

FOOD SERVICES ESPs AND BULLYING PREVENTION

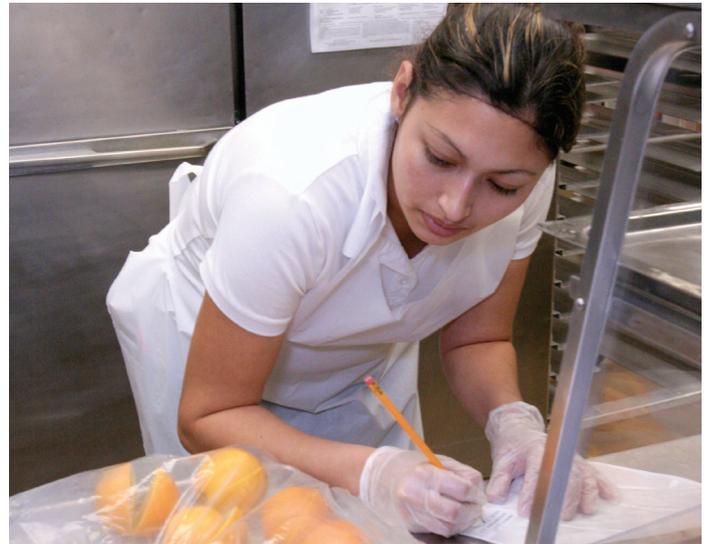
School Cafeterias a Common Location for Bullying

Bullying behavior is a growing concern among America's educators. Bullying is generally defined as repeated aggressive acts intended to do harm, and is characterized by a power or status difference between the students. Bullying includes not only physical aggression such as hitting or stealing, but also verbal aggression, such as threatening, name calling, spreading rumors, socially rejecting and isolating someone, or cyberbullying (where perpetrators can hide behind the anonymity of the Internet).

According to the U.S. Department of Education, in 2006-2007, one-third of U.S. students ages 12 through 18 reported being bullied. Students who have been bullied report feeling depressed, anxious, and isolated. Many have low self-esteem. Their school attendance and performance may suffer. And in some cases, as the nation has seen recently, they are so tormented, they take their own lives.

Even though there are many training programs that can provide educators with tools to intervene in bullying situations, bullying often occurs outside the classroom, beyond teachers' reach. Research consistently points to the cafeteria as a prime location where bullying occurs and where students feel unsafe. The unstructured nature of most cafeteria settings contributes to students' feeling that most classroom rules don't apply there. Often, well-intentioned bullying prevention programs don't take into consideration the special context of the cafeteria and how food service workers and other education staff can contribute to a more orderly cafeteria setting which, in turn, contributes to less opportunity for students to bully one another. Also, since most food service personnel are from the community, they are uniquely positioned to understand local factors that may be affecting students' lunchroom behaviors.

The cafeteria should be seen as a school context ripe for bullying prevention and intervention, where staff can curb bullying and promote a positive school climate. A review of research on school connectedness suggests that the quality of students' social interactions with peers and staff in a school setting influences their social behavior as well as



academic development. More specifically, research indicates that adding structure to the cafeteria and increasing adult monitoring during the lunch period are associated with **decreases in student aggression and increases in pro-social interactions** among students.

Nevertheless, in many schools across the country, teachers don't supervise children during the lunch period. Instead food service workers, paraeducators, parents and volunteer community members with little or no training are recruited to supervise students in the cafeteria. This should alert us to the need to include food service workers in bullying prevention and intervention training.

NEA has long been committed to bullying and harassment prevention and intervention. For decades, members have received training in how to recognize and intervene in student-to-student bullying situations. In 2010, NEA conducted the first nationwide survey to include the opinions of education support professionals as well as teachers on issues relating to bullying in public schools. Among the 2900 ESP respondents, 384 were food services ESPs.

Highlights of the food service workers' responses are presented on the next page.



What Food Services Employees Said

They witness bullying. Food services workers were less likely than other ESPs to report seeing a student being bullied at their school. However, about half of them reported witnessing it as frequently as several times a month. Nearly 10% saw bullying daily. They viewed bullying as a significantly greater problem at their school than did other ESPs.

Cafeteria workers are less likely to hear reports of bullying from students and parents than other ESPs.

Approximately one in four of the food services ESP surveyed indicated that a student reported bullying to them within the past month. Only 8% reported that a parent has spoken to them about bullying.

They feel it's their job to intervene. A majority of food services workers surveyed—77%—report that it is “their job” to intervene when they see bullying situations.

They need training on bullying prevention and intervention. Nearly all the food services ESP surveyed report that their school district has a bullying policy, but fewer than a third of them said they received training on that policy.

A majority of food services ESPs say it's “their job” to intervene in bullying situations.

They are more likely to say they need training on specific forms of bullying. More than two-thirds of food services workers reported that they need additional training on how to address different forms of bullying—physical, verbal, and relational—and in situations involving children being bullied because of sexual orientation, race, gender, and religion. Training is particularly needed to address bullying in the form of negative remarks about students who are overweight, with more than 70% of food workers expressing such a need.

They need to be invited/encouraged to join school committees on bullying prevention. Among all ESPs, food services workers are the group least likely to be involved in formal bullying prevention efforts in their schools. Only 12% reported being involved in formal school teams, committees or prevention programs dealing with bullying.

VIEW FROM THE CAFETERIA

Donna West, a food service professional at Brownwood Elementary School in Scottsboro, Alabama, says even the young children in her K-4 school need to be reminded that bullying can hurt.

“I have witnessed physical and verbal bullying in the cafeteria, especially when adult presence is low,” says Donna. “This usually happens during breakfast when we have a limited staff on duty. Name calling and pushing and shoving are typical things that we deal with.”

Donna reports that she and her staff talk to the bully and to those who report bullying. She says that in most cases of verbal bullying or threats the bullies will claim they didn't really mean it. “But in today's atmosphere, without clear cut guidelines and adequate training of staff, we are left feeling inadequate,” she says. The matter is turned over to the principal for further discipline.

“As a mother myself, I feel it is so important that children

understand the power of their words,” Donna continues.

“Our bodies are a miracle of nature and given time, physical wounds will heal. However, we may never heal from the verbal wounds. They can eat away at our self-esteem and fill us with self-doubt.”

Donna emphasizes that ESP are in a position to help. “It is our duty, as caring adults, to help children make the right choices and understand that every decision has consequences—good or bad,” she states.

“I have heard of a school in Wisconsin where they have a cyberbully box. It is an attachment to the school web site for reporting incidents of bullying. The reports could be from children as well as adults. They could be anonymous or signed,” Donna reports. “We do not have this option in our school system yet, but it has been presented for consideration. At present, all we have are signs placed around campus that say 'Bully Free Zone.' Some of those are in the cafeteria.”

TIPS FOR FOOD SERVICES ESPs

To Prevent Bullying

- ✓ Treat students the way you want to be treated and the way you want them to treat each other.
- ✓ Focus on developing empathy and respect.
- ✓ Use positive, non-verbal interactions—a smile, a nod, a thumbs up, a high five, a pat on the back.
- ✓ Notice something positive the students do and say something about it to them or someone else where they can hear it.
- ✓ Don't expect students to solve bullying incidents themselves; they lack the skills.
- ✓ Encourage students to report incidents of bullying to you and other adults.
- ✓ Inform administrators that increasing adult supervision and monitoring in the cafeteria can ensure bullying won't go unnoticed.
- ✓ Advise administrators that post-lunch academic achievement can be enhanced by implementing a more structured lunchroom/cafeteria program.
- ✓ Suggest establishing and posting rules of lunchroom/cafeteria behavior in easily visible locations.
- ✓ Suggest establishing an incentive program for classrooms on their best behavior in the cafeteria.
- ✓ Contribute to establishing a time-out/consequence system for cafeteria misbehavior.

Sample Lunchroom & Cafeteria Rules

- ✓ Enter quietly
- ✓ Remain seated
- ✓ Keep your area and the cafeteria clean
- ✓ Respect yourself and others
- ✓ Keep food in the cafeteria

To Intervene in Bullying

- ✓ Learn about bullying so you know what you're looking for (see resources)
- ✓ Learn what your school's consequences for bullies are and what supports for targets exist.
- ✓ When you see something, do something—be assertive and calm.
- ✓ Express strong disapproval of and stop bullying when it occurs.
- ✓ Start with verbal warnings. Use the name of the student who is bullying.
- ✓ Report incidents as required by your school's policy.
- ✓ Maintain your own log of bullying incidents.
- ✓ Talk to other school staff about what you've witnessed so they are alert to possible retaliation during the balance of the school day.

Sources: US Department of Education and US Department of Health & Human Services

Like other ESPs, food services workers report feeling slightly more connected to their school community than teachers, which influences bullying intervention.

Connectedness is the belief by adults in the school that they are cared about as individuals and professionals involved in the learning process. Research has shown there is an important link between feeling connected to the school and being comfortable intervening with all forms of bullying among all types of students.

They are likely to live in their school community. The NEA survey found that 73% of food services ESPs live in the school community where they work, a rate about twice as high as that of teachers. This means they know the students and their families, and can be an invaluable resource when seeking answers to bullying incidents.



Inform Yourself and Your Association

- ❑ Visit www.nea.org/neabullyfree, a good go-to source for resources about how to help bullied students and how to prevent bullying in your school.
- ❑ Seek input and collect data from other school staff to whom students go for support.
- ❑ Request a bullying prevention and intervention training session from NEA at www.nea.org/neabullyfree (there is a training link). Make sure the training is scheduled at a time that is convenient for food services ESPs to attend.
- ❑ Ask your school district to provide training on the content of current policies for bullying prevention and intervention. Work with your local affiliate to ensure these trainings are scheduled at times that are convenient for food services ESPs to attend along with other school staff.
- ❑ Become involved in bullying prevention teams, committees and other activities at your school or Education Association.
- ❑ Initiate meetings with other staff to share concerns about bullying in general or specific students in particular.

Resources:

www.nea.org/neabullyfree

NEA's official website for the NEA Bully Free: It Starts with Me campaign

www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocr/letters/colleague-201010.html
Guidance on bullying from the U.S. Department of Education

NEA'S BULLY FREE PLEDGE

I agree to be identified as a caring adult who pledges to help bullied students. I will listen carefully to all students who seek my help and act on their behalf to put an immediate stop to the bullying. I will work with other caring adults to create a safe learning environment for all students in my school.



Be that caring adult. Take the pledge at nea.org/neabullyfree

Bully Free: It Starts With Me!

www.pta.org/bullying.asp

National PTA guide on safeguarding children from bullying

www.bnetsavvy.org/wp/

NEA Health Information Network cyberbullying resource

www.nea.org/home/3207.htm

Education Support Professionals website with links to bullying resources, including the *2010 NEA Nationwide Study of Bullying*

www.stopbullyingnow.samhsa.gov

Educator Tip Sheets are available, such as: *How to Intervene to Stop Bullying: Tips for On-the-Spot Intervention at School*

Reference:

Leff S., Power T., Costigan T., and Manz P. Assessing the climate of the playground and lunchroom: Implications for bullying prevention programming. *School Psychology Review*. September 2003: 32(3): 418-430. Available from Academic Search Premier, Ipswich, MA.

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