



Embrace Civility in the Digital Age

Survey Findings Document a High Level of Ineffectiveness of Current Bullying Prevention Approach

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February, 9, 2016

The results of a national survey of 1,540 U. S. secondary students conducted by Embrace Civility in the Digital Age in October 2015 revealed a high level of ineffectiveness of staff responses to hurtful situations (“bullying”), insight into causes of hurtful behavior, and evidence of positive values held by the majority of students.

The current bullying prevention approach that schools are encouraged, or required by state statute, views “bullying” as an act of defiance against the authority of the school. This approach is focused on establishing rules against bullying, requiring staff to stop bullying if they witness this occurring, establishing reporting systems for students to report these hurtful incidents, and punishing those who are hurtful. The current approach also focuses solely on incidents of “bullying,” which excludes other forms of hurtful behavior. Guidance provided to educators frequently characterizes those who engage in bullying as “at risk” students.

These survey findings, backed up by extensive research outlined by Embrace Civility in the Digital Age, calls into serious question the effectiveness of this recommended or required “Just say ‘No’” approach.

Key Findings Regarding Staff Effectiveness and Student Reporting

This survey asked students how frequently someone was hurtful to them, how upset they were, and how effective they felt in getting the hurtful situations to stop. The intentionally broad definition of “hurtful” included bullying, but was expanded to other hurtful behaviors. All hurtful interactions, whether one-directional or bi-directional, can disrupt the school environment and interfere with student learning.

Students who were “more vulnerable” were identified. These students were those who experienced someone being hurtful to them once or twice a week or almost

daily, were upset or very upset, and felt that it was very difficult or they were powerless to get this to stop. Students who reported someone was hurtful were asked how staff members, if present, responded and whether things got better, stayed the same, or got worse. They were also asked whether they told a staff member and, if so, whether things got better, stayed the same, or got worse. If they did not tell a staff member, they were asked why they did not do so.

Nine percent (9%) of students were identified as “more vulnerable.” Based on an estimated population of 25,000,000 U.S. secondary students, 9% equates to 2,250,000 students. Given the sample size, there is a 3% margin of error.

From the perspective of these “more vulnerable” students, staff members were present 69% of the time. Afterwards, things reportedly got better only 13% of the time, stayed the same 47% of the time, and got worse 45% of the time. Based on other research and analysis, several factors appear associated with this low level of reported staff effectiveness:

- These incidents frequently occur in classrooms and hallways, when staff have the compelling responsibility to get many students settled down to their studies. Staff often do not receive helpful guidance into how to respond in these situations.
- The statutory and policy focus on “bullying,” as distinguished from all forms of hurtful behavior, may cause staff to not respond if the hurtful situations appear to be bi-directional.
- The insight staff generally receive regarding “bullying” characterized those who engage in bullying as “at risk” students. Therefore, staff may not recognize the hurtful acts of social skilled students who are denigrating others to achieve social dominance or consider this a matter to be concerned about.

Sixty-four percent (64%) of the “more vulnerable” students did not talk with a school staff member about these hurtful incidents. Sixteen percent (16%) of the students told a school staff member and this resulted in things staying the same. Nine percent (9%) told and this resulted in things getting worse. Just 11% told and this resulted in things getting better.

Students who did not tell a school staff member indicated they did not do so because they did not think a staff member would do anything to help, this would make things worse, they probably deserved it, they would be blamed, or the hurtful student would retaliate.

The evidence from this survey documents a high level of ineffectiveness in staff responses to hurtful incidents, whether witnessed or reported, and that only a minority of students report these hurtful incidents to staff. There is also ample other research evidence that documents serious challenges regarding this recommended approach.

In sum, the evidence from this survey demonstrates that the approach that schools are encouraged or required by statute to implement to address “bullying” is generally ineffective in responding to many of the hurtful incidents experienced by students. Clearly, it is necessary for schools to rethink how they are seeking to reduce all forms of hurtful interactions between students, especially how staff respond when such hurtful incidents are witnessed or reported.

The Nature of Hurtful Behavior

Concerns associated with the statutory and policy focus on “bullying,” as distinguished from other forms of hurtful behavior, were also evident in other data. The data demonstrates that many of these hurtful incidents involve what appears to be bi-directional cycles of hurtful acts--a hurtful response to being treated badly.

Eighty-one percent (81%) of students who reported they were “frequently” hurtful and 69% of students who were “ever” hurtful also reported that someone had been hurtful to them. Having someone be hurtful to you appears to be the risk factor. Being hurtful appears to be the outcome.

The two top reasons students provided for being hurtful were that they acted fast without thinking and the person had been hurtful to them or a friend--in other words, impulsive behavior and retaliation.

All students appear to have mixed feelings about retaliation. They think retaliation may be an appropriate response in some circumstances, however, when hurtful retaliation responses were described

more specifically, students did not think these responses were generally helpful.

Students also thought it was generally helpful for those who are treated badly to immediately respond. Likely students think that an immediate response shows personal strength. But an immediate response, when angry, could further the cycle of hurtful acts.

This insight is of significant interest, because it appears that reducing impulsive retaliation--and peer support thereof--could result in an improvement in student relations. Fortunately, there are solid, research-based strategies to reduce both impulsive behavior and retaliation.

Key Findings Regarding Student Norms and Values

Students were asked about their norms and values related to bullying and their insight into why they would not engage in hurtful behavior, how to effectively respond to hurtful situations, and their thoughts on stepping in to help when they witnessed hurtful situations.

The vast majority of students expressed disapproval of their peers being hurtful to others. Students admire those who are kind and respectful to others, step in to help if they witness hurtful situations, respond to hurtful situations in a positive way, and stop themselves and remedy the harm. Students do not admire those who support others being hurtful, laugh when they see hurtful situations, create hurtful drama to get attention, or think it is “cool” to denigrate others.

Students approved of responses to hurtful situations that reflected a high amount of personal power, such as thinking to yourself that you will not give this hurtful person control over how you feel about yourself and calmly telling this person to stop, as well as personal responsibility, such as apologizing if they have been hurtful. The most important reason students indicated they would not be hurtful was how they would feel if someone did this to them.

Students described those who step in to help with such words as: “Brave, Kind, Hero, Nice, Courageous, and Caring.” The majority of students indicated that when they witnessed a hurtful situation, they stepped in to help. However, those who were treated badly reported a much lower level of receiving assistance from peers.

These findings can be positively interpreted as an expression of students’ desire to step in to help, but that there are barriers between intent and action. The key barriers students identified to stepping in to help were not knowing what they could do and their

perspective that the social norms at their school would not support such intervention.

These survey findings support the conclusion that students should be empowered as leaders and assisted in gaining greater skills to fully support efforts to foster positive relations and reduce hurtful behaviors in their schools.

Conclusion

The implications of these survey findings are that the approaches to bullying that schools are encouraged or required to implement must be fundamentally altered in order to improve effectiveness. New positive approaches must reflect the actual circumstances and dynamics of potentially hurtful situations, more effectively respond to the underlying concerns of the students, and more effectively engage students in leadership roles to foster positive relations. This effort must be grounded in an overall, multi-tiered focus on establishing a positive school climate.

Embrace Civility in the Digital Age promotes a 21st Century approach to address hurtful youth behavior. This approach promotes the positive values held by young people, empowers young people with effective skills and resiliency, and encourages young people to be helpful allies who positively intervene when they witness peers being hurt or at risk. This approach also focuses on increasing the effectiveness of adults in supporting young people and effectively responding to the hurtful incidents that occur.

Embrace Civility in the Digital Age

Embrace Civility in the Digital Age is releasing ***Be a Leader!*** a free research-based instructional program for students that focuses on empowering students to reach out to help others, tell those being hurtful to stop, report serious concerns, stop themselves and make amends, and to be positively powerful if treated badly. Also being released is ***Embrace Civility: Fostering Positive Relations in School***, a professional development resource for school staff that provides insight into how to better empower students to foster positive relations and effectively respond when hurtful situations are witnessed or reported.