Developing a Positive School Climate
Top Ten Tips to Prevent Bullying and Cyberbullying

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Much research has shown that a positive school climate contributes to a variety of behavioral, emotional, and academic outcomes that educators hope to achieve. Our research demonstrates that students who report a positive climate at school also experience fewer problematic behaviors online. Here's what you can do to improve your climate and not only enhance student achievement, success, and productivity, but also teach youth to be safe, smart, honest, and responsible while using technology.

1. PROMOTE AWARENESS. School staff should dedicate time in the classroom and via assemblies to educating students about all forms of bullying in order to raise awareness of the risks, possible school-based and legal penalties, and the emotional, psychological, reputational, and even physical harm that can result. Students should realize that even if they are not bullying others, they have a responsibility to ensure the safety of their peers. If they see bullying, they should do something about it. Schools should also instruct, model, and reward appropriate and helpful behaviors, instead of only speaking out against and disciplining that which is inappropriate.

2. CULTIVATE OPEN LINES OF COMMUNICATION. Interaction between staff and students should exist conveniently and comfortably throughout the school. Staff should intentionally work to build an atmosphere of trust and continual dialogue regarding the issues youth are confronting. Students must know and feel completely comfortable with at least one adult at school whom they can approach to discuss any struggle they are facing – offline or online.

3. LEARN THEIR NAMES. Educators should take the time to learn the names of all of their students in order to build relationships, combat feelings of unimportance, promote connectedness and belongingness, and to reinforce critical feelings of trust, mutual respect, and safety. This is a simple but very powerful way for educators to show that they truly care about each and every child in their school.

4. DEVELOP STAKEHOLDER RELATIONSHIPS. Educators should work together with parents and others in the community, such as businesses, non-profits, law enforcement, and other youth professionals to properly address bullying and cyberbullying. Local organizations that care about these issues can assist in ways that are substantive (sponsorships!) and symbolic (messaging, endorsements, intangible support). Everyone can bring something to the table and help collectively combat these issues. Teaching teens to use technology with wisdom, discretion, and forethought is the responsibility of everyone in the community.

5. SET UP ANONYMOUS REPORTING. Schools should create safe and private ways for students to report issues of concern that they may otherwise feel uncomfortable, scared, or ashamed to openly share with the proper authorities. Nobody wants to be viewed as a snitch or tattletale. Reporting systems could include a form on a school web page, a phone number to receive confidential calls or texts, or a drop-box on campus for youth to use. As important as reporting mechanisms are, it is even more essential that schools investigate and respond swiftly and appropriately to all reports that come in. If not, students will quickly learn that nothing happens when reports are made, and they will stop doing it, and dismiss the school as oblivious, hypocritical, and apathetic.

6. INSTILL HOPE. School staff should work to cultivate a strong sense of hope and positivity across the student body to counter negative messages from those who bully, and to help buffer typical adolescent stressors. The best educators demonstrate care about more than just the academic or athletic success of youth. Administrators, teachers, and support staff can come alongside all students to build them

up, show compassion and empathy, give them assistance when needed, and keep them inspired toward a great future.

7. BUILD POSITIVE SOCIAL NORMING CAMPAIGNS. Social norming is about changing prevailing mentalities about the extent of certain behaviors across campus. For example, if most youth think that bullying is a common and natural part of adolescent culture, or that anyone who talks to an adult about their problems is weak, then these beliefs will dominate and spread. The reality is that the vast majority of kids despise bullying, don't want to hurt others, and desire great relationships with their peers. Focus attention on the majority of youth who do utilize their phones, social media, and other technology in acceptable and even positive ways. Promote the positive things that students are doing. Celebrate successes. Highlight and commend acts of kindness. Make clear that care and compassion is the *norm* at your school, and not the exception. And have a clear messaging strategy that gets the word out!

8. ENLIST THE HELP OF STUDENTS. Many youth want to be actively involved in combatting cruelty and promoting positivity at their school. And they are typically best positioned to make the greatest impact! The peer group is a powerful influence on the attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors of adolescents at this stage of their development. High school leaders could talk to fellow students about these issues informally in the cafeteria during lunch or during a more structured assembly. Some could organize a presentation for others in small classroom–sized (20+) groups. The potential opportunities for student empowerment and involvement are endless!

9. COLLECT DATA. Administrators should consider conducting a regular formal assessment of students to find out the actual extent of bullying, cyberbullying, and related teen problems – as well as their contributing factors and the negative outcomes that result. This will help inform and direct efforts so that resources are spent in the best possible ways. Having data specific to your school(s) also adds credibility and legitimacy to funding requests by demonstrating what is happening locally. The results can also be compared to national data to examine the extent to which your school is substantially different (better or worse) than other schools. Contact us for help and support in making this happen!

10. NEVER STOP LEARNING. Educators themselves should continue to learn about new technological developments, devices, and forms of online misuse. They should also develop relationships with staff at other schools who focus on these problems so that they know where to get help when an incident comes across their desk. There are plenty of research-informed resources available to help educators identify, prevent, and respond to bullying and cyberbullying. They just need to seek out and obtain the best materials out there. Our Cyberbullying Research Center has a growing number of free, excellent, practical resources for educators, parents, and teens; check them out at cyberbullying.org.

For a more detailed discussion of how to develop a positive school climate as a way to prevent bullying, cyberbullying, and other adolescent misbehaviors (online and off), see our book: School Climate 2.0: Preventing Cyberbullying and Sexting One Classroom at a Time (from Corwin Press).

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