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Background

The CirclePoint™ Bullying Prevention Program is a new, comprehensive program developed in conjunction with educators in the Boston Public School District in Massachusetts. The program enables all members of a school community—administrators, teachers, support staff, parents, and students at all grade levels—to make a positive difference in preventing, reducing, and resolving bullying problems by providing role-appropriate actions, strategies, and/or processes that work at both the individual and peer group levels.

The program contains a mechanism, the Target Support System, that is designed to help educators without a formal counseling background provide support to students who have been bullied. This mechanism includes a conversation framework to enable the educator to help the bullied student understand bullying to demystify and depersonalize it, determine how to resolve the bullying problem, and reverse the harm caused by the bullying. The framework keeps the conversation focused, ensures the critical points are covered, and minimizes the amount of time required for the discussion. The mechanism provides guidance to educators and caregivers on how to resolve bullying problems constructively and recommends terms and conversation points to minimize emotional responses.

The use of CirclePoint student guides in schools where the program has not been formally implemented has created the need to provide educators with guidance on counseling bullied students and working with their caregivers to resolve the bullying problems. Discussions about bullying in a supportive school environment frequently result in bullying target self-identification. Educators who are responsible for these students may not know how to help them. Other adults outside of school settings, such as pediatric physicians and adults who lead extracurricular activities, may also become aware of students who are bullied in school and can benefit from having a quick-counseling framework to provide these students with support.

Purpose

The CirclePoint Quick-Counseling Guide is intended to help an adult to provide effective counseling to a bullied child and/or caregiver in a very brief period of time. This guide provides the adult with, at a basic level, the knowledge the adult needs to understand bullying problems, to discuss it with the student and/or his or her caregiver, and to recommend next steps for resolving the bullying problem. The guide outlines the general points that should be covered in the conversation and provides examples of what the adult can say for each point. The guide contains conversation outlines for targets of both dominance and relational aggression.

Bullying Basics

While the conversation between the adult and child and/or the child's caregiver should only take a few minutes, it is critical that the adult providing the counseling have a basic understanding of bullying.

Key Terms

- Bullying: repeated aggressive behavior that results in emotional harm.
 - Behaviors can be verbal, physical, or exclusionary.
 - Aggression can be direct/overt (person-to-person) or indirect/covert.
 - Channels (means of delivering aggression) can be through conversation, direct physical contact, writing (e.g., notes, graffiti), and online technologies (cyberbullying).
- Target: a person at whom bullying behaviors are directed. In this context, the target is negatively affected by the bullying.
- Aggressor: the person who does the bullying. Note that the term “bully” should be avoided as it is dehumanizing and is a label. The term “bully” should never be used as a descriptor of the aggressor when talking to the aggressor’s caregiver.
- Bullying types:
 - Dominance aggression—generally direct behaviors that are used to give the aggressor a feeling of superiority (“dominance”) over the target. Forms of dominance aggression include overt physical and verbal actions such as hitting, pushing, shoving, name calling, and mocking. Aggressors who engage in physical forms of dominance aggression usually do not intend to do serious physical harm to their targets; physical aggressions are used to demonstrate a lack of fear of the target and/or to instill fear in the target.
 - Relational aggression is used to harm the relationships (friendships) and feelings of acceptance between individuals and socially isolate the targets. Relational aggression behaviors are generally covert actions such as gossiping, starting rumors, forming a group for the purpose of excluding a person, whispering while pointing, starting a secret petition about a person, pretending to be friendly but then talking about the person behind his or her back, sending electronic communications that appear to be from a different person than the sender, and other indirect, nonconfrontational behaviors. It can start between friends as a result of conflict avoidance or can be between individuals who aren’t friends.

Bullying Drivers

Bullying is commonly thought of as mean and cruel behavior intended to harm the target. However, this is generally not the case. The majority of bullying occurs as a means for the aggressor to maintain or boost his or her social status or to eliminate a social threat. Starting around 3rd grade for boys and as early as kindergarten for some girls, social status among peers becomes the highest priority for students. So important is status to elementary, middle, and high school students that the majority of them will engage in actions that break rules if the actions result in increased status, and approximately one-third will place gaining status as a priority over friendships.

The need to attain and maintain status is the primary driver of the aggressive behavior that results in bullying. The vast majority of bullying through dominance aggression (80–85%) occurs in front of peers (bystanders) as peers determine social status. Aggressors bully to entertain peers and

demonstrate superiority over their targets, which can increase social status. Even those who do not like the bullying that they witness generally have an increased level of respect for the aggressor.

Bullying through relational aggression, which is mostly done by girls, is generally done for two reasons: 1. to eliminate a social threat, and 2. as a means of retaliating for an offense without actually confronting the offender. In the first case, a girl who stands out due to a special skill, admirable characteristic, achievement, or material possession may be bullied by an aggressor who fears that what makes the target stand out may harm the aggressor's own social standing among peers or may provide the target with a social advantage. In the second case, a girl who is offended by another but who wishes to avoid confrontation may use relational aggression as a means of getting justice.

Whether the person at whom the aggression is directed is merely bothered by the bullying behavior or truly harmed by the behavior is incidental to the social benefits and may not even be perceptible to the aggressor. The lack of harmful intent is one of the reasons why punitive consequences (i.e., punishment) for bullying are ineffective, if not counterproductive.

Bullying Harm

The harm from bullying can occur on two levels: personal and social. On a personal level, bullying using dominance aggression can make a target feel weak or flawed. A target may feel powerless to stop an aggressor who may be physically larger, and the target may fear a risk of bodily harm. Bullying that involves mocking of a characteristic of the target may make the target feel flawed. On a social level, bullying can make a target feel like he or she does not belong to the peer group. Bullying using a personal characteristic makes a target feel as though he or she does not fit in with peers due to this "flaw" that the target has. And bullying using relational aggression leaves a target socially isolated and alone. Some students who have been bullied for a long period of time (chronically bullied) may believe that they deserve the treatment that they are receiving. And those who bully such targets may not even perceive their treatment of the target as bullying; the treatment the target receives is simply an accepted social norm of the peer group.

Why Targets Do Not Tell Adults

Although targets generally believe that adults have the power to get bullying to stop, they usually do not tell adults about the bullying based on a number of valid fears. It is important to understand these fears, as follow-up actions by adults or the caregiver that validate them should be avoided. Targets do not tell adults about a bullying problem because they fear that:

1. Adults will punish the aggressor. Punishment can validate to the aggressor the effectiveness of the bullying; increase the social status of the aggressor, resulting in positive reinforcement of the bullying; and can also result in increased bullying due to retribution;
2. They will be further ostracized by peers, as telling on a peer (reporting the aggressor) who is then punished carries a negative social cost;

3. Instead of handling a bullying problem secretly and quietly, adults will handle the problem in a way that makes others, such as peers, aware of it;
4. In telling an adult, they will lose control over how the problem is handled and that adults will take unwanted action;
5. Adults will take unwanted action even if the intent in telling an adult about the bullying problem is just to talk about it and get advice;
6. Adults who take action based solely on targets reporting the bullying can lead to a he-said-she-said impasse with an aggressor who denies the behavior, resulting in adults not knowing who is telling the truth and leaving them unable to take action;
7. Making one adult aware of the problem simply means that the bullying will occur at times and in places where that adult is not present;
8. Adults will be dismissive of the problem or will give ineffective responses such as telling students just to ignore the aggressor;
9. Adults will be judgmental and think of the target as weak for being bullied or for not standing up to the aggressor.

A final barrier to target self-identification is that admitting to being bullied can be embarrassing, particularly if the target has accepted a characteristic used in the bullying as a flaw, and feels that he or she cannot belong to the peer group due to the flaw.

Screening Recommendations

Adults who proactively try to identify bullying targets should focus on asking how others are behaving toward the child and how the child feels about those behaviors using age-appropriate language. Questions should include asking the child if he or she likes school or whatever the environment is, e.g., camp, sports, after-school, where bullying is possible or suspected. For a younger child, ask if he or she has friends and if any kids are not being nice or being mean. For an older child, ask if he or she feels comfortable around peers or if peers are excluding or making the child uncomfortable in social settings. Ask if kids tease or mock the child and if so, what they tease or mock the child about. Note that children with body sizes (both height and weight) that deviate from the norm and children with disabilities are frequently targets of bullying behavior. Ask the child if he or she is afraid of anyone hurting him or her. For girls especially, ask if she has recently lost friends or feels alone. Ask the child if he or she has tried getting the person(s) using the aggression to stop. If so, find out what the child has done and if adults tried to intervene.

Please note that using the terms “bully” and “bullying” should be avoided in the screening as some bullied children do not recognize they are being bullied. Some children even perceive the bullying treatment as their own fault. Further, the child may not fully understand what the term “bullying” means.

Quick-Counseling Framework

The quick-counseling framework consists of recommended conversation points for a discussion with the target and with the target's caregiver based on the type of bullying that the target is experiencing. The points are listed below along with sample dialogue to use with targets of dominance aggression and relational aggression to reinforce the differences between the two types of bullying.

Target Conversation Points

1. **Listen:** let the child tell you all the details of the bullying problem. Ask questions when necessary to draw out information about what the child is experiencing.
2. **Empathize:** convey that you sincerely understand how awful bullying can be. A tremendous help can be to share your own bullying experience (if applicable).
3. **Educate:** help the child to understand why kids bully. Help them to understand that the driver of most bullying is the attainment of social status on the part of the aggressor. For cases of relational aggression, find out if something good has happened in the target's life, e.g., she is excelling in academics or on the sports field, has received a special present, or in some other way has recently had a change in social status or position. If so, use the information to explain bullying to eliminate a social threat. Also mention that relational aggression can start from an unresolved conflict.
4. **Empower:** start by asking what the child has done to get the bullying to stop. This can help focus the discussion on more effective approaches by eliminating ones that have not worked. Explain how kids often "react" to aggression in a way that makes it satisfying to the aggressor and effective in providing a social boost. Explain, however, that kids can "respond" to aggression in a way that renders it ineffective. Natural reactions to dominance aggression include getting upset, getting frightened, or showing fear. Responding to dominance aggression means acting in a way that fails to provide the aggressor with a status boost, for example, by responding with humor. Natural reactions to relational aggression include pretending it is not happening and hoping that it will stop. Responding to relational aggression means taking steps to identify the aggressor and the reason for the aggression, engaging participants to provide support, and, when driven by conflict, resolving the conflict. Note that the CirclePoint program has guides available for students that describe ways to respond to aggression to render it ineffective. See *Recommended Resources* below.
5. **Encourage Action:** explain that the two main ways to get the bullying to stop are to: 1. respond to the aggression in a way that renders it ineffective; 2. engage an adult to get the bullying to stop. The child can choose to first try responses that may render the aggression ineffective. This approach is preferential as its success can allow the target not only to stop the bullying but also to regain lost social status. If different responses fail to stop the bullying, then the child can engage an adult. Otherwise, the child can simply choose to immediately engage an adult.

Examples of Dialogue

For Targets of Bullying Involving Dominance Aggression

Step	Example
Listen	“What does the aggressor do to you?” “Where does it happen?” “When does it happen?”
Empathize	“It must be a terrible feeling to have kids treat you this way.” “It’s no fun when someone makes you fear for your safety.” “Being treated this way makes it no fun to go to school [or other location].” “I, too, had a hard time when I was your age. It was awful. I know exactly how you feel.”
Educate	“You should know that what is happening is not your fault. Do you know why kids act mean toward others? They do it to make themselves more popular and get respect from peers by making them laugh or impressing them. Aggressors generally do not mean to cause harm and do not intend physical harm. What makes aggressors choose a target is how the target reacts to the aggression. A certain reaction from the target provides the aggressor with a popularity boost.”
Empower	<p>“Have you tried getting the person who is treating you this way to stop? What have you done? If you engaged an adult, what did the adult do?”</p> <p>“How you react to the aggressor’s behavior is what makes it effective. And this is not to blame you for the aggressor’s behavior. It is natural and normal, for example, to feel afraid when a big and intimidating person approaches you in a threatening way or to become angry at someone for insulting you. However, one way to get repeated aggression toward you to stop is to respond differently. For example, if someone is using intimidation, cowering is going to make the aggression successful; kids watching will see that you fear the aggressor and will give the aggressor respect. But if you don’t cower, if you stand fast and tall and look the aggressor in the eye, if you don’t show fear, the aggressor looks silly. Same with insults: if you get angry and upset, kids may find that entertaining. The aggressor may look clever and funny. But if you respond in an unexpected way, like agreeing, joining in and laughing along with the aggressor, or shrugging it off and showing that you are not affected, the aggressor won’t look clever or funny.”</p>
Encourage Action	<p>“Aggressive behavior has to be met with a response, one that is different from how you have been reacting to it. Think about how you react when the aggressor makes you feel bad. Oftentimes you can change the way you react to make the bullying ineffective. Don’t show fear or don’t get upset. Join with the others in their laughter. Respond differently and effectively.”</p> <p>“Another option is to engage an adult. You can talk to your school principal or a teacher and ask that person to be on the lookout for the aggressive behavior. Ask the adult to step in and stop it if he or she sees it but not to make a huge deal out of it.”</p> <p>“Of course, the best approach is to try responding differently first, and if that fails, to then engage an adult.”</p>

For Targets of Bullying Involving Relational Aggression

Step	Example
Listen	“When did this all start? Was it sudden or gradual? Have you lost all or just some of your friends?”
Empathize	“It must be a terrible feeling for this to have happened, to be disconnected from your social group.” “You must really feel lonely.”
Educate	<p>“The aggression is happening for one of two reasons; however, before we try to narrow it down, has anything good been happening in your life lately? Are you standing out among your peers in some way or for some reason?”</p> <p>“The first reason why this type of aggression occurs is that the aggressor sees you as a threat to her status or popularity. In other words, she may be jealous of the attention that you are getting for your participation in a sport or activity, good grades, new car, etc. Or there may be something personal about you that stands out. So the aggressor is trying to reduce your social status as she feels threatened. The other reason why this type of aggression occurs is that the aggressor may be angry at you for something you did or for something she perceives that you did and is doing this in retribution.”</p>
Empower	<p>“What have you done to try to stop the behavior? Have you talked with anyone who has participated? Do you know who the aggressor is?”</p> <p>“If you are being mistreated because the aggressor sees you as a social threat, you can try talking to the aggressor and reaffirming your friendship. You can also ask a participant for help by maintaining her friendship with you and getting other participants to remain friends with you as well. The aggressor needs others to rally to her side to make the aggression successful. Only by turning others against you will she succeed. So if you can talk to a participant and get her support and perhaps even have her talk to the aggressor on your behalf, you may be able to get the aggression to stop.”</p> <p>“If you suspect that you may have somehow offended the aggressor, you should try to find out or confirm the offense and apologize for it.</p> <p>If you have no idea why this is happening, the best thing you can do is try to find out. Try talking to the aggressor. Participants may or may not know what is driving the aggression.”</p>
Encourage Action	“See if you can find out from the aggressor why she is behaving that way toward you; there may be an unresolved conflict that is driving the aggression. Or talk to a participant to see if she will help. Yes, it may feel embarrassing, but you have to try. And think about expanding your circle of friends; friends can help with this type of problem. And although you may feel like no longer doing whatever it is you excel at so as not to stand out so much, give that serious thought. Ask yourself if you really want to change who you are or stop doing your best because another girl feels threatened by your achievements.”

Caregiver Conversation Points

This section is for physicians and others who are providing guidance to caregivers on how to solve a bullying problem that is outside their sphere of influence, such as in school. Whether the child is present or not, the conversation with the caregiver should emphasize the following:

1. Educate:
 - a. Simple definition: bullying is aggressive behavior on the part of one person that results in emotional harm to another.
 - b. Bullying is essentially one or more students using your child as a means of making themselves more popular or maintaining their social position.
 - c. Aggressors generally do not intend harm; it is a byproduct of the aggression, which is simply intended to provide the aggressor with a boost in social status.
 - d. Any child, no matter how popular, what skills he or she has, how good at sports he or she is, etc., can be a bullying target. Let the caregiver know that the bullying is not his or her child's fault. It is not a reflection on the child's strengths, personality, characteristics, or popularity.
 - e. While bullying is common in childhood, it is not a "rite of childhood" or an experience that the child needs to have. To the contrary, bullying can be harmful; every effort should be made to get it to stop. Think of bullying like a common childhood disease; although many children may get it, everyone tries to avoid it, but if they catch it, they seek an immediate cure.
 - f. Any characteristic that is being used in a bullying situation—whether body size, hair color, etc.—is not a flaw, but an excuse to bully. Every child has some characteristic that can be used as an excuse to bully. The solution to the bullying is not to change the characteristic; it is to get the aggressor to change his or her behavior. The child should not be pressured to change the characteristic solely for the purpose of stopping the bullying.
2. Encourage Support:
 - a. Explain the fears that a target has regarding telling an adult (see the section *Why Targets Do Not Tell Adults* above).
 - b. Have the caregiver understand that it is normal for children not to tell adults unless they suspect or believe that the adult won't take any action that will make the bullying worse. These actions include anything that makes peers and other adults aware of the bullying problem. Make sure the caregiver doesn't take it personally or hold it against his or her child that the child did not tell the caregiver.
3. Encourage Action:
 - a. Work with the child to develop an action plan together.
 - i. For dominance aggression, the plan can be to first have the child try to get the bullying to stop on his or her own by trying different ways of responding to the aggression. Or the child may want adults to intervene to get the bullying to stop. The child may want to engage adults on his or her own or may want the caregiver to be involved.

- ii. For relational aggression, the responsibility for action will largely rest with the child. The child will need to talk to the aggressor and/or participants to see if she can get support and/or apologize for offending the aggressor. Unfortunately, once friendships have been severed, there is generally little adults can do to repair the damage.
 - b. If the child and caregiver agree to engage an adult in a position of authority (e.g., school principal) to stop bullying involving dominance aggression, ask that the adult watch for the bullying behavior and intervene when it is happening to reduce the risk that the aggressor suspects the child told the adult. State that you are not seeking punishment for the aggressor; rather, you just want the aggressor to stop his or her behavior.
 - c. It is not recommended that the caregiver talk to the aggressor directly.
 - d. It may be helpful for the caregiver to talk to the aggressor's caregivers; however, that should be a last resort.
4. Establish Trust: trust is critical between the child and caregiver. The child and caregiver should pledge to work together honestly on solving the problem. The child should, in exchange for maintaining a degree of control over the problem, agree to keep the caregiver informed. And the caregiver should consult with the child before any action is taken.
 5. Entreat the Child: if the child is present, let the child know that he or she must keep the caregiver informed of what is happening. Honest communication will ensure trust.

Caregiver Conversation Points for Educators

Educators and others who are counseling a caregiver in a school or institutional setting, where the educator can engage the principal or organization leader, should follow this outline.

1. Engage: Tell the caregiver that it has come to your attention that his or her child is being bullied by another student/others. Make sure the caregiver understands that you're letting him or her know so the caregiver can support the child in solving this problem. In addition, let the caregiver know you want to work with him or her to get the bullying to stop.
2. Educate: see above.
3. Encourage Support: see above.
4. Encourage Action: There are two main paths to follow at this point: empowerment or adult intervention.
 - a. Empowerment: the child can try to respond differently to the bullying behavior to render it ineffective. If the aggressor does not get satisfaction in front of peers, he or she will stop. The caregiver may want to review ways to respond to aggression that can get it to stop with his or her child before deciding on a resolution path. The child and caregiver can even role-play ways of responding to the aggression.
 - b. Adult intervention: if the child wishes, offer to engage the school principal or organization leader and try to get the behavior to stop.
 - c. The educator and the caregiver should consult first with the child about how he or she would like to handle the problem. The child may want to try solving the problem himself or herself before engaging an adult.

5. The caregiver and the child should work on a plan together. Empathize with the child's situation, provide a shoulder to lean on or cry on, help him or her feel better, and then discuss what to do. Make sure the caregiver understands the importance of listening to what the child wants. Taking action that the child doesn't want can increase his or her anxiety. The caregiver should trust in his or her child so the child will trust in the caregiver.
6. If the caregiver and the child do decide to take action together, they should try to work first with the principal or organization leader. Directly engaging the caregiver of the aggressor, while it can work, may not be effective. And it is not recommended that the caregiver directly engage the aggressor.
7. When working with the principal or organization leader, the caregiver should keep in mind that while he or she may wish to seek justice for how the aggressor is acting toward the child, punishment for bullying is ineffective and often makes the problem worse. And the child, more than likely, does not want the aggressor punished either. The child likely wishes simply to have the bullying behavior stop, quietly and without anyone knowing. Have the child describe to the principal or organization leader the bullying behaviors and the times and places the bullying occurs. Ask to have an adult observe the behavior and then engage the aggressor in private to request that it stop.

Recommended Resources

Guidance for Parents: The CirclePoint Bullying Prevention Program offers a free guide to caregivers on proactive and reactive actions caregivers can take to help prevent bullying from starting and stopping it if it does. This resource can be accessed from the "Materials" page on the CirclePoint Bullying Prevention Program website, www.circlepointprogram.org.

Guidance for Students in Grades K–5: The book *What YOU Can Do About Bullying* by Max and Zoey, a CirclePoint program component, is a comic-style guide for boys and girls that illustrates ways to respond to aggression to get it to stop.

Guidance for Students in Grades 6+: *All About Bullying*, also a CirclePoint program component, contains the same material as the comic-style guide (above) but in a nonillustrated format more appropriate for older students.