

Template for a Letter from Doctor to School

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Just in case it is not glaringly obvious, which is unlikely, this letter template has been written by someone with a legal background, with the intent of allowing a clinician making it quite clear to a school district, if the evidence supports this, that his or her patient is being bullied, this is causing harm, and that the manner in which this situation is being handled has not been effective. Clinicians should feel absolutely free to soften this language if, based on their relationship with school staff or other insight, they think this would be more helpful.

The language provided below essentially lays the situation out in a relatively legalistic manner, with the intent to encourage action, without raising undue overreaction by the district. The greatest concern I would have about reporting a situation to a district or school is that they will overreact by employing even more aggressive punitive measures on the student(s) who are engaging in the hurtful behavior, which may be called for in some situations. However, this clearly also raises concerns of damage to the bullied student's reputation or retaliation by the one(s) being aggressive and his or her friends. To the extent possible, both in communications with the parents/guardians and school district, the imposition such punitive measures, unless clearly called for, should be avoided.

Clinicians likely do not have the time or ability to figure out who would be the appropriate person to send this to at any school their patient attends. Thus, my recommendation is for clinicians to have the name and contact information of a key staff person at the district level and to send this letter to this person.

If there are any indications that a school staff member is engaging in or encouraging hurtful acts, this is a situation that should be taken very seriously and only reported at the district level.

My patient (name of patient), who in the (grade) at (school) has been to see me for (number of times) in relation to concerns associated with (physical injury) (psychosomatic related illness) (other).

In questioning (name of patient) further, it appears likely that these medical concerns are associated with bullying behavior directed at him or her at school. I have attached to this letter the results of a questionnaire that I asked (name of patient) to complete, along with my additional notes regarding what is happening at school.

Notable, it appears that these hurtful incidents include (identify kinds of hurtful acts). Further, these hurtful acts have been both persistent, that is (describe frequency) as well as pervasive (describe number of students involved).

[If appropriate include: Further, (describe any evidence of staff involvement in being hurtful or encouraging such hurtful acts, note there are 2 questions on the questionnaire that could document this).]

As a result of these incidents, (name of patient) is having (describe medical concerns), as well as reporting (emotional concerns as documented on survey or in discussion). [If appropriate include: I have made a referral of (name of patient) to a mental health professional for additional screening for the presence of a trauma disorder associated with this bullying.] Further, as a result of these hurtful acts, (name of patient) has (describe negative impact on learning and on school activities). The negative impact of these hurtful acts on (name of patient) are clearly in accord with the research literature on the harmful impact of bullying on children and teens.

(Name of patient) and his/her parent/guardian have reported this/these incidents (describe how and describe result.) [If appropriate include: (Name of patient) has informed me that he/she is not longer telling his/her parent/guardian and/or school staff about all of the hurtful incidents, because reporting has (never been effective in resolving the situation/has only made things worse.) [If appropriate include: (Name of patient) has informed me that (report insight on what staff who have witnessed such hurtful incidents and how staff have responded.)]

[If appropriate include: I would note that (name of patient) is (identify protected class) and it appears that these hurtful acts are related to his/her protected class status under (Title IX - sex or gender-based, Title IV - race, national origin, including religion based on national origin, Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act/Americans With Disabilities Act. (Elaborate related to what patient has reported was said.))]

[Alternative: While (name of patient) does not identify as being a sexual minority, it appears that he/she is being harassed based on the perception he/she is. (Elaborate related to what patient has reported was said.))]

[Alternative: (Name of patient) has a medical condition of obesity. As you might be aware, in June 2013, the American Medical Association labeled obesity as a disease. Although it is unknown how the Americans with Disabilities Act will be interpreted for students suffering bullying in school, it does appear, from my perspective, that (name of patient) is being harassed based on his/her medical disability.]

[If appropriate include: Further, it is my understanding that (name of patient) receives special education services and has an Individual Education Plan. It is my understanding based on a Dear Colleague Letter issued by the U.S. Department of Education's Office for Special Education and Rehabilitation Services on August 20, 2013, that it is necessary to address the concerns of a student on an IEP who is being bullied in the context of an IEP meeting and that it is not permissible to restrict this student's instruction and involvement in the mainstream educational environment as a manner of seeking to address such bullying. (Name of patient's) parent/guardian has informed me that an IEP meeting has not been held, nor has one been scheduled to address this concern.]

[If appropriate include: I also asked (name of patient) and his/her parent/guardian about how the school has handled this situation. He/she has informed me (describe - specifically describe the negative impact on patient resulting from imposition of punishment on the students who were hurtful).]

It is my understanding that the imposition of punishments on students in bullying situations can have a negative effect of undermining the bullied student's reputation and leading to retaliation.

[If appropriate include: This appears to have happened in this situation.] I have counseled (name of patient) and his/her parent/guardian that what appears to be required for schools under a Dear Colleague Letter from the U.S. Department of Education's Office for Civil Rights, dated October 26, 2010, to address the underlying climate that appears to be supporting these hurtful acts from occurring, along with holding those engaging in hurtful behavior accountable.

I am sure that you and (name of school) will be appropriately responsive to these concerns. I will be following up with (name of patient's) parent/guardian to determine progress in addressing these concerns. If there is any way I can be of further assistance, please do not hesitate to ask.

Guidance to support the use of this document is available at: <http://www.embracecivility.org/positiverelationsatschool/>.

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