

# Social-Emotional Learning and Bullying Prevention (and how *Second Step* can help)

*Adapted from the article Social-Emotional Learning and Bullying Prevention from A Committee for Children White Paper.*

Bullying is a pervasive problem in schools, and has significant consequences for all involved: children who are bullied, children who bully, and children who witness bullying. Teaching **social-emotional learning skills** is important in the healthy development of children, and when incorporated into a bullying program has had positive results. **Social-emotional learning skills** not only promotes a safe and positive climate within schools, it creates healthy children who are ready to learn.

Results from studies have taught us not only about the rates of bullying, but a great deal about the characteristics of children who bully and those who are targeted as well. One way of tackling the problem of bullying and providing safe and respectful learning environments with healthier, happier children who are ready to learn for all students is by focusing on the **social-emotional skills** of children. These skills enable children to be socially competent citizens within the school environment and help build an overall positive climate within the school.

## Serious Problem with Serious Consequences

Bullying is intentional negative behavior that is repeated and involves an imbalance of social or physical power.<sup>1</sup>

### Who does bullying affect?

#### All participants: the bullied child, the bully, and the bystanders

- **The bullied, the victim:** Recent reports estimate that about 20% of children are victims of bullying at school.<sup>2</sup> Paying attention to victims of bullying is important, because students who are bullied report having more physical health complaints and engage in higher levels of problem behavior, such as smoking and drinking.<sup>3</sup> In addition, students who are bullied can suffer negative effects that may last into adulthood, including depression, anxiety, sadness, and loneliness.<sup>3</sup>
- **The bully:** Those doing the bullying also suffer. Students who bully others are at higher risk for a wide range of problems including abusing alcohol and other drugs, getting into fights, and doing poorly academically.<sup>3</sup> And like victims of bullying, children who bully are at higher risk of having problems into adulthood, such as criminal convictions and substance use.<sup>4</sup> These are disturbing consequences, given that recent reports estimate that about 13% of children in schools are directly engaging in bullying.<sup>2</sup>
- **The bystanders:** Bullying rarely happens in isolated corners of the school where no one is watching. It often happens in very open places in front of other students. With greater use of technology to aid in bullying, bullying can happen in very public forums. Bystanders (students who witness bullying) make up the largest group of students in school. A recent report by the National Crime Prevention Council estimates that 6 out of 10 children report an incident of bullying in school at least once a day. The high number of children who are witnesses to bullying is disturbing, given that bystanders are also found to exhibit negative consequences. Research shows that students who witness bullying as bystanders also suffer increased use of tobacco, alcohol, or other drugs, have increased mental health problems, and are more likely to miss or skip school.<sup>5</sup>

## The Need to Act

Although bullying can occur anywhere, most reported bullying happens in school. Bullying can greatly affect the school environment and more importantly hinder the academic success of students. Bullying can lower academic achievement, influence school attendance, and even contribute to higher dropout rates.<sup>2</sup>

## Solutions

Much is known about key predictors of bully and victim behavior.

- Bullying is typically a group phenomenon that involves multiple aspects of social relationships.<sup>6</sup> Many students bully for social reasons and use bullying effectively to gain status.
- Victims of bullying tend to be socially withdrawn and lack positive self-concepts.<sup>7</sup>
- Bystanders often report feeling guilt and helplessness for not standing up for a peer who is being bullied and often do not intervene for fear of retaliation.

Given the social nature of bullying, a key component in combating this behavior is to focus on changing bullying norms and increasing the social-emotional competence of students.<sup>8, 9, 10, 11</sup> Focus in schools on **social-emotional learning (SEL)** skills to deal with issues of bullying involves “the systematic development of a core set of social and emotional skills that help children more effectively handle life challenges and thrive in both their learning and their social environments.”<sup>12</sup> Teaching social-emotional competence can:

- Help create physically and emotionally safe school environments.<sup>12</sup>
- Increase students’ scores on standardized achievement tests.<sup>13</sup>
- Increase students’ social-emotional skills while raising their awareness of bullying.
- Improve student social competence, positive student and staff responses to bullying, and overall school climate while ultimately reducing physical bullying among students.<sup>14</sup>
- Be a key component in combatting bullying.

## How Does SEL Prevent Bullying?

Enhancing students’ social-emotional competence through a focus on building SEL skills is the focus of the *Second Step* program from Committee for Children which includes lessons for preschool through eighth grade. It focuses on core social-emotional skills that are particularly important for bullying prevention, including empathy, emotion management, and social problem solving. In addition, embedded within these units are topics like friendship building and how to be assertive, which are also key skills in bullying prevention.

### Key Components of Social-Emotional Learning:

**Empathy** – *feeling or understanding what someone else is feeling.*

Being empathic has been found to be crucial in preventing bullying. Compared to both children who bully and those who are bullied, prosocial children have been found to show greater empathetic awareness.<sup>15</sup> Greater awareness of others’ feelings not only allows students to treat each other with respect and kindness, it may cause them to intervene in bullying situations as well. Empathic concern toward peers makes bystanders more likely to intervene to stop bullying.<sup>16, 17</sup>

The *Second Step* program lessons on empathy teach students to identify feelings, understand the feelings of others, and show care and compassion to others. Another key component of the empathy lesson plan is teaching perspective-taking (that is, the idea that others may have a different perspective or opinion than your own). Studies have found that students with good perspective-taking skills are less likely to be physically, verbally, and indirectly aggressive to peers.<sup>18</sup> Thus it is important to teach perspective-taking to prevent bullying. Perspective-taking skills also make students more likely to offer emotional support to others,<sup>19</sup> making these skills crucial in helping bystanders take a stand against bullying.

**Emotion Regulation** – *ability to monitor and regulate strong emotions and calm down when upset.*

The ability to regulate emotions is a particularly important skill to possess in order to build positive relationships. Lack of emotion management may make a student more prone to being bullied. Research finds that students tend to be more victimized by their peers if they are hyperactive, exhibit emotional outbursts, or are emotionally unstable.<sup>20</sup> Exacerbating the problem is that nearly half of children who are bullied tend to escalate and intensify the bullying by responding with highly emotional reactions, such as yelling, screaming, or crying.<sup>21</sup> Good emotion management not only prevents children from becoming victims of bullying, it also helps them respond to it. In addition, research has shown that students are more likely to bully others if they lack emotion-management skills.<sup>7, 22</sup> Teaching emotion-management skills, then, helps not only students who are bullied, but those who bully as well.

The *Second Step’s* emotion-management unit helps children develop skills to manage emotions. Children learn to identify their feelings (particularly strong feelings) and situations that may bring on these emotions. Techniques such as belly breathing and self-talk to manage strong feelings like anger or worry are a key component of this unit.

Learning to manage strong emotions may help both children who bully and those who are bullied get along with peers and make good choices. Research has found that students being bullied can learn to use self-talk and other calming strategies to avoid crying, retaliating, or responding in other ways likely to mark them as easy targets for continued victimization.<sup>23,24</sup>

### ***Social Problem Solving – the ability to successfully navigate through social problems and challenges***

Children who are good social problem solvers can recognize a problem, reflect on possible solutions, and understand consequences to a particular action. It is no surprise that this skill is important in managing peer challenges and responding in thoughtful ways. It has been found that both children who bully and those who are bullied lack social problem-solving skills.<sup>7</sup> Those who bully, for instance, often misread social cues and situations.<sup>25</sup> This lack of social awareness leads children who bully to act more hostile and aggressively in social situations. They also have more aggressive ideas about how to handle conflicts.<sup>1</sup> Students who are bullied also lack effective social problem-solving skills.<sup>7</sup> They may behave passively in social situations, which can set them up for being bullied.<sup>26</sup> Effectively managing social situations is also an important skill for those students who are bystanders. By properly assessing a social situation and coming to the appropriate decision to intervene, bystanders can help stop bullying.

The *Second Step* program has an entire unit dedicated to problem solving. In particular, these lessons teach children to recognize a problem, generate multiple solutions to a problem, predict consequences, and ultimately select a reasonable solution to the problem that is safe and respectful. These problem-solving strategies help children who are bullied de-escalate the conflict.<sup>27</sup> Lastly, teaching these problem-solving lessons help prevent bullying by making children who may bully aware of how to effectively deal with a social situation in a nonaggressive way.

### ***Friendship Building and Assertiveness Training***

Social status and relationships are an important element of bullying. Lower social status is related to being bullied.<sup>7, 10, 26</sup> Bullied children tend to have fewer friends, and those they do have are often bullied as well.<sup>20</sup> Children who bully also lack adequate social skills.<sup>7</sup> However, many of those who bully have high social status and use this status to impose their power on their victims. Bystanders often report fear of losing social status as one reason they do not intervene on behalf of bullied classmates.<sup>5</sup> Thus improving social relationships and eliminating social hierarchies can aid in preventing bullying.

One of the overarching goals of the *Second Step* program is to help students gain friends and get along better with peers by increasing friendship skills. Students are taught to play fairly (for example, sharing, taking turns, and following rules), eliminate peer exclusion, and treat peers respectfully. The ability to successfully make and keep friends is an important protective factor against being bullied. Students who have at least one friend are less likely to be bullied by peers, and bullied students with a good friend experience less subsequent bullying and fewer emotional and behavioral problems.<sup>21, 28</sup>

Another component of building positive relationships is understanding how and when to be assertive. *Second Step* lessons teach children how to differentiate between aggressive, passive, and assertive responses. Learning to be assertive is particularly important for children who may be bullied, so they are not targeted more often.<sup>24</sup> In addition, learning assertiveness can help bystanders use specific strategies to stop the bullying or ask adults for help.<sup>29, 30</sup>

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