How can we increase positive peer interventions in face-to-face and digital bullying situations?

This quote from Berkowitz supports the approach that will be advocated in this presentation.

Human beings act within a social context that serves to inhibit or encourage healthy behaviors, and environments can serve to either inhibit or encourage violence. Violence prevention is facilitated when individuals can identify situations with the potential for violence and then act to prevent it. Whether someone intervenes is in turn influenced by the extent to which they feel that others in their immediate environment share their concerns and will support their efforts.

Or perhaps a story from another arena all together:

Some researchers in the psychology of influence set up a study in a hotel, where the desired behavior was hanging towels. They measured towel hanging. Then they placed signs in the rooms that said: “76% of the people in this hotel hung up their towels to protect the environment.” The rate of towel hanging went way up.

Aggression Dynamics

A significant amount of bullying is socially motivated, that is, motivated by a desire to achieve status, power, and control. Insight into aggressors:

- Are dependent on peers for realization of their social status goals.
- Chose the time and place to maximize exposure. Digital aggression draws significant attention.
- Select targets who lack social status, are “different” and “less desirable.”
- Are often perceived as very popular, cool, and powerful, but are not well liked.

Insight into witnesses and defenders:

- Vast majority think bullying is wrong, feel bad for target, and wish they could do something to help.
- Those who defend are held in very high esteem.
- Defenders are often very effective in stopping the bullying acts.
- Having defenders reduces the negative impact on the target.

Barriers to Positive Intervention

The following factors are barriers to positive peer intervention.

Bystander Effect

People are less likely to intervene when situations arise in the presence of others. Diffusion of responsibility. Assume that someone else is or should be responsible for responding.

• Audience inhibition. Are concerned about potential for public failure and resulting embarrassment.

• Social Influence. Take social cues from those nearby in assessing how serious the incident is and whether a response is warranted.

Mechanisms for Moral Disengagement

The common mechanisms people use to rationalize hurtful behavior also appear to be mechanisms witnesses use when they witness harm, but do not intervene.

- Reconstruing Conduct (Spin It). “It was just a joke.”
- Displacing or Diffusing Responsibility (Point to Responsibility of Others). “Someone else should be responsible for stopping this.”
- Disregarding or Misrepresenting Injurious Consequences (Deny the Harm). “It wasn’t that bad.”
- Dehumanizing or Blaming the Victim (Put Down). “He or she deserved it.”

Social Status

If a potential defender is lower on the “social ladder” than the perceived social status of the student engaging in aggression this can present a barrier.

- Potential for retaliation by the aggressor.
- Affiliation with the lower social status target could lead to humiliation and embarrassment.

School Rules, Staff Behavior, & Effectiveness

School rules, staff behavior, and effectiveness of investigations can be a barrier to intervention.

- Staff Modeling (social influence). If staff members see, but do not respond to, peer aggression, students will think that response is not warranted.
- Diffusion of Responsibility. If the school communicates the message that problems between
students should be resolved by staff, students may be less likely to perceive they have any responsibility.

- Conflict Between Following School Rules/Expectations and Positively Intervening. School expectations that students should mind their own business, not “tattle,” get to class on time can reduce interventions.

- Effectiveness of School Intervention. If school officials do not respond effectively, students will likely not report concerns.

Factors That Support Positive Peer Intervention
Factors that support positive peer intervention include both personal factors and the socio-ecological environment.

Personal Factors
Personal factors include:

- Personal values. Motivation to intervene is ground in personal values.
  - Commitment to the value of personal responsibility for the well-being of others.
  - Tolerance or acceptance of differences in others.

- Social Status. Because aggressors are often perceived as popular, the social status of the potential defender is highly relevant.

- Affective Empathy. Potential defenders appear to have a higher level of affective empathy. However, it appears that both defenders and aggressors have a high degree of cognitive empathy.

Social Self-Efficacy
Social self-efficacy includes both effective skills and confidence that you have such skills.

Socio-Environmental Factors

- Parent Values. Parent’s values are closely linked to student’s personal values.

- Society values and the media.
  - Media messages about being “cool” can encourage students to be hurtful to those who do not fit media’s standards.
  - Today’s society, particularly in the political arena, is unfortunately modeling a significant high level of interpersonal aggression.
  - Recent media messages are reinforcing positive peer intervention. This includes the Lady Gaga’s Born This Way Foundation, a new Ad Council/Free to Be Foundation ad reinforcing the importance of personal responsibility for the well-being of others, and others.

- School Climate. School rules, staff behavior, and effectiveness of investigations should be addressed in the context of school climate.

Perceived Peer Norms
Students’ perspective of the predominant norms held by their peers appears to be the critically important factor.

When students clearly understand that their peers do not approve of bullying and strongly support positive peer intervention, the number of students who are willing to positively intervene increases!

Evidence-Grounded Strategies
The following approaches have been found to be effective in addressing the kinds of barriers and factors that impact positive peer intervention.

Social Norms Influence
The Youth Health and Safety Project has made effective use of local surveys to reduce bullying behavior.

- This project collects school-based data about students’ perspectives on bullying. This data is used to create posters that demonstrated the school’s norms related to bullying. In middle schools, this simple intervention reduced bullying by 17% to 35%.

Skill Development
University of New Hampshire’s Know Your Power.

- Encourages bystanders to intervene in situations involving dating violence. Posters that demonstrate problem situations and effective intervention strategies using text “bubbles” that demonstrate suggested statements and skills.

The Positive Behavior Interventions and Support’s bullying prevention program, Expect Respect.

- Suggests the use of a “stop” hand symbol to indicate to a peer that his or her behavior has crossed the line and to avoid providing attention to the one being aggressive.

International Institute for Restorative Practices.

- Has developed a list of questions that are suggested for use when interacting with someone who has engaged in hurtful behavior that can generate reflection and lead to reconciliation.

Psychology of Influence.

- Have identified approaches that influence behavior, including a focus on reciprocity (Golden Rule), commitment, social proof (social norms), likability, and authority.

Positive Norms & Effective Strategies Approach

Ensure a Positive School Climate
A positive norms and effective strategies approach should be designed as a supplement that supports the school’s more comprehensive program to support positive behavior and reduce harmful behavior.
• Key components of this comprehensive program should include a solid positive behavior support program, clear policies, a focus on social emotional intelligence, and an effective approach for principals to investigate and intervene in hurtful situations that are reported.
• Important components of this comprehensive approach that are specifically related to increasing positive peer intervention include:
  - Ensure staff understand their responsiveness to hurtful situations that will communicate important “social cues” to students.
  - Address concerns of diffusion of responsibility by ensuring students know they are equally important players in stopping hurtful situations.
  - Ensure that students know if there is a conflict between school rules/expectations and positive intervention to help student at serious risk, they should choose to help.

Reinforce Personal Values
Reinforce the values of personal responsibility for the well-being of others and acceptance of differences.
• Ensure these messages are a strong component of the school climate.
• Encourage parents to reinforce the importance of these values to their children in the context of a school program to reduce bullying.

Address Social Status Issue
It is not likely possible to change students’ positions on the school’s “social ladder.” Strategies to remove social status as a barrier include:
  - Empower the higher status students with strategies to ensure they know how to effectively intervene.
  - Increase the ranks of defenders by lowering the social status barrier using a positive norms approach to reinforce the very positive perspective of those who intervene.
  - Undermine the social status of those who engage in aggression using a positive norms approach.
  - Encourage use of strategies that are more private, such as privately reaching out to be kind, to reduce the potential of risk of failure or embarrassment.

Increase Social Self-Efficacy
To be an effective defender requires taking note of a negative situation, interpreting it accurately, feeling a personal responsibility to respond, and having the skills, resources, and sufficient “power” to effectively respond.19
• Three primary ways witnesses can positively intervene include:
  - Report concerns to an adult who can help. To do this, students need to know the circumstances when they should report--when someone could get hurt, their safety would be at risk, or intervention efforts have been ineffective. They also need to know how to report.
  - Reach out to be kind to the person targeted. There are many ways students can reach out. There is ample research that demonstrates the very powerful positive impact of having a defender reach out.20
  - Say “stop.” Saying “stop” publicly, requires a significant degree of confidence. Students can, however, work as a team with other students, just say “stop” and leave as not to give more attention to the one being aggressive. Students can also privately ask discuss the situation with the one being aggressive to encourage reflection and reconciliation. Students should be advised to keep themselves safe and not to retaliate.

Positive Peer Norms & Effective Strategies
To implement an approach that will reinforce positive norms requires obtaining data from the students on these issues.
• Conduct a school-based survey that will:
  - Assess school climate.
  - Assess student norms against hurtful behavior and in favor of positive intervention.
  - Determine the strategies students use to reach out to help others and their perceptions of barriers.
  - Gather incident data for needs assessment and evaluation.
• Use this data to support social norms messaging, effective skills instruction, needs assessment, and evaluation.
• Implement a student-led program to provide instruction to students that uses survey data and other guidance that focuses on norms and effective strategies.
Embrace Civility in the Digital Age

Embrace Civility in the Digital Age, a program of Center for Safe and Responsible Internet Use, promotes approaches that will best ensure all young people become cyber savvy and that seek to address youth risk in the digital age in a positive and restorative manner.


E-mail: info@embracecivility.org

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About the Author

Nancy Willard, M.S., J.D. is the director of the Embrace Civility in the Digital Age. She has degrees in special education and law, taught “at risk” children, practiced computer law, and was an educational technology consultant before focusing her professional attention on issues of youth risk in the digital age.


Note

A significantly longer document that provides in-depth analysis of the research is available on the Embrace Civility in the Digital Age web site.

Embrace Civility in the Digital Age’s new program, Be a Friend ~ Lend a Hand has been developed in accord with the insight presented in this document.


8 Pöyhönen, et. al. supra; Simona, et. al., supra; Salmivalli (2010), supra.


11 Pozzoli & Gini, supra


18 Cialdini, supra.
