



Embrace Civility Student Survey

Embrace Civility in the Digital Age

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February 9, 2016

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Executive Summary

Results of a survey of U.S. secondary students reveals a high level of ineffectiveness of staff responses to hurtful situations (bullying), insight into significant causes of hurtful behavior, and evidence of positive values held by the majority of students.

The current bullying prevention approach is for schools to have rules against bullying, require that staff supervise, tell students to report if they are bullied, and punish the wrong-doer.

A national survey of 1,549 secondary students on bullying and hurtful behavior was conducted by Embrace Civility in the Digital Age in October 2015 calls into serious question the effectiveness of this approach. Students were asked questions about hurtful incidents. “Hurtful” was defined for them as including what is typically called “bullying,” but also including other hurtful interactions.

More Vulnerable students were identified as those frequently being treated badly, who were feeling distressed and unable to get the hurtful situation to stop. Staff members were frequently present and things rarely got better. The vast majority did not report these incidents and for those who did, this did not often make things better.

Impulsive retaliation appears to play a major factor in many of these hurtful incidents. Over two-thirds of students who reported they had been hurtful also reported someone had been hurtful to them.

The vast majority of students hold positive values against hurtful behavior and clearly desire to foster positive relations among their peers, to step in to help if they witness hurtful situations, and to resolve hurtful situations in a restorative manner.

The implications of this survey, along with insight from current research, are that the approaches to bullying that schools are encouraged or required to implement must be fundamentally altered in order to improve effectiveness by reflecting the actual circumstances and dynamics of potentially hurtful situations, by more effectively responding to the underlying concerns of the students, and by more effectively engaging students in leadership roles to foster positive relations.

Key Findings Regarding Staff Effectiveness & 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 situation to stop. The definition provided for “hurtful” included bullying, as well as other hurtful behaviors.

Based on the responses to these three questions, 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 also asked how staff members, if present, responded and whether things got better, stayed the same, or got worse.

Students 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.

Briefly, the key findings regarding staff effectiveness and hurtful behavior are:

- 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 the 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.
- Sixty-four percent (64%) of the More Vulnerable students did not talk with a school staff member. Sixteen percent (16%) of the students told and things stayed the same. Nine percent (9%) told and things got worse. Eleven percent (11%) told and things got better.
- Those who did not tell a staff member indicated they did not do so because they did not think a school staff member would do anything to help or they feared this would make things worse, that they probably deserved to be treated like this, that they would be blamed, or that the hurtful student would retaliate.

The current approach that schools are encouraged, or required by state statute, to implement to reduce bullying 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 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. The evidence also demonstrates that many of these hurtful incidents involve what appears to be bidirectional cycles of hurtful acts--a hurtful response to being treated badly.

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 not effectively helping the vast majority of students who are treated badly by peers..

Clearly, it is necessary for schools to rethink how they are seeking to reduce bullying and other hurtful incidents and how staff respond when such hurtful incidents are witnessed or reported.

Key Findings Regarding Hurtful Behavior & Prior Relationships

- Eighty-one percent (81%) of students who reported they were “frequently” hurtful and 69% of students who were “ever” hurtful also reported someone was hurtful to them. Thirty-seven percent (37%) of More

vulnerable students also reported they had been hurtful. Having someone be hurtful to you appears to be the risk factor. Being hurtful is the outcome, especially when telling a staff member did not make things better.

- 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--impulsive behavior and retaliation.
- Both students engaging in hurtful behavior and those who were treated badly report a wide range of prior relationships, including no real connection, best friends, more recent argument, and prior hurtful acts.

The current approach also focuses solely on incidents of “bullying,” which excludes other forms of hurtful behavior. “Bullying” is defined in entirely different ways in the guidance provided to educators, as compared to definitions in state statutes. School staff are required to investigate hurtful incidents to determine whether “bullying” has occurred, so that “the bully” can be disciplined.

These findings document a wide range of prior relationships, as well as a significant amount of bidirectional hurtful acts occurring. These findings again suggest that the current bullying prevention approach will not effectively address the wide range of hurtful incidents that are occurring in schools, which cause emotional harm to students and disrupt student learning.

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 witness hurtful situations. Students who reported they were hurtful or someone was hurtful to them also were asked followup questions.

Briefly, the key findings regarding student norms, values, and experiences are:

- The vast majority of students disapprove 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 strive to 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 most highly approve responses to hurtful situations that reflect a high amount of personal

power, 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 describe 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.
- 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 the school would not support such intervention.
- All students appear to have mixed feelings about retaliation, that is, they think retaliation may be an appropriate response in some circumstances. They also think that those who are treated badly should immediately respond. This insight is of significant interest, because it appears that reducing impulsive retaliation--and peer support thereof--could result in a significant improvement in student relations.

These survey findings support the conclusion that students should be empowered as leaders in the efforts to foster positive relations and reduce hurtful behaviors in their schools and specifically require greater support in self-regulation and avoiding retaliation. Fortunately, there are research proven approaches to address both of these issues.

Student Perspectives on Effectiveness of Staff Interventions, Reporting Hurtful Incidents & the Nature of Hurtful Behavior

More Vulnerable Students

As noted, this survey asked students how frequently someone was hurtful to them, how upset they were, and how effective they felt in getting the hurtful situation to stop.

Using a combination of the responses to these three questions, students who were considered More Vulnerable were identified. These students are ones who reported someone was hurtful once a week or more, they were upset or very upset, and they found it very difficult or they felt powerless to stop the hurtful incidents from occurring. For these More Vulnerable students, 56% said these hurtful acts occurred almost daily, 68% said they were very upset, and 67% said they felt powerless to stop this.

Nine percent (9%) of the students who responded to this survey were considered to be More Vulnerable based on this criteria. Based on an estimated secondary student population in U.S. schools of 25,000,000, this equates to over 2.2 million students who find themselves in this situation in secondary schools in the U.S.

Students were asked how school staff responded, if present, and whether things got better, stayed the same, or got worse after staff response. They were also asked if they told a school staff member and, if so, how the staff responded and whether things got better, stayed the same, or got worse. If they did not tell a school staff member, they were asked why they did not do so.

Response of Staff Witnesses

Overall, students indicated that from their perspective a staff member was present 65% of the time and students reported that after this:

- 30% Things got better.
- 49% Things stayed the same.
- 21% Things got worse

However, the More Vulnerable students fared much worse. For these students, staff were reportedly present 69% of the time and students reported that after this:

- 13% Things got better
- 47% Things stayed the same.
- 40% Things got worse.

What students reported made things better were when staff:

- 64% Stepped in to help.
- 47% Told the person being hurtful to stop.
- 38% Punished the person being hurtful.
- 37% Talked with both of us together to resolve the situation.
- 31% Reported the incident to the office.

For all students reported staff responses that made things stay the same or get worse were when staff ignored the situation or just watched. What reportedly made things get worse for the More Vulnerable students were when staff:

- 54% Ignored the situation.
- 46% Just watched.
- 43% Made me feel as if I were at fault.

Telling a Staff Member

Overall, only 32% of all students told a school staff member. Only 36% of the More Vulnerable students told a staff member.

Only 26% of the students considered Less Vulnerable--those who reported someone was hurtful once or twice a month, they were not upset, and they were able to get the situation to stop--told a staff member. The reason these students did not tell was that they had resolved the hurtful situation.

Overall, after students told a staff member, students reported:

- 48% Things got better.
- 39% Stayed the same.
- 15% Things got worse.

Again, the situation was worse for the More Vulnerable students. After these students told a staff member, they reported:

- 30% Things got better.
- 45% Things stayed the same.
- 25% Things got worse.

What reportedly made things worse for the More Vulnerable students were:

- 54% Ignored me.
- 46% Made me feel as if I were at fault.
- 38% Told me to stop doing what I was doing.
- 38% Appeared to support the student being hurtful.
- 38% Also did something hurtful.

The same kinds of reported responses appeared to make things better or stay the same. These included intervening with the hurtful student, supporting the student who was treated badly, and helping resolve the situation.

However, the level of intensity of the staff intervention, based on more steps taken by this staff member, appeared to play a role in making things better. For the More Vulnerable Students, what reportedly made things better were:

- 75% Told the student being hurtful to stop.
- 75% Punished the student who was hurtful.
- 75% Talked with both of us apart to resolve the situation.
- 68% Helped me figure out ways I could handle the situation.
- 63% Told me if I were ever upset I could come and talk.
- 63% Checked in with me later to see if things were okay.

- 56% Talked with us both to resolve the situation.

Why Students Did Not Report

For the 64% of More Vulnerable students who did not tell a school staff member, the reasons given were:

- 50% Did not think a school staff member would do anything to help.
- 44% Thought that a school staff member might make things worse.
- 35% Thought I would be blamed.
- 35% I probably deserved it.
- 33% The student being hurtful would likely have retaliated.

Clearly, based on the data from those students who did talk to an adult, these reasons appear to be grounded in fact--likely past experiences in asking for help from an adult.

Overall Findings for More Vulnerable Students

Thus, looking at these findings from an overall perspective, the current level of the “tell an adult” approach to bullying for More Vulnerable students is:

- 64% Did not tell a staff member.
- 11% Told a staff member and things got better.
- 16% Told a staff member and things stayed the same.
- 9% Told a staff member and things got worse.

A dismal 11% level of effectiveness in the current approach must result in proactive reassessment of the current recommended approach.

It should be noted that this study is not the first to identify the concern of staff effectiveness. The *Youth Voice Project* asked students who were repeatedly bullied and had experienced moderate to very severe levels of distress whether they reported to an adult at school and, if so, whether things got better, stayed the same, or got worse.¹ The findings indicated:

- Elementary (grade 5). 46% did not tell an adult, 29% told and things got better, 17% told and things stayed the same, 11% told and things got worse.
- Middle school (grades 6 to 8). 68% did not tell an adult at school, 12% told and things got better, 8% told and things stayed the same, 12% told and things got worse.
- High school (grades 9 to 12). 76% did not tell an adult at school, 7% told and things got better, 8% told and things stayed the same, 9% told and things got worse.

Staff Responses to Students Who Were Hurtful

Additional insight into the effectiveness of staff interventions was obtained in the responses to the questions of students who reported that they had been hurtful. These students indicated that from their perspective staff was present 78% of the time. These students reported:

- 28% Things got better.
- 54% Things stayed the same.
- 18% Things got worse.

Fascinatingly, the highest reported responses by staff that these hurtful students thought made things worse were:

- 33% Just watched.
- 30% Ignored the situation.
- 28% Told me to stop.
- 26% Appeared to support me.

What these hurtful students thought made things better were:

- 44% Stepped in to help.
- 42% Told me to stop.
- 41% Talked with both of us together to resolve the situation.
- 34% Talked with both of us apart to resolve the situation.
- 33% Punished me.

It appears that students who were hurtful desired staff assistance in resolving these situations.

“Told me to stop” was high on the list of leading to all three outcomes. However, on another question regarding what had ultimately happened, only 3% of these students indicated they stopped being hurtful because they were told to stop by a school staff member. The vast majority reported they had stopped because they decided to, a classmate or the one who they had targeted told them to stop, or they had resolved the situation.

Implications

The results of this survey call attention to the significant challenges in the primary approach schools are currently being advised to use to reduce bullying.

It is presumed that school staff do want to respond to these hurtful situations in an effective manner and will be dismayed by these findings. Based on extensive research on these issues, it is suggested that the following key factors likely play a significant role in the lack of effectiveness of

staff in responding to these hurtful situations and the lack of student reporting. These factors include:

- **The focus on “bullying” as a violation of a school rule, rather than a social skills challenge.** The authoritarian, rules-and-punishment-based approach that assumes that “bullying” can be effectively stopped by making rules against such behavior and punishing students who violate the rules. This approach dramatically shifts the focus away from important life lessons and learning opportunities for the students and the school community. By treating these situations as disciplinary matters, the school staff member usurps the position of the student who was treated badly, for whom remedy is deserved, and turns the matter into a violation of a rule that is imposed by the adult authority. Clearly, a significant number of these hurtful situations are bidirectional in nature. Being treated in a hurtful way is a risk factor for being hurtful.
- **What educators are taught about the nature of bullying and other hurtful behavior.** What educators are taught about students who engage in bullying is incomplete. Most instruction for educators focuses solely on the concerns of students who have significant challenges and are also aggressive. Recent research has demonstrated that the students who most frequently engage in hurtful behavior, especially at the secondary level, are the socially-skilled “popular” students who are engaging in hurtful behavior to achieve social dominance. Because these “social climbers” have excellent social skills, they are very effective at being hurtful to their peers using strategies that are not as easily detected by school staff. Many of these situations involve bidirectional cycles of hurtful acts.
- **The failure to focus on the empowerment of targeted students.** The most common description of students who are “bullied” presents these students as lacking in sufficient strength to positively and powerfully respond. There is ample research documenting the long lasting harms, but an abject lack of research on how to prevent these harms. Believing these students are incapable of becoming empowered and effectively responding when someone treats them badly supports their continued victimization. Rather than view these targeted students as inherently lacking in personal strength, intervention efforts must be shifted to a focus on empowering them to better respond to hurtful situations on their own and addressing the harm that was caused.

Hurtful Behavior by Staff

Students were also asked how frequently in the last month, they had witnessed a school staff member be hurtful to a student. Student responses were: 9% Almost every day. 12%

Once or twice a week. 21% Once or twice a month. 58% Never.

The results on questions about student-on-student hurtful behavior--how frequently they had witnessed a student be hurtful to another student, been hurtful, or had someone be hurtful to them--were then analyzed based on their response to the question about witnessing staff being hurtful to students.²

Students were classified as “ever” or “never” having witnessed staff being hurtful to a student. “Ever” included those who witnessed such hurtful behavior once or twice a month, once or twice a week, or almost daily.

The results were significant. Those students who had “ever” witnessed staff be hurtful to a student were significantly more likely to report witnessing, engaging in, or being targeted by hurtful behavior.

This analysis revealed that 85% of students who “ever” witnessed a staff member be hurtful to a student indicated that they had also witnessed a student being hurtful to a student, whereas, only 56% of students who “never” witnessed a staff member be hurtful to a student indicated that they also had witnessed a student being hurtful to another student.³

Fifty percent (50%) of students who “ever” witnessed a staff member be hurtful to a student indicated that they had engaged in hurtful behavior directed at another student, whereas, only 13% of students who “never” witnessed a staff member be hurtful to a student engaged in hurtful behavior directed at another student.⁴

Lastly, 73% of students who “ever” witnessed a staff member be hurtful to a student also indicated that someone had been hurtful to them, whereas, only 36% of students who “never” witnessed a staff member be hurtful to a student reported that someone had been hurtful to them⁵.

As noted, students who reported they were involved in hurtful incidents either as the one who was hurtful or the target were also asked how staff responded, if present, and the outcome. Students who reported they had been hurtful and they had also witnessed staff “ever” be hurtful reported the top three staff responses to the hurtful situation were: Ignored the situation. Told them to stop. Just watched. Whereas, hurtful students who had “never” witnessed staff be hurtful reported the top three responses were: Stepped in to help. Talked with both of us together to resolve the situation. Ignored the situation.

For those students who indicated they were hurtful, when these students had “ever” witnessed staff be hurtful, things got better after a response by staff only 24% of the time. However, when students had “never” witnessed staff be hurtful to a student, things got better after a response by staff 49% of the time.⁶

Students who reported someone had been hurtful to them and they had also witnessed staff “ever” be hurtful reported the top three staff responses to the hurtful situation were: Ignored the situation. Told the person being hurtful to stop. Just watched. Whereas, targeted students who had “never” witnessed staff be hurtful reported the top three responses were: Stepped in to help. Told the person being hurtful to stop. Talked with both of us together to resolve the situation.

When students who had experienced someone be hurtful to them had “ever” witnessed staff be hurtful to a student, things got better after a response by staff only 22% of the time. However, when students had “never” witnessed staff be hurtful to a student, things got better after a response by staff 49% of the time.⁷

Implications

The issue of staff being hurtful to students is enormously important. It appears that in schools where staff treat students in hurtful ways, this results in significantly higher levels of student hurtful behavior directed at peers. An alternative way to approach an analysis of this data is to consider the dramatic declines that could be achieved to reduce student against hurtful student hurtful behavior by reducing staff hurtful behavior directed at students.

The Nature of Hurtful Behavior & Prior Relationships

Being Hurtful & Having Someone be Hurtful to Them

There is clearly a relationship between being hurtful and having others be hurtful to you. Looking at the data from the perspective of students who reported they were hurtful:

- 81% who were Frequently hurtful (once or twice a week or almost daily) also reported someone was hurtful to them.
- 69% of students who were Ever hurtful (once or twice a month, once or twice a week or almost daily) also reported someone was hurtful to them.
- 40% of those who reported they were Never hurtful reported someone was hurtful to them.

Looking at the data from the perspective of students who reported someone was hurtful to them:

- 56% of students who reported someone Ever was hurtful to them had Never been hurtful to another.
- 88% of students who reported no one had been hurtful to them had Never been hurtful to another.
- 63% of the More Vulnerable students had Never been hurtful to another.

A risk estimate was computed for these findings. Being hurt is the risk factor. Engaging in hurtful behavior is the outcome. Students who had Ever engaged in hurtful behavior were 3.6 times more likely to have been hurt than students who had Never engaged in hurtful behavior.

As is documented below, retaliation for being treated in a hurtful way was a key reason given for engaging in hurtful behavior.

While some of these situations are more one-direction in nature, clearly many hurtful situations could more accurately be described as cycles of hurtful acts and retaliation. Thus, in an investigation and intervention, addressing the issue of prior relationships and prior hurtful acts by both parties is important.

When students who are identified as being hurtful are then punished by the school, without addressing the fact that others have been hurtful to them, all schools are doing is adding to the harm.

There appears to be no relationship in making a decision to tell a staff member based on whether or not the student who was treated badly had also been hurtful. Thirty two percent (32%) of students who were Ever hurtful and had someone be hurtful to them told an adult and 32% of those who were Never hurtful and had someone be hurtful to them told an adult.

There appears to be a significant difference on the outcome of telling an adult on whether students were Ever hurtful.

- 33% of students who had someone hurtful to them, told an adult and things got better were Ever hurtful.
- 53% of students who had someone hurtful to them, told an adult and things stayed the same or got worse were Ever hurtful.

It appears that also being hurtful does not have a relationship with the decision to tell an adult that someone has been hurtful to you. However, the outcome of telling an adult if someone has been hurtful, whether things get better, appears to have a significant correlation with not being hurtful. This could mean that if things did not get better, the student retaliated or that staff were less effective in resolving situations where both students are being hurtful.

Prior Relationships

Students who were hurtful and those who were treated badly both reported a variety of prior relationships. Highest on both lists were that they were good friends, they had no connection, and things were fine between them. Students who were More Vulnerable reported a higher rate of ongoing hurtful relationships.

Implications

These findings must be considered in connection with the guidance provided to school staff that their focus should be on determining whether “bullying,” variously defined, has occurred and then applying a disciplinary consequence on “the bully.” There appear to be a wide range of potential relationships that underly hurtful situations, which will require a broader focus on fostering positive relations and resolving a broad range of types of hurtful incidents.

Student Perspectives on Hurtful Student Behavior

This survey also sought to identify additional student perspectives about hurtful interpersonal behavior, especially focusing on identifying students’ norms and values and their thoughts on effective responses when treated badly, why they would not be hurtful, why they were hurtful, and stepping in to help.

Who Students Admire

Students clearly do not support hurtful behavior--with 89% of students reporting that they do not like to see a student being hurtful to another.

Students admire those who engage in these actions:

- 88% Are respectful and kind to others.
- 86% Reach out to help someone who is treated badly.
- 81% Tell someone who is being hurtful to stop.
- 71% Help someone who was hurtful decide to make things right.
- 65% Were treated badly and responded in a positive way. 61% Report serious concerns to an adult.
- 61% Were hurtful, but stopped and made things right.

Students do not admire those who engage in these actions:

- 56% Ignore hurtful situations involving others.
- 82% Laugh when seeing that someone is being treated badly.
- 84% Create hurtful "drama" to get attention.
- 84% Think it is "cool" to be disrespectful to others.

Students reported mixed feelings about those who were treated badly and engaged in retaliation, which will be discussed below.

Those Who Help

Students describe those who step in to help with such words as these:

In open ended questions asking how they could reach out to be kind to someone who had been treated badly or tell someone being hurtful to stop, the students expressed excellent ideas on what to do or say.

The majority of students indicated that when they witnessed a hurtful situation, they stepped in to help in a variety of ways. However, those who indicated someone was hurtful to them reported a much lower level of receiving assistance from peers.

This finding can be positively interpreted as an expressed desire of students to step in to help. However, there appear to be barriers between such positive intent and action.

The key barriers students identified to stepping in to help were:

- 59% I didn't know what I could do.
- 34% It was none of my business.
- 32% I could have failed and embarrassed myself.
- 28% Other students might have teased me if I tried to help.
- 28% School staff is supposed to handle this.

The first identified barrier reflects students' lack of comprehensive skills needed to safely and effectively step in to help. The following barriers all reflect students' perspective that the social norms at the school, imparted by staff and students, would not support their stepping in to help. Both of these factors can be better addressed through instruction and a focus on the actual student norms of admiration for those who help.

Why Not Be Hurtful

Students were asked the three most important reasons they would not be hurtful to another, The three top reasons were:

- 78% How I would feel if someone did this to me.
- 50% How I would feel about myself.
- 36% What my parents would think.

As noted, students were also asked an open-ended question about what they would say to someone who was being hurtful. Many of the statements they provided were a version of the "golden rule." For example: "Would like to be treated like that?" "Imagine if it was you." "Treat others the way you want to be treated."

How to Respond if Someone is Hurtful

When asked their opinion on what responses, when someone was hurtful, were generally helpful, generally not helpful, or mixed, the top generally helpful responses were:

- 61% To tell themselves they will not give this person the power to make them feel bad.
- 57% Apologize if they have also been hurtful.
- 56% Immediately respond.
- 55% Calmly tell the hurtful person to stop.

However, students do not think responding in a hurtful way, such as getting into a fight or saying or posting hurtful things about or to the person, are generally helpful responses.

While 49% of students indicated reporting the incident to the office was generally helpful, in another question, 62% of the students thought that it was not that likely or not at all likely that students in their school would report.

These responses indicate that students seek to be empowered to respond effectively to hurtful situations and to accept personal responsibility for hurtful acts they have engaged in.

What Happened After

Students who were hurtful were asked what best described what happened after this incident and reported:

- 21% I realized that I should not do this, so I stopped.
- 16% Truthfully, I have not stopped being hurtful.
- 13% I just decided to stop for no specific reason.
- 12% The person I was hurtful to and I resolved the difficulty.
- 12% Other reason I stopped.
- 7% A friend told me to stop, and so I did.
- 6% The person I was hurtful to told me to stop, and so I did.
- 5% Another student told me to stop, and so I did.
- 5% My parents told me to stop, and so I did.
- 3% A school staff person told me to stop, and so I did.

Note the degree to which these students reported they resolved these hurtful situations by themselves or in relationship with peers, including the one who was hurtful and the low level of impact of adult intervention. This finding is supported by an understanding of the developmental priorities of teens.

Impulsive Retaliation

Students who indicated they had been hurtful to another student in the last month were then asked what they were thinking at the time. The two key reasons students said they were hurtful were:

- 47% I acted too fast when I was angry and really did not "think."
- 44% This student had been hurtful to me or a friend of mine.

The evidence of bidirectional hurtful acts also supports the conclusion that a significant amount of hurtful behavior can be characterized as cycles of hurtful acts.

It appears from the responses to questions of all students, that many students have mixed feelings about retaliation. As noted above, students reported they admired those who were treated badly and responded in a positive way. They also think apologizing if you were hurtful is an effective response.

Also, as reported above, students also overwhelmingly did not think that hurtful responses, such as getting into a fight or saying or posting hurtful things to or about a person, were generally effective ways to respond if someone was hurtful.

However, 52% appeared to think that retaliation may be appropriate in some circumstances and 30% indicated they admired someone who was treated badly and retaliated. Clearly, the issue of retaliation must be addressed.

Also note that many students thought immediately responding was generally effective. If this immediate response is to calmly tell the student being hurtful to stop, this is likely a helpful response. The danger of an immediate response clearly is acting when angry and being hurtful.

It is likely that students consider an immediate response to show more power. However, if the immediate response is a hurtful act, as this frequently appears to be, this clearly will not act to resolve these hurtful situations.

The combination of responses by students provides insight to support better strategies to reduce hurtful behavior. Significantly, there are solid, research-based approaches that can help students increase their ability to self-regulate to avoid impulsive behavior and to decrease retaliation.

Implications

These survey findings provide insight into the positive norms and values held by the vast majority of students and clearly indicate the desire of these students to foster positive relations and address hurtful situations in a restorative manner.

To better address these barriers, schools must empower students with a more effective range of skills they can use to safely and effectively help and better communicate the positive norms and values held by the majority of their students regarding their admiration for those who step in to help.

Conclusions

Schools are strongly advised of the need to reassess the approach they have implemented to address bullying. The current authoritarian, rule and punishment based approach, which schools are encouraged to implement and often required by state statute to implement, does not appear to be having a positive effect.

Leaders in this field are now recommending a shift to a focus on engaging all members of the school community, including students, to build a positive school. and foster positive relations.

It is necessary that educators gain a greater understanding of the different forms of hurtful behavior, especially the hurtful behavior of more socially skilled students who are seeking social dominance and the incidents that are more bidirectional in nature, and more effective approaches for staff to intervene.

Given the positive norms and values of students reflected in this survey, educators are encouraged to focus more significantly on strategies to empower students to foster positive relations.

Efforts to integrate social-emotional learning, cultural competency, growth mindset, mindfulness, and restorative practices into schools are clearly supported by this data.

The following specific strategies are recommended:

- Revise current staff intervention approaches and provide more effective professional development for staff for when they witness hurtful situations. Special attention must be paid to identifying those students who are More Vulnerable and ensuring appropriate follow-up to ensure the hurtful situations are resolved.
- Improve the effectiveness of interventions when students reach out to request assistance from staff. Simply repeatedly telling students to "tell an adult" and setting up new reporting systems are not approaches that will lead to greater numbers of students reporting--if when they do so there is not a significant likelihood that things will get better. This will require a shift from intervention responses that are disciplinary in nature to approaches that seek to resolve and restore relationships that have gone amiss and address the social skills challenges of all involved students.
- Evaluate the effectiveness of interventions in more serious situations. A district-wide post-incident evaluation system is strongly recommended. This system should support a determination of which situations require continued staff involvement, as well as the ability to assess the effectiveness of various intervention approaches in each school.

- Address the concerns of Marginalized students who are more frequently hurtful and those who are More Vulnerable using an approach grounded in Multiple Tier System of Supports (MTSS). Generally, a Tier II or III MTSS approach is implemented to address student misbehavior. However, ongoing intervention strategies that provide support, including a routine, positive-focused check-in/check-out, can be developed to provide essential support to students who experience relationship challenges. For students on Individual Education Plans or 504 Plans, this can be integrated into the plans.
- Strengthen and better communicate the positive norms and values held by the majority of their students .
- Empower all students with more effective skills to resolve hurtful incidents as participants or witnesses.
- Implement research-based approaches to address both impulsive behavior and retaliation, as well as restorative approaches that seek to help students who have been hurtful to acknowledge their wrongdoing and remedy the harm.

5 Chi-square (3) = 259.75, p<.001.

6 Chi-square (2) = 14.01, p<.001.

7 Chi-square (2) = 37.84, p<.001.

Embrace Civility in the Digital Age

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.

Website: <http://embracecivility.org>

Nancy Willard, M.S., J.D., Director of Embrace Civility in the Digital Age, brings a background of working with emotionally challenged students, law, and digital technologies to the challenge of fostering positive relations in the digital age. Nancy is the author of the first book ever published on cyberbullying, *Cyberbullying and Cyberthreats* (2007). She is the author of several other books and frequently contributed articles to publications for educators, such as District Administration.

1 Davis, S. and Nixon, C. (2013) Youth Voice Project: Student Insights into Bullying and Peer Mistreatment. Research Press: Illinois; Davis S. and Nixon, C. (2011) Youth Voice Project, National Data Set. Youth Voice Project. <http://www.youthvoiceproject.com>.

2 The Chi-square test of independence was used to determine how witnessing staff maltreatment of students related to student responses to these questions.

3 Chi-square (3) = 223.94, p<.001.

4 Chi-square (3) = 241.14, p<.001.

- Unit 1. Research Insight to Support Rethinking Bullying Prevention.
- Unit 3. Helping Students Who Have Been Targeted Gain Resilience.
- Unit 4. Helping Students Who Are Hurtful Stop, Own it & Fix it.
- Unit 5. Encouraging Students to Step in to Help.
- Unit 6. Effective Interventions by Staff Who Witness Hurtful Incidents.

Unit 7. Effective Investigations & Restorative Interventions is a resource for designated staff members who must respond to the more serious hurtful situations.