



**EMBRACE  
CIVILITY**  
IN THE DIGITAL AGE

# Empower Students to Embrace Civility

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## Unit 2 Embrace Civility Student Survey

Noting the challenges that have been identified in the research literature, Embrace Civility in the Digital Age conducted a survey to specifically explore the issues and concerns further. A national survey of 1,549 secondary students on bullying and hurtful behavior was conducted in October 2015. This was a national survey. Clearly, the results could vary in individual schools.

### Hurtful Incidents

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.

Students were asked: “In the last month, how frequently has any student in your school been hurtful to you?” Fifty-one percent (51%) reported someone had been hurtful to them. Eleven percent (11%) indicated this occurred almost every day, 15% indicated this occurred once or twice a week, 26% indicated this occurred once or twice a month, and 49% indicated this never occurred. There were no significant gender differences.

Students who reported someone had been hurtful were asked how upset they were and how effective they felt in getting this to stop. An expanded analysis was conducted to identify students who are considered More Vulnerable, those who indicated that in the last month someone was

hurtful to them once or twice a week or almost daily, they felt upset or very upset, and they felt that it was very difficult or they were powerless in getting the hurtful situation to stop.

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 the U.S.

Students were also asked how frequently they had been hurtful to another student from your school. Twenty-nine percent (29%) indicated they had been hurtful. Four percent (4%) indicated they had been hurtful almost every day, 7% indicated they had been hurtful once or twice a week, 18% indicated they had been hurtful once or twice a month, and 71% indicated they had never been hurtful. Students engaging in hurtful behavior were more likely to be male.

**Implication.** The most significant finding is that there are far too many students in the U.S. who are chronically experiencing being treated in a hurtful manner while at school.

## Response of Staff Who Witnessed

Students who were targeted or hurtful were asked how school staff responded, if present, and whether things got better, stayed the same, or got worse after staff response.

### Responses to Targeted Students

Overall, students who were targeted indicated that from their perspective a staff member was present 65% of the time and students reported the following impact: 30% Things got better. 49% Things stayed the same. 21% Things got worse

However, for the More Vulnerable students, staff were reportedly present 69% of the time and students reported the following impact: 13% Things got better 47% Things stayed the same. 40% Things got worse.

Sixty-four percent (64%) of students reported that made things better were when staff stepped in to help. For all students who reported someone was hurtful, the staff responses that made things get worse were when staff ignored the situation or just watched. More Vulnerable students also reported that what made things worse was when staff made them feel as if they were at fault.

### Responses to Hurtful Students

Students who were hurtful indicated that from their perspective staff was present 78% of the time. These students reported the impact as: 28% Things got better. 54% Things stayed the same. 18% Things got worse.

What these hurtful students thought made things better were when staff stepped in to help or told them to stop. The highest reported responses by staff that these hurtful students thought made things worse were just watched or ignored the situation.

Additional insight came from a question asked of students who were hurtful, “What best describes what happened after this incident?” Sixteen percent (16%) indicated they had not stopped. It appears that 34% decided to stop on their own, 18% resolved the situation with the person they were hurtful to, 12% stopped because of peer intervention, and 12% stopped for an undefined reason (combining several answers). There was very limited evidence of adult effectiveness in encouraging the student being hurtful to stop. Only 5% indicated that they stopped because their parent told them to and only 3% stopped because a school staff member told them to.

**Implications.** It is presumed that school staff want to respond to these hurtful situations in an effective manner and will be dismayed by these findings. A high priority must be placed on increasing the effectiveness of staff responses when hurtful situations are witnessed. Ensuring follow-up to determine effectiveness of staff intervention is

obviously essential. It appears that being told by an adult to stop has very limited effectiveness.

## Telling a Staff Member

Students who were treated badly 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.

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

For all targeted students who told a school staff member, after they told, the reported impact was: 48% Things got better. 39% Stayed the same. 15% Things got worse. However, after the More Vulnerable Students told a staff member, the reported impact was: 30% Things got better. 45% Things stayed the same. 25% Things got worse.

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.

The top five responses of what reportedly made things worse for the More Vulnerable students were: Ignored me. Made me feel as if I were at fault. Told me to stop doing what I was doing. Appeared to support the student being hurtful. Also did something hurtful.

For More Vulnerable students, what reportedly made things better was: Told the student being hurtful to stop. Punished the student who was hurtful. Talked with both of us apart to resolve the situation. Helped me figure out ways I could handle the situation. Told me if I were ever upset I could come and talk. Checked in with me later to see if things were okay. Talked with us both to resolve the situation.

The top five reasons all targeted students gave for not telling an adult at school were: Was a minor incident. Did not think a school staff member would do anything to help. Resolved the incident by myself. Thought that a school staff member might make things worse. The student stopped.

For the More Vulnerable students who did not tell a school staff member, the reasons given for not telling were: Did not think a school staff member would do anything to help. Thought that a school staff member might make things worse. Thought I would be blamed. I probably deserved it. The student being hurtful would likely have retaliated.

**Implications.** The “Tell an Adult” approach to “bullying prevention” will be ineffective unless and until telling an adult consistently achieves a positive result.

## 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.<sup>1</sup>

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.<sup>2</sup>

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.<sup>3</sup>

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 them<sup>4</sup>.

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.<sup>5</sup>

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.<sup>6</sup>

**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.

## Bi-Directional Hurtful Behavior

The survey results revealed a significant amount of bi-directional hurtful behavior. 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 whether students reported someone was hurtful to them: 56% of targeted students reported they had “never” been hurtful. 63% of the More Vulnerable students reported they had “never” been hurtful. 88% of non-targeted students also reported they had “never” been hurtful.

A risk estimate was computed for these findings. Having someone be hurtful appears to be 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 experienced someone being hurtful to them than students who “never” engaged in hurtful behavior.

While some of these situations are one-direction in nature, especially in the situation of More Vulnerable students, clearly many hurtful situations could more accurately be described as bi-directional cycles of conflict or hurtful acts followed by retaliation.

Students who were targeted and those who were hurtful were also asked about the prior relationship with the other person. Highest on the responses of both targeted and hurtful students were that they were good friends, they had no connection, and things were fine between them. However, students who were More Vulnerable reported a higher rate of ongoing hurtful relationships.

**Implications:** Focusing exclusively on incidents that meet some definition of “bullying” will result in failure to address bi-directional hurtful incidents, that can be just a distressing and disruptive. There appear to be a wide range of personal relationship issues implicated in hurtful situations, which requires preventing and resolving a broad range of types of hurtful incidents. Addressing the issue of prior relationships and prior hurtful acts by either of the parties will be important to ensure resolution. 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, schools are adding to the harm.

## Student Norms and Values

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

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 also indicated they admire those who engage in the following 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.

However, students reported mixed feelings about those who were treated badly and engaged in retaliation. Of

concern, 52% of students appeared to think that retaliation may be appropriate in some circumstances and 30% indicated they admired someone who was treated badly and retaliated. This will be discussed further below.

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

Awesome **Brave** Amazing Nice  
Confident **Strong Kind** Friend Responsible  
**Caring** Respectful **Hero** Leader  
**Courageous** Smart Admirable

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. These findings 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 identified as: 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.

Students were asked to identify the three most important reasons they would not be hurtful to another. The three top reported 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.”

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

Students did not think that 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. These findings are somewhat contradictory to the above noted finding of mixed feelings or some support for retaliation. This is discussed below.

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.

**Implications:** It appears that the vast majority of students hold positive norms, as well as clearly desire to foster positive relations and address hurtful situations in a restorative manner. 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. To better address these barriers, schools must empower students with an 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.

## Impulsive Retaliation

Students who indicated they had been hurtful to another student in the last month were also asked what they were thinking at the time. The two key reasons students 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 above noted evidence of bi-directional hurtful acts also supports the conclusion that a significant amount of hurtful behavior can be characterized as cycles of hurtful acts, where both students are being hurtful to each other. As noted in the prior section, it appears from the responses to questions of all students, that many students have mixed feelings about retaliation.

The positive responses included that students admired those who if were treated badly and responded in a positive way and they also think apologizing if you were hurtful is an effective response. Overwhelmingly, students 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 to you.

However, students did report very mixed feelings about those who were treated badly and then retaliated. Also note that on the question about effective responses if treated badly, 56% of students thought immediately responding was generally effective. It is possible that students consider an immediate response to show more personal power. 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 is acting impulsively when angry and being hurtful.

**Implications:** These findings are considered to be highly important. Impulsive retaliation appears to be a frequent source of hurtful behavior--and all students appear to have mixed feelings about the need to respond immediately and acts of retaliation. Reducing both the support for impulsive retaliation and impulsive retaliation itself could dramatically improve student relations. 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.

## Conclusions

The following conclusions can be drawn from the Embrace Civility Student Survey findings:

- A high priority must be placed on improving the effectiveness of staff responses when they witness hurtful situations. It is essential that after intervening follow-up occur to ensure things got better for all students involved.
- A high priority must be placed on improving the effectiveness of staff responses when students report to staff that someone has been hurtful. We cannot expect students, especially those who are More Vulnerable, to tell an adult if there is such a low probability of things getting better--and an equivalent likelihood that things will get worse. It is essential that after intervening follow-up occur to ensure things got better for all students involved.
- Schools should be able to achieve dramatic declines in hurtful student behavior and a significant increase in civility by ensuring that staff interactions with students are always kind and respectful.
- It is essential that schools address all forms of hurtful behavior, not just those incidents that meet some definition of "bullying."
- The norms and values of the vast majority of students fully support the desire for positive relations. Students must be engaged as full partners in the efforts to embrace civility and foster positive relations.
- An impulsive response that is hurtful in retaliation for a perceived prior hurtful act appears to underly a significant amount of hurtful behavior. Student norms around the issue of immediately responding and

retaliating appear to be mixed. Addressing the concern of impulsive retaliation should yield significant benefits in efforts to embrace civility.

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

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

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

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

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

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