



Bullying Prevention for Young Children

Bullying and negative patterns of behaviours

Creating a bullying free environment in our communities is an important task for care providers and parents. Every child has the right to feel safe, engage in enriching experiences and participate in on-going secure social interactions without encountering acts of bullying.

A common misconception is that bullying behaviours begin in middle childhood or adolescence. Research tells us that negative patterns of behaviour that can lead to bullying may be identified as early as the preschool years and in some cases even in toddlers. If these behaviours are unchallenged by significant adults, children learn poor social skills that they will carry with them for their whole lifetime.

Bullying is not a behaviour that children grow out of. Behavioural outcomes of children who bully can lead to delinquency and criminality, moral disengagement and anti-social behaviour. Victims of this negative behaviour suffer from a number of consequences including isolation, depression, and in the most severe cases, suicide. Evidence shows that bullying is very common among both boys and girls.

Research tells us that, "early intervention should not wait until the start of school. School communities must reach out to families even before kindergarten... Children with poor social behavioural skills can be identified as early as three years of age, and the earlier these children receive intervention, the more successful these efforts will be". (Dwyer, Osher, and Hoffman, 2000)

What is bullying?

It is natural for children to be aggressive sometimes. An aggressive action once in a while does not mean that a child is a bully or a victim of bullying. But when a child hits, kicks, or pushes others frequently, or is repeatedly picked on by others, it is a worry. Bullying occurs when an individual or a group is repeatedly aggressive towards others. There are four classic types of bullying:

- **Physical:** The least sophisticated type of bullying, this is action-oriented and may involve hitting or kicking victims, and taking and damaging their property.
- **Verbal:** Uses name-calling, insults, racist comments and constant teasing.
- **Emotional:** Attempts to ostracize victims by convincing peers through threats or hurtful gossip, to exclude or reject a certain person or group of people. More common among girls.

- Reactive: Engage in bullying and provoke bullies into attacking them by taunting. Most conflicts are physical.

Ways to help prevent bullying

We help prevent bullying when we teach pro-social behaviour. This includes behaviour that is kind, helpful, cooperative and respectful. It is never too soon to begin teaching bullying prevention! The skills that children need in order to resist bullying and develop pro-social behaviour are reflected in anti-bias education.

"In conclusion, there is no conclusion to what children who are bullied live with. They take it home at night. It lives inside them and eats away at them. It never ends. So neither should our struggle to end it."

- Sarah, aged 17

Louise Derman-Sparks, an expert in anti-bias education for young children, has identified four factors that help children develop positive relationships with others.

1. **Positive Self-Esteem** Feeling good about who you are, having a strong sense of belonging and feeling confident in your relationships with others. Children with strong self-esteem are more likely to stand up for themselves and others.
2. **Empathy** Understanding and caring about the feelings of others. Recognizing the basic emotions in themselves and others. Children can learn to recognize similarities and differences and understand that unkindness hurts. Children who bully are often not able to recognize and care about the feelings of others.
3. **Critical thinking** Be able to tell the difference between fair and unfair words and actions, and know what actions can help solve problems.
4. **An ability to take action.** Knowing what to do when you see something unfair. Most bullying happens in front of children who are not directly involved. When young children see something unfair and take action, they reduce the power of the bully.

Activities that promote pro-social behaviour

TO DEVELOP A STRONG SENSE OF SELF:

- Identify own physical features during group activity.
- Make a chart showing the diversity of features in the group.
- Sing hello songs in different languages.
- Invite families to include family traditions during times of celebrations.

TO DEVELOP EMPATHY:

- Talk to children about feelings, their own feelings and the feelings of others.
- Help children identify ways in which people are the same and how people are different, ie sizes, skin colours, types of food and traditions. Always emphasize ways that we are also the same.
- Focus on everyday experiences from the perspectives of children and their families.

TO THINK CRITICALLY:

- Help children explore how they might respond to people who are different.
- Talk to the children about issues as they come up and ask, “Is it okay to exclude others from the group because they are different?” How do you think they feel? How would you feel?
- Read books such as *This is our house*, *That toad is mine* or *I miss Franklin P Shuckles*. These stories offer opportunities for children to talk about these issues. *Contact the Westcoast Child Care Resource Centre Library for a list of books for children that are related to bullying.*

TO TAKE ACTION:

- Talk to children about what they can do when they see something that is not fair. Read stories like “Is it right to fight?”.
- Talk to children about conflict resolution and how to solve problems in ways that are fair for everyone.
- During any story that you are reading you can facilitate discussion about fair and not fair.

The Adult Role

Children are more likely to develop these characteristics and skills when the adults who care for them use pro-social behaviour themselves. This includes behaviour that is kind, helpful, co-operative and respectful. Children are more likely to behave in a positive manner when adults give them positive attention when they are behaving in desirable ways.

Adults influence how children view the world around them. If children see the world as a positive place, they are more likely to act in positive ways towards others. If adults frequently say negative things, children come to think that the world is more negative than positive.

Good adult supervision is important to prevent bullying. Adults must be available to step in when a child needs help. Sometimes children learn bullying from other children. They might see that aggression sometimes gets others their own way, and “try it out.” Sometimes they might think they need to be aggressive to fit in with their friends.

How you can help

- Help children feel valued and self-confident.
- Show children that the world is a positive place.
- Help children identify their own feelings and the feelings of others.
- Teach children to express their feelings in appropriate ways.
- Let children know when they are behaving in socially acceptable ways.
- Correct children’s behaviour if they act aggressively towards others.
- Make sure an adult is ready to step in when a child needs help.

Sources

Craig, Wendy et al, (1998) *Bullying and Victimization Among Canadian School Children*, Human Resources Development Canada.

Derman-Sparks, L., (1992) *Anti-Bias Curriculum: Tools for Empowering Young Children*. National Association for the Education of Young Children.

Olweus, D. (2000) *Bullying at school: What We Know and What We Can Do*.

More resources are available from the Westcoast Child Care Resource Centre Library. Phone 604.709-5661 or toll-free 1.877.262.0022 or visit our website at: www.wstcoast.org to search our on-line catalogue.

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