



## Involvement of Law Enforcement Officers in Bullying Prevention

With solid relationships forged in the school resource officer (SRO) and Drug Abuse Resistance Education (D.A.R.E.) programs, law enforcement officers are in a unique position to help identify and eliminate bullying behavior in schools—behavior that is seriously interfering with students' ability to receive a sound education.

### What is bullying?

Bullying among children is aggressive behavior that is intentional and that involves an imbalance of power or strength. Typically, it is repeated over time. Bullying can take many forms, such as hitting, punching (physical bullying); teasing or name-calling (verbal bullying); intimidation using gestures or social exclusion (nonverbal bullying or emotional bullying); and sending insulting messages by e-mail (cyberbullying).

### Why law enforcement officers should help stop bullying

- Law enforcement officers, like other adults, should be concerned about the effects of bullying on children. Research indicates that bullying can cause health, psychological, and educational problems for children who are bullied. Children and youth who are bullied are more likely than other children to be depressed, lonely, and anxious; have low self-esteem; be absent from school; feel unwell; and think about suicide.
- Law enforcement officers also should try to prevent bullying because research shows that bullying others can be a sign of other serious antisocial and violent behavior. Children and youth who frequently bully their peers are more likely than others to
  - Get into frequent fights,
  - Be injured in a fight,
  - Vandalize property,
  - Steal property,
  - Drink alcohol,
  - Smoke,
  - Be truant from school,
  - Drop out of school, and
  - Carry a weapon.

- Children and youth who bully are also more likely to report that they own guns for risky reasons, such as to gain respect or frighten others (Cunningham et al. 1998).
- In one study, boys who were identified as bullies in middle school were four times as likely as their non-bullying peers to have three or more criminal convictions by age 24 (Olweus, 1993).

### How can law enforcement officers contribute to a successful bullying prevention program in school?

Changing bullying behavior in the schools requires a coordinated approach. Law enforcement officers can help stop the spread of fear and violence in our schools by assisting in the implementation of a comprehensive bullying prevention program.

#### *1. Enlist the support of school administrators.*

A plan to implement a bullying prevention initiative can be successful only with the support of the highest authority in the school. Unfortunately, many school administrators don't believe that there is a bullying problem in their school.

- To convince them of the seriousness of bullying, share with them research findings about the nature, prevalence, and effects of bullying.
- Consider collecting your own data about bullying at the school to share with your administrator and fellow staff members. You may want to administer an anonymous student questionnaire (grades three and higher). A number of bullying prevention programs include such questionnaires.
- Consider collecting and mapping incidents of reported bullying at your school. Free computer programs (e.g., [www.schoolcopsoftware.com](http://www.schoolcopsoftware.com)) are available that may help you to analyze and map incidents that occur in and around your schools.

#### *2. Select and implement a research-based bullying prevention program.*

Research existing bullying prevention programs that your school might adopt.

Visit [www.stopbullyingnow.hrsa.gov](http://www.stopbullyingnow.hrsa.gov) for information about such programs and tips about what to consider in selecting effective programs.

Work with your administrator and other staff to select a program that best fits the needs of your school, while considering the proven effectiveness of the model. Work actively with your colleagues to implement the program with fidelity.

### **3. Be accessible to students and staff.**

Get to know students by name and work to develop trusting relationships with them. Encourage them to come to you with concerns about bullying or other issues.

### **4. Create an anonymous reporting system in your school.**

Many students are bystanders to bullying, and many do not take action against bullying that they see or know about. Creating a system that promotes anonymous reporting of bullying incidents gives passive bystanders an opportunity to be active bystanders. Consider providing a locked box for anonymous reports of bullying. Locate the box in an area of the school that is private but easily accessible. Investigate the reports thoroughly and sensitively. Alerting responsible adults about bullying incidents and increasing supervision can significantly reduce their frequency.

### **5. Institute passive surveillance.**

In other words, be watchful. Observe from behind blinds of a window that overlooks the playground or a stage curtain that overlooks the lunchroom. Use information gathered from anonymous reports to strategize where and when you should increase supervision.

### **6. Work with other staff to create a safety plan for children who are bullied.**

Consider establishing a code phrase that could be used by the child to alert a teacher or other adult to bullying behavior without drawing undue attention to the child who was bullied.

### **7. Suggest the implementation of behavior contracts as a type of creative probation.**

If a bullying behavior constitutes a crime, visit with your prosecuting attorney to see whether you can develop an intervention plan for the child who bullied. Consider the statute of limitations for misdemeanor crime in your state and propose that you be given some discretion in how these children are charged when bullying incidents violate the law. Ask the prosecutor to help you develop a behavior contract and offer to monitor this child's behavior for the next few months at school. If successful, the child who bullies can escape prosecution (much like a diversion), and the court's case log can be reduced. If unsuccessful, the child who bullies would face this charge in addition to any other charges as a result of continued bullying behavior.

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