who come to the aid of the target by directly confronting the aggressor/assistants while the aggression is occurring to get the bullying to stop or pulling the target out of the bullying situation, or indirectly helping by privately confronting the aggressor, comforting the target, or making a target aware of relational aggression that is occurring are bystanders called **defenders**.
- It should be noted that bullying as a group allows students to feel less individual responsibility for the bullying.

Bullying as a social norm: When bullying occurs over time in a group of students, such as in a classroom, it becomes an accepted social norm for that group. The acceptance of bullying by the peer group is a reflection on the level of acceptance of bullying by the highest-status students. When bullying becomes part of a peer group norm, students no longer see the behavior as bullying; they may profess to be against bullying but will not see the harmful aggression that is occurring in front of their eyes as bullying. If a characteristic of the target(s) is used as a justification for bullying, whether explicitly referenced or not, the peer group will tend to define itself as not having the characteristic the target(s) possesses. This makes the target feel that he or she can never be accepted by the group and may make a new student entering the school who has the same characteristic of the target have a harder time gaining peer acceptance.

Barriers to bullying problem resolution: Students often don't talk about or report bullying, which makes resolving problems challenging. In addition, parents frequently take a defensive position, react based on emotion, and take steps that may not align with target needs and a constructive outcome.

- Targets: While surveys show that the majority of students believe that adults can be the best way to get bullying to stop, students who are being harmed by bullying rarely come forward and ask for help. Reasons for silence include:
 - › Being bullied can make a student feel weak or flawed, making an admission of being bullied embarrassing or shameful and a validation of the feeling.
 - › Students who are bullied over time come to believe that the bullying is their own fault; they may not even realize that they are being bullied.
 - › Targets feel the need to resolve the bullying problem themselves in order to restore lost social status; an adult getting involved and stopping the bullying usually does not restore lost status and may even harm the target's status.
 - › Targets may have already tried asking an adult for help but not gotten effective support.
 - › Students are taught from a young age not to tell on peers if it will get them in trouble; programs or school discipline processes that include punishment for aggressors can result in targets and other students remaining silent.
 - › Targets may fear retaliation by the aggressor if the aggressor is punished.
- Bystanders: Students face three barriers to stopping bullying when they see it:
 - › 1. If bullying occurs in the peer group, it becomes an accepted peer group norm; students prefer not to go against group norms, as doing so can result in a decrease in status.
 - › 2. A student who intervenes is in effect taking the side of a lower-status student against a higher-status student, which can result in a decrease in status.
 - › 3. A student who intervenes risks becoming a target.
 - › Bystanders will also not report bullying if the aggressor will get in trouble or if there is a strong social norm against telling on peers; bystanders will lose status for both reasons. Bystanders also fear becoming a target themselves if they report an aggressor and the aggressor is punished.
- Aggressors: Aggressors will generally not admit to bullying for three reasons: 1. If the program or school discipline process involves punishment, aggressors will deny their actions to avoid that punishment. 2. Aggressors sometimes do not view or realize that their actions are harmful; they may be entertaining peers or just having fun. 3. If the bullying is driven by conflict, aggressors may feel justified in their actions.
- Parents: The natural instinct for parents of a target is to rush in and try to protect their child. They may feel anger at the school, the aggressor, and the aggressor's parents for the harm being caused to their child. They will demand immediate cessation of the bullying and justice for damage caused. They may not ask their child what the child wants them to do or allow their child the opportunity to solve the problem. The natural instinct for parents of an aggressor is to try to protect

their child. They may feel anger at the school, the target, and the target's parents for leveling an accusation of bullying. They will usually take their child at his or her word if the child denies the bullying behavior, or if the child admits to the behavior but claims that no harm was intended. In such cases, they may fight any attempt to level a consequence for the behavior.

- Educators are frequently caught between two angry groups of parents who are fighting tooth and nail in the belief that they are protecting their own children's interests even though the parents are actually preventing a successful and constructive resolution. Whatever solution that educators provide is thus inevitably unsatisfactory to one or both parties.

2. Program Overview

The *CirclePoint* program uses mechanisms based on modern research to constructively address bullying problems in ways that result in personal growth for the students involved. The program accounts for target needs and what is effective in terms of achieving aggressor behavior change.

2.1 Program Mechanisms

Education of the whole school community—educators, parents, and students—on bullying; self-study materials are provided to all groups.

- *Guides About Bullying for Students*: a comic book, *What YOU Can Do About Bullying by Max and Zoey*, for students in grades K–6 and a guide, *All About Bullying*, for students in grades 7 and up that explain bullying, ways that targets can react to get bullying to stop on their own and keep it from starting, ways that bystanders can intervene to stop bullying with minimal personal risk, and how students can work with adults to resolve a bullying problem
- *CirclePoint Guide for Educators*: a comprehensive, detailed reference book for educators covering bullying, empowerment techniques, and the program mechanisms
- *CirclePoint Guide for Parents*: this guide

Target Support System: a network of adults in a school (ideally all educators, including support staff) who, using a predefined process, are able to help bullied students to heal, learn ways of reacting to aggression to render it ineffective, and to get the bullying to stop. Students will be able to engage a trusted adult of their own choosing in confidence and will have a measure of control over the process. A target will not be required to divulge the name of the aggressor(s) unless the target wants the adult to directly intervene. The adult and student will develop a plan to get the

bullying to stop, which can include the adult serving as a coach while the student tries empowerment techniques or having the adult intervene and have administration start the Constructive Discipline Process.

Constructive Discipline Process: an approach that eliminates initial punishment for bullying behavior to provide an aggressor with an opportunity to change his or her behavior and results in a “constructive” consequence if the bullying continues. This process eliminates the common denials and finger-pointing by the aggressor and allows for an objective and constructive engagement of the parents of the students involved. In addition, research shows that initial punitive consequences are ineffective and often counterproductive since many aggressors do not see their behavior as harmful and may retaliate against the target if punished. In addition, the punishment may even enhance the social status of the aggressor. In the Constructive Discipline Process, the aggressor has a conversation with a school administrator (e.g., the principal) about the behavior and the harm it is causing. The administrator will seek to understand if there is a driver of the aggression beyond general opportunistic aggression (for status improvement). The aggressor will be asked to stop and will be told of a consequence if the behavior continues. The consequence will be constructive in that it will remove the aggressor from the same environment as the target where the aggression has typically occurred. For example, if the aggression happens in the cafeteria, the aggressor will have to eat in another location for a defined period of time. If the aggression occurs on the playground, the aggressor will have recess in an alternative area for a period of time. If the aggression occurs on the bus, the aggressor will need to find an alternative means of transportation for a period of time. Fully informed that the aggression is causing harm, the aggressor will be given an opportunity to demonstrate that he or she can stop the aggression by resuming normal activity. If the aggression continues, however, the consequence will be applied and any required district reporting of bullying will occur. Note: bullying activity that involves physical harm, sexual harassment, or other behaviors may require specific and immediate disciplinary procedures and consequences mandated by district guidelines and/or state regulations.

Chain of Custody Awareness: the raising of awareness among all the adults—teachers, specialists, cafeteria monitors, playground monitors, etc.—who monitor the students involved in a bullying problem to ensure that aggressive behavior does not continue and to stop it, document it, and report it to administration if it does. Administration will notify the adults in the chain of custody following the initial conversation with the aggressor. The aggressor will be informed that all the adults in the chain of custody have been notified of the problem and will be observing the aggressor to ensure the behavior has stopped.

Classroom Strategies: proactive and reactive actions that teachers can take to prevent, reduce, and resolve bullying and influence peer group norms to make bullying less accepted.

Parent Strategies: proactive and reactive actions parents can take to prevent their children from being bullied and help resolve a bullying problem should it arise.

Student Survey: anonymous questionnaire that will be administered to all students. The purpose of the questionnaire is to determine the estimated number of students in the school who are affected by bullying behavior. The questionnaire cannot be used to identify whether any individual is being bullied or using aggressive behavior.

2.2 How the Program Works

A month before the program starts, educators will undertake a self-guided study (**Education**) on bullying, intervention techniques, classroom strategies, the Constructive Discipline Process, and how to provide targets with support. The students will be surveyed anonymously (**Questionnaire**) about bullying to help administration gather information on the scope of the bullying problem in the school. When the program starts, students and parents will be provided with materials (**Education**) to learn about bullying. Students will be encouraged to seek confidential adult help (the **Target Support System**) from any adult they trust either to provide guidance while the target tries to stop the bullying or to have the adult stop the bullying. Aggressors who are identified by targets, bystanders, or adults will not be punished initially for their behavior; administration will talk to these students (and their parents) about their behavior, inform them of the harm the behavior is causing, let the aggressor know the consequence if the aggression continues, and give the aggressors an opportunity to change their behavior (**Constructive Discipline Process**). Adults will monitor the students involved in a bullying problem (**Chain of Custody Awareness**) and will stop and report any further aggression. Further aggression will initially result in a constructive consequence for the aggressor, as well as district notification (if applicable). Teachers will use a number of strategies (**Classroom Strategies**) to address bullying and to try to influence students to make bullying behaviors less acceptable to the peer group. Parents will be encouraged to proactively talk to their children about bullying and will receive guidance on handling a bullying problem should it arise (**Parent Strategies**).

Resource Requirements: The *CirclePoint* program was designed to have minimal impact on teaching time and educator responsibilities. The education component for all community members is self-directed. One approximately 20-minute anonymous survey of the students will be conducted. A program kickoff

announcement lasting 5–10 minutes, to explain the program and to answer questions, will be made in each classroom. Target Support System conversations between educators and targets are expected to last approximately 15 minutes. No other changes to the discipline process are expected.

3. Proactive Parent Strategies

Parents should not wait until their child is involved in a bullying problem to take action. There are many things a parent can do to help a child to better deal with aggression that he or she will inevitably face so as to avoid becoming involved in a bullying problem, to increase the chances that their child will reach out for help if needed, and to make better decisions when witnessing or asked to participate in bullying.

If you haven't already done so, please read the section *Bullying Overview*, above, before proceeding, as the high-level understanding of bullying that section provides will provide context for the strategies.

Action 1: Educate yourself. Understanding bullying is essential to delivering effective solutions. Education will depersonalize and demystify the topic and help reduce an unnecessary emotional reaction should a problem arise. This guide is a good start, but the student comic (for grades K–6) or student guide (for grades 7 and up) will provide more detailed information. The program guide for educators has the most comprehensive information; ask your school if you can borrow a copy. If your child has a student guide, read it to understand the perspective your child will get from the guide.

Action 2: Talk to your child. Talk with your child about aggression before it starts if your child is in the lower grades, or about what aggression your child may be witnessing or be experiencing himself or herself for students in the upper grades. A very important part of this conversation is to listen to what your child has to say about it; let your child know that you are interested in knowing what is happening and how it makes him or her feel. Do not render judgment or offer advice unless asked. If the aggression makes the child upset, empathize. The goal is to ensure that your child feels comfortable approaching you if he or she has a problem knowing that you will listen, not judge, be sympathetic, and not take unwanted action.

Action 3: Let your child know you are available to help. Let your child know that you will provide help the right way should a bullying problem arise. The student comic and guide both contain a section describing the wrong way and right way to help a bullied student. Read the section together if possible and let your child know that if a problem starts, you will not do the wrong things but will work with him or her on a plan and take action together. Let your child know that you will not call the school or do anything that your child believes would make the problem worse

without talking about it first. Also explain that even though bullying may happen in front of adults, the adults may not recognize it as bullying; adults staying silent does not mean that adults condone or approve of bullying (which is what children start to believe when adults take no action). Let your child know that sometimes adults need to be made aware that bullying is happening.

Action 4: Become familiar with the Target Support System discussion framework. The Target Support System, a program mechanism used by teachers and school staff, can also be used at home. The system uses a five-step discussion framework to guide an adult who is helping a bullied student. Knowing this framework before a bullying problem starts can allow for a more effective conversation should your child ask you for help. The five steps are Listen, Empathize and Heal, Educate, Empower, and Take Action.

- Listen: Let your child explain the problem and how he or she feels. Do not jump in (yet) to offer solutions; let your child talk.
- Empathize and Heal: Let your child know that you understand how awful being bullied can be. Let your child know that he or she is not flawed and that the aggressor(s) is being unkind. Let your child know that you will support him or her to resolve the problem.
- Educate: Talk about bullying dynamics: sit with your student and read the bullying comic or student guide to help demystify and depersonalize the bullying.
- Empower: Review empowerment techniques specific to the child's bullying problem that can help render the aggression ineffective, and then discuss options on how to get the bullying to stop. The empowerment techniques are explained in detail in Part 3 of the *CirclePoint Guide for Educators* and are also described in the student guides. Ask your child what he or she would like to do and would like you to do. Your child may want to try to get the bullying to stop on his or her own using empowerment techniques. Your child may want to let the adults in the school handle the problem, and your child will keep you informed. Or your child may want you to contact the school to have administration engage the aggressor in the Constructive Discipline Process or to have your child's chain of custody made aware of the aggression and to stop it if it occurs (without necessarily engaging the Constructive Discipline Process).

Action 5: Encourage indirect bystander intervention. Bystanders arguably have the most power to stop bullying, as they explicitly or implicitly reward aggressors with higher status. The barriers to bystanders taking action (described above) are significant. A child should never be told to directly intervene in a bullying problem that he or she witnesses due to the personal risks (becoming a target, lower social status); however, a parent talking favorably about not participating in the bullying

or talking about indirect intervention (which carry minimal risk to the bystander) can help influence a child to take action. At the very least, a parent may be able to influence a child to take a more positive role in a bullying situation—e.g., instead of being a reinforcer, the child may be a neutral observer instead, or instead of being an unwitting participant in a relational aggression campaign, the child may be an objector instead—which can help change peer group norms. Parents should speak positively of not participating in general terms and can discuss and encourage indirect intervention techniques. Due to the social implications and risk, direct intervention is a personal choice that only a student can make based on his or her own understanding of peer group norms, personal risk, and own social status.

Action 6: Now and then, check in. Periodically ask how things are going; ask if kids are being nice or if anyone is being mean to your child or another child in the peer group. Avoid using the word “bullying” in these conversations; remember, sometimes students do not recognize aggressive behavior as bullying, and bullied students can feel ashamed and are reluctant to admit to being bullied. “Check ins” are especially important if your child is starting a new school or camp. Remember, listen to your child.

Action 7: Be aware of changes in mood. A student who starts to be bullied may exhibit changes in behavior, such as becoming withdrawn, refusing to go to school, becoming easily upset, etc. When this occurs, check in and add a few specific questions. Ask how things are going with friends, and ask what activities are happening on the playground (a common place for bullying to occur) and who he or she sits with at lunch (another common bullying location). At the end of the conversation, give a gentle reminder that you are there to help if needed.

Action 8: Proactively raise Chain of Custody Awareness. If you have a child who has been bullied in the past and for whatever reason tends to be targeted for aggression (e.g., your child has a disability or other significant unique characteristic) and is starting a new camp, after-school program, or other activity involving peer groups, inform adults who monitor your child that he or she has been a target in the past and ask them to be more sensitive to aggression directed at your child. Note: one of the Teacher Strategies in the *CirclePoint* program is monitoring of special needs students and those who are frequently targeted; the action described here should not be necessary if the school has implemented the program.

Action 9: Take additional actions if you are parents of a daughter. Relational aggression is very complex and challenging. It is hard to detect, and often the damage is done before the target is even aware that she is being bullied. The best solution to relational aggression is to prevent it from starting; once started it can be hard to stop and the damage to friendships can be permanent or take a long time to repair.

Parents with daughters should do the following:

- Educate yourself deeply on this topic: an excellent book is *Odd Girl Out: The Hidden Culture of Aggression in Girls* by Rachel Simmons, a groundbreaking work that illuminates this phenomenon.
- Review the relational aggression prevention techniques in either one of the student guides or in the program guide so you are familiar with them.
- Encourage two key relational aggression prevention techniques:
 - › Encourage your daughter to directly address conflict, and even practice the empowerment techniques related to directly addressing conflict if possible.
 - › Encourage your daughter to create a circle of friends; having more than just one best friend will reduce the risk of your child suddenly finding herself friendless as a result of relational aggression and creates a support group of friends for when a friendship does change.
- Understand not only the actions girls should take in the event they do become targets but also how to provide support if necessary.

4. Helping a Target or an Aggressor

Whether your child is involved in bullying as the aggressor, an assistant, a reinforcer, or a target, it is important to keep in mind that aggression is normal and the problem is one of behavior and not about the character of a child. A student who uses aggression that causes harm is not a bad person; it is the behavior that is wrong and must stop. Sometimes aggressors are aware that they are causing harm and get pleasure from it, but other times aggressors do not view their own behavior as harmful. Resolving a bullying problem is both a behavioral change process (to get the bullying to stop) as well as a target support process (to help repair the damage from the bullying and to help the target render future aggression ineffective).

Please note that every bullying situation is unique, from the students involved, the aggression involved, the levels of support from the parents, and how the students will react to the change process. The actions described below are suggested ways of responding but may not be inclusive for all situations. Parents should use their best judgment and take action they believe is appropriate for their child's unique situation.

4.1 If Your Child Asks for Help

A child asking for help is a wonderful first step; he or she has overcome a huge hurdle in being able to admit to this type of problem and has now come to someone whom he or she believes will help get the bullying to stop. Children, however, will not always

ask for help in the most direct fashion. Be aware that they may ask for help with a bullying problem in one of the following ways:

- Admission: “The kids at school are bullying/being mean to me.”
- Roundabout: “There’s this one guy who is giving me trouble.” In this approach, your child may even try to say it like a joke as a hedge against not being taken seriously.
- Tangential: “Mom, I wasn’t invited to Becky’s party” or “I don’t hang out with Becky anymore.”
- Without Words: Child just stands there sad, wanting parent to ask questions.
- Characteristic-focused: “I hate my [characteristic, e.g., nose]/I wish I were different.”
- Direct: “I have a problem. Can you help me?” or “Can I talk to you about something?”
- Indirect: Your child comes to you with the student comic or guide and wants you to sit with him or her to read the section *Training Your Adult Helper*.

Action 1: Take all requests seriously. If your child comes to you and asks for help, listen with your full attention. Your child may minimize the problem to disguise the pain he or she is feeling. Ask questions, and let your child talk. Assure him or her that you will help. Note: your child may come to you with a problem that you don’t believe is serious. Even if you don’t believe the problem is significant, take action; asking for help can be a very hard step for a child to take. If your child is not taken seriously the first time, he or she may not come to you for help again. In addition, a child’s perspective on a problem can be quite different from an adult’s; give your child the benefit of the doubt. Please note that some children do confuse “bullying” (resulting in emotional harm) with “bothering” (resulting in annoyance); even if that is the case, take the request seriously and act. Not only will your child feel good that you are taking action, but you can also use the resolution process as an opportunity to help educate your child on the difference.

Action 2: Follow the target support process. The five-step discussion process is described above (Parent Strategy Proactive Action 4). Please note that completing all five steps in the process is not necessary to provide benefit. Sometimes a child is satisfied just knowing a parent is aware of the problem; the child may not be looking for adult help. If the child is resistant to the education, empowerment, and/or action plan steps, don’t force it. Those steps may not be necessary at that time. Let your child know that if he or she would like further help, you are there and ready.

Action 3: Determine if bullying is conflict driven. Some bullying, particularly relational aggression, arises from conflict between the aggressor and target.

Sometimes the best way to resolve such bullying is to address the underlying conflict. Talk to your child to see if an unresolved conflict may be involved, and then review the conflict resolution techniques found in the student comic and guide. Trying to resolve the conflict is an option to try to get the bullying to stop.

Action 4a: Provide moral support if empowerment is chosen. If your child chooses to try to stop the bullying on his or her own using empowerment techniques, including those related to resolving conflict, provide support by checking in daily to see how things are going. Provide empathy if things are not going well, and celebrate successes. Let your child know that you are rooting for his or her success, but that if he or she is not successful, you are there ready to help if desired.

Action 4b: Contact the school if adult intervention is chosen. If your child wants you to get the bullying to stop, talk about whether adult awareness should be tried or if the aggressor should be engaged by administration. Explain each process to your child.

- In both options, the administration is going to first talk to your child to understand the nature of the bullying.
- For the awareness option, the administration will notify all the adults the child is with during the day so that they can keep an eye out for instances of aggression. When the adults spot the aggression, they will stop it and the aggressor will be called before an administrator for a discussion.
- For the engagement option, the aggressor will be immediately engaged. Once the aggressor is engaged, the principal will inform him or her that the behavior is inappropriate, harmful, and must stop or there will be a consequence. Then the aggressor will be given an opportunity to stop the behavior. If the behavior does not stop, the aggressor will suffer a consequence that will remove him or her from contact with the target for a period of time.

Point out that adult awareness can be tried first, and if it doesn't work, the aggressor can be directly told to stop. Once you have worked out a plan with your child, notify the school of the problem. Provide details on who is involved, where the aggression occurs, and what type of aggression is involved. If cyberbullying is involved, be prepared to show evidence if requested. Ensure the chain of custody is notified in all cases. Please note that some forms of aggression used in bullying may violate other disciplinary policies, e.g., policy on sexual harassment. If the aggression does violate such a policy, the administration may be required to immediately engage the aggressor and apply punitive consequences mandated by such policies. Also, when initially contacting the school for support, do not use the term "bullying"; this term is reserved for aggression that continues after the aggressor has been engaged by

administration and informed that his or her behavior is harmful. Rather, indicate that you are asking for help in getting harmful aggression to stop.

Action 5: Ensure no punishment. The constructive consequence advocated by this program is expressly intended to not penalize the target; the target should be able to continue his or her regular routine with no changes (except for the removal of the aggressor from the environment). Unless the target has retaliated in some way against the aggressor, the parents of the target should ensure that the bullying resolution process does not penalize the target. For example, the target should not be made to move desks if the bullying occurs in a classroom. The target should not be made to eat lunch with a teacher or stand close to a playground monitor. In cases of cyberbullying, the target should not be restricted in his or her use of social media technologies. However, note that if the target has retaliated against the aggressor, there may be a consequence for the target.

4.2 If the School Informs You That Your Child Is a Target

Action 1: Get the details. Find out how the school became aware of the problem, what type of aggression is being used and where it is happening, and what the school is doing or planning on doing to resolve the bullying problem. Ensure the chain of custody is notified. Ask if your child engaged an adult in the Target Support System.

Action 2: Talk to your child. Find out your child's perspective on the problem. If applicable, talk about the adult in the Target Support System your child has chosen to help him or her. Let your child know that you will provide whatever additional support he or she needs; ask what you can do to help.

Action 3: Get updates. The school should contact you when the investigation process is complete. However, certain confidentiality rules may prevent the school from sharing what the outcome of the conversation with the aggressor is. Stay engaged with the school to ensure the problem has been resolved, and check in frequently with your child to ensure the aggression has stopped.

Action 4: Ensure no punishment. See Action 4 in 4.1 "Your Child Asks for Help."

4.3 If You Suspect Your Child Is Being Bullied

Action 1: Ask your child. If you suspect that your child is being harmed by aggression, have a check-in conversation with your child to see if he or she offers any information. Ask if your child is having trouble with any friends or classmates. Ask if anyone is being unkind. Ask if anyone is excluding him or her at times or has made up a rumor. Ask if there is anyone your child doesn't like at school; the question

can even be phrased using humor, such as “If you could put someone at school on a spaceship and send it to another galaxy, who would you send?” Initially focus the questions on how the suspected aggressor(s) may be acting toward your child and less on how the aggression is making your child feel; children may find it easier to talk about the actions that are occurring rather than how those actions make them feel.

Action 2: Share the information that makes you concerned. Describe the behavior (“You seem to be down lately”) or social changes (“you haven’t been hanging out with Becky lately”) you’ve observed to see if your child agrees. Avoid using the word “bullying” in the conversation; a child who is being bullied may not realize it or may feel responsible for the bullying. If you cannot determine if bullying is occurring, or if your child does not want to talk, let him or her know that you are available to help if there is a problem, and check in again later.

4.4 If the School Notifies You That Your Child Is Using Aggressive Behavior

If the school contacts you regarding aggressive behavior from your child, the school may request that you come in for a meeting. The Constructive Discipline Process involves a meeting with your child, a discussion about the aggressive behavior, and a consequence that will be applied if the behavior does not stop. Your child will be asked to acknowledge the behavior and consequence in writing to ensure that he or she fully understands that a continuance of the behavior will be construed as bullying and will be met with the consequence. If you are not able to attend the discussion between your child and administration, administration will follow up with a call. In addition, your child will be provided with a copy of the behavior and consequence acknowledgment that you can review. Please note that some school districts mandate the reporting of bullying incidents; the continuance of aggression not only will result in a constructive consequence but also may result in a district bullying report.

Action 1: Recognize that the process is a behavioral change exercise. A child who is using aggressive behavior that harms another child is not a “bully” and is not a “bad” child. Rather, the child is using normal and natural behavior that is causing harm and must stop. Remember, the need to use aggression to gain status or for other reasons can override a child’s knowledge that the behavior is wrong and harmful and that the behavior carries a consequence. And your child may not even be intending harm. However, since the behavior is causing harm, it has to stop. If the behavior stops, then the process is closed.

Action 2: Get the details and pledge partnership and cooperation. Find out from administration the nature of the aggression, where it happens, and how frequently. Ask what you can do to help. Ask if the chain of custody has been notified and if your child

has been informed of this (a child who knows that the adults are aware of the aggression will be less likely to repeat the aggression in their presence; chain of custody awareness helps your child). Ask if any others are involved as assistants (the school will not be able to say who is involved for privacy reasons, but knowing if others are involved will allow for a more informed conversation with your child about the situation). Convey your intent and commitment to help solve the problem, and indicate that this commitment can be shared with the parents of the target.

Action 3: Talk to your child. Start off on a positive note, expressing that the conversation is about behavior, not about the child. Let your child explain his or her actions. Express your understanding that aggression is normal and natural. Then express that the behavior is inappropriate and must stop. Be prepared to hear denials and justifications or a minimizing of the behavior due to shame, fear of a consequence, or simply a different perspective. Make it clear, however, that no matter what drives the behavior or how inconsequential your child views the behavior, the behavior is harmful and must stop. Reiterate the consequence that will be applied by the school if the behavior does not stop, and that a district bullying report may be filed as well. Remind your child that the adults he or she is with during the day have been made aware of the problem and will be monitoring for any future aggression.

Action 4: Do not punish. When talking to your child, let him or her know that there will be no punishment for the behavior (as mentioned above, punishment is generally ineffective and can be counterproductive at this stage). Let your child know that you won't apply consequences if the aggressive behavior stops, but that you will support administration in applying the predetermined consequence if the behavior continues.

Action 5: Limit/monitor online channels. Social media channels allow bullying to occur easily, secretly, and effectively. If your child is directing aggression against another student, and social media channels are involved, consider limiting your child's use of social media for a period of time to ensure the aggression does not continue. If your child has bullied using a device such as a phone (e.g., texting) but requires having the device (e.g., for emergency purposes), you may want to monitor communications made by your child. Let your child know you will be monitoring online channels and communications for a period of time.

Action 6: Support administration's consequences. If the aggression continues, you will be notified by administration of the report(s) received from adult(s) in the chain of custody and that, unfortunately, a consequence will have to be applied. Let the administration know that you understand the need for the consequence and support it.

Action 7: If you feel compelled to apply consequences, make them parallel and constructive. Constructive consequences are those that remove the aggressor

from the same environment (physical and virtual) as the target and also prevent the aggressor from receiving a benefit (i.e., status enhancement) from the aggression. It is strongly recommended that any consequences that parents apply for continued aggression should be constructive and aligned with the consequence defined by the school. Constructive consequences can include the temporary loss of online privileges if cyberbullying is involved, keeping the child from participating in after-school or extracurricular activities in which the target also participates, and temporarily not allowing association with others, especially friends, who are involved in the bullying. These temporary measures serve to prevent aggression from occurring, send a strong message that parents disapprove of the behavior, and show the child that the consequence is not arbitrary but is a direct result of his or her own behavior.

4.5 Engaging the Parent(s) of the Other Student(s)

As a rule, parents should allow school administration to manage the bullying resolution process. Parent cooperation is essential for successful resolution, and the emotions of all parties, as well as differing perspectives on who bears responsibility for the aggressive behavior and resulting harm, can unnecessarily complicate and hinder the process. Ideally, parents should communicate their intentions to help resolve the problem to the other family through administration.

Some parents, however, may feel strongly about contacting the parents of the other student(s) involved. Before you contact another parent, consider the following:

- The parents of the target are likely to be very upset at the harm their child has suffered. The only message that those parents are generally interested in hearing is an acknowledgment of the harm, an apology on behalf of the aggressor(s), and a commitment to work to help ensure a behavioral change on the part of the aggressor so that the bullying stops.
- The parents of the aggressor may be very upset about their child's involvement and may be looking for an excuse or justification for their child's behavior, i.e., that the target provoked or otherwise is somehow responsible for their child's aggression, or may back up their child's assertion of innocence or that no harm was intended. Parents of the aggressor may agree with their child that the behavior is insignificant and that the target is making a big deal out of nothing.

If you already have a personal relationship with the parents of the other student(s) and are ready to acknowledge your child's role and work together in partnership to resolve the problem, then make the call. There may be moments of awkwardness, but two sets of parents working together can not only be extremely effective in solving the problem but can be a great example to their children. And nothing is more comforting to the parents of a bullied child than a commitment from the parents of the aggressor to help

get the bullying to stop. If you are unsure of the reception that you will receive from the other parents, then don't make the call; communicate this commitment to resolving the problem through administration. A call to the other parents that does not go well may make successful resolution of the problem more difficult.

For Further Information

If you have any questions about the *CirclePoint* program or would like to discuss a bullying problem, please contact your school. The school should have a program committee that can answer questions and provide confidential advice. The school may also have available a copy of the *CirclePoint Guide for Educators* to loan.