

Bully Proofing Your Environment

I received a call from the Secret Service who inherited a new initiative directed at "bully proofing" our nation's school systems. The initiative came about due to the troubling statistics received by the Department of Education, the Department of Justice, as well as the Department of Juvenile Justice that showed a drastic increase in bullying in our schools. These statistics also show bullying behaviors now surfacing in younger children, between the ages of 10 and 11, and in some cases in children as early as kindergarten. The funds for many programs were reduced or eliminated in order to fund anti-terrorist campaigns after 9/11. Among these programs, the funding for anti-bullying campaigns was heavily reduced, leaving teachers without training or the resources needed to effectively deal with bullying. Effectively dealing with bullying involves not only punishing the behavior, it must also give the tools and means to prevent future bullying.

While the issue of bullying is a major concern for every parent, teacher, and school administrator, it is also the subject of studies conducted by the Department of Justice, the Department of Juvenile Justice, the Secret Service, the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms, as well as educational institutions such as Harvard University. This extensive research continues, but is limited due to shrinking funds.

Why all the attention?

The effects of bullying behaviors are not only immediate, but systemic and long-lasting for everyone: the bully, the target, and society. In schools, the consequences of bullying behavior are exhibited through suffering academic performance, young people dropping out, and students acting violent. An extreme example of this violence is the mass killings in our school systems, which, in

many cases, were carried out by young people retaliating for being bullied.

The scars of being bullied are not easily healed. Forty-two (42%) percent of individuals who were targets of bullying behavior exhibit post traumatic syndrome consequences, which affects how they interact as adolescents, and continues to affect how they interact as adults. If you have ever been a bully's target you know the feeling of being haunted by the experience.

Bullying behavior has consequences for the bully as well. Among young people who repeatedly exhibit bullying behavior, seventy (70%) percent end up being arrested before they are twenty-one years of age, forty-seven (47%) percent of these individuals become repeat offenders, and thirty-two (32%) percent end up doing time in jail or prison. That certainly can't help bullies adapt any better to society! Statistics such as these should show all parents that they don't want their children to be bullies.

As shown, everyone is affected when a bully goes unpunished: their targets, society, and themselves. Because of this, three institutions that were asked to monitor bullying and for funding appealed to the Secret Service for help. The Secret Service responded by classifying bullying as a terrorist activity, and the victims of bullying, were reclassified as targets. The beginning of a new anti-bullying campaign had the support and funds. The new approach was to surpass many of the previous anti-bullying campaigns, which were designated to be completed within only one week of a school year. The Secret Service was also interested in accomplishing three goals that simply could not be accomplished within one week: First, to empower the students and therefore change the culture of the student population; Secondly, to instill in the administrators with the essential need for consistency and standardizing; and finally, to somehow dissuade a bully from his or her actions.

My first step in addressing the issue was to form a focus group. This forum dealt with a select group of students, bullies and their targets, therefore, my focus group was larger and more diverse than focus groups in other projects.

This unique collaboration included 15,000 students from The Palm Beach County School District, Leon County School District, noted Anti - Bullying specialist, Ron Slaby, of the Harvard Educational Consortium, The Justice Department, the "G.R.E.A.T." program, (Gang Resistance Education And Training Program) established by the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms, and teachers and administrators of the Broward County School District. All of whom were instrumental in designing this presentation. However, the greatest and most significant contributions were those made by the honesty of the student and young people in the focus groups from the mentioned Florida school districts and "G.R.E.A.T." program all the students including the selected bullies. Their concerns, candor, opinions, and options were revealing and worthwhile, and their solutions should be initiated.

The students who exhibited aggressive bullying behavior, bared their souls, and did not look for pity or understanding; they were just explaining their motivation, Although this presentation might seem to excuse their behavior, it does not. Remember, bullies tend to be at the center of some controversy either at school or at home. No matter where they are, they learn to dance the dance of excuses and denials. In this case, they also realized that by contributing to this project they were addressing bullying in a new and innovative way. A byproduct of bullies exposing themselves was the identification by their peers that there was a dysfunction that caused the bullying behavior. Whether it was attention seeking behavior, retaliation for a parent that abused them, a sense of insecurity, a need for power, or any other possible dysfunctional behaviors, the root of the problem was now open for discussion and evaluation. In the school districts where we tested this curriculum, bullying behaviors dropped seventy-two percent (72%). This success was attributed to administrators' following through and addressing the bullies, students' reporting of and protecting one another from bullies, ending the instigation of bullies by bystanders, and the bullies' not wanting to appear to be dysfunctional individuals.

This presentation does not directly address helping or changing a bully. This CD has been designed through the eyes of students to empower students and mobilize the adult community. The content of this CD is a universal tool. You can introduce this tool to any school, class, or home, and the discussions that result will be forthcoming and informative. You will hear from targets, as well as from bullies, who will reveal their feelings, reactions, behaviors, and results of bullying behavior. No other curriculum focuses on how the bully feels after they attack a target and how bullying affects their lives. Most importantly, everyone who completes this presentation will agree with the students: ENFORCEMENT IS THE ONLY MOTIVATION TO PREVENTION.

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