

# Engage Students to Embrace Civility

(Second Edition)

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## INTRODUCTION OF BOOK

Engage Students to Embrace Civility provides schools leaders and mental health professionals with guidance—grounded in academic research and legal principles—to fully engage students to maintain positive relationships and effectively respond when hurtful behavior occurs, either within your school environment or between students online. This includes the objectives of both reducing the instances of such hurtful behavior and responding in a way that stops and remedies the harm. Civility means being kind and respectful, even if you disagree.

The term “school leaders” should be read to incorporate district and building leadership, as well as mental health professionals.

The title of this book is *Engage Students to Embrace Civility*. The title of the companion student program is *Empowered to Embrace Civility*. So what is “civility?” I totally embrace this definition from The Institute for Civility in Government:

*What is Civility?*

*Civility is claiming and caring for one’s identity, needs and beliefs without degrading someone else’s in the process. ...*

*Civility is about more than just politeness, although politeness is a necessary first step. It is about disagreeing without disrespect, seeking common ground as a starting point for dialogue about differences, listening past one’s preconceptions, and teaching others to do the same. Civility is the hard work of staying present even with those with whom we have deep-rooted and fierce disagreements. It is political in the sense that it is a necessary prerequisite for civic action. But it is political, too, in the sense that it is about negotiating interpersonal power such that everyone’s voice is heard, and nobody’s is ignored.*

*And civility begins with us.<sup>1</sup>*

My shortened definition is: Being kind and respectful to others—even if you disagree or think they are “different.”

## CONCERNS ASSOCIATED WITH CURRENT ANTI-BULLYING APPROACH

Too many young people experience bullying, harassment or other forms of hurtful behavior. The approach schools in the U.S. have been using shows no signs of effectiveness in addressing these concerns for well over a decade. With the more recent arguments over protective actions required during the pandemic, the disruption of learning, and the societal arguments over the directions in our society, especially as this relates to people or color and sexual or gender minorities, the concerns of hurtful behavior directed at young people

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<sup>1</sup> The Institute for Civility in Government. <https://www.instituteforcivility.org/who-we-are/what-is-civility/>.

have profoundly increased. This article will outline the nature of the concerns and then present recommendations from my newly published book, *Engage Students to Embrace Civility*.

There are too many confusing definitions of “bullying.” There is the academic definition, fifty different state statutory definitions, and surveys that ask about experiencing hurtful acts. There is significant confusion between what is called “bullying” and what constitutes discriminatory harassment under civil rights laws. Hurtful incidents that do not meet any definition can cause a significant disruption at school or in the lives of involved students. It is my recommendation that we need to empower students to maintain positive relationships and effectively reduce and respond to all forms of hurtful behavior.

There are two kinds of students who are at greatest risk of long lasting harms from hurtful behavior inflicted on them by students or school staff.

- Marginalized Hurtful Students are students who have often experienced adversities at home and who have been treated badly and excluded at school—who are now engaging in hurtful behavior. They are at highest risk of significant lifelong negative outcomes. It is important to stop the harm that is being directed at these students and hold them accountable for their hurtful acts.
- Targeted Students are those who are seriously or persistently treated badly by peers, frequently, based on their identity. It is not possible to “protect” these students through a disciplinary code approach. We must empower them to reduce the potential they will be treated badly, ensure they have the ability to respond effectively, and have the supports to reduce the harmful impact.

Since the early 2010’s in the US there has been no decline in the rate at which students report being bullied. Surveys also document that bullying occurs in areas of the school where it should be noticed and stopped—but most often it is not.

Identity-Based Bullying is biased-based bullying that occurs because of the student’s actual or perceived “identity” within a group of people who are marginalized within our society. Identity groups include those who receive protection under most civil rights laws. However, students within other identity groups, such as overweight or low income, also experience Identity-Based Bullying. Identity-Based Bullying may be serious incidents, persistent more minor incidents directed at one student, or pervasive targeting of all or most students within the entire identity group.

Being bullied can have life-long harmful consequences. Being bullied can result in stress-related physical and mental health symptoms. Bullying is a form of trauma. There is a high incidence of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) symptoms, as well as depression and anxiety, among students who reported they were bullied and a strong association between frequency of exposure to bullying and such symptoms. Being bullied leads to lower academic performance and increased absences and drop outs. Schools with higher levels of bullying have lower academic scores, even after accounting for such factors as poverty, enrollment, and the like.

There is a clear connection between bullying and suicide. Persistent experience of being bullied, combined with ineffective intervention by the school, can lead to feelings of hopelessness and helplessness that can result in suicidal thinking or behaviors. A serious incident of bullying may act as a trigger. There is also a clearly established connection between being bullied, school violence, school shootings, and bringing weapons to school. When students do not feel that they can safely report being bullied to school officials, bringing a weapon to defend themselves may follow. Being bullied and not having any friends at school are vulnerabilities that hate group recruiters look for.

Most insight provided to educators casts those students who engage in bullying as having significant other challenges—“maladjusted youth.” This is an inaccurate stereotype. The greatest source of bullying is socially competent students who are often perceived by school staff to be “leaders,” who are being hurtful to achieve dominance and social status. Aggression is a strategy in most animal groups to achieve dominance, which supports the acquisition of territory, resources, and mates. Bullying behavior of students is for the same purpose. Bullying behavior is seen in all cultures, although the way it manifests is different. These students target both those who are considered “misfits” as well as rivals, especially rivals for mates.

Dominance motivated hurtful students achieve significant rewards from their hurtful behavior. They experience earlier ages of dating and first sexual intercourse, greater dating and sexual relations, are more likely to be dating, and have a significantly greater number of sexual partners. They also achieve the ability to dictate social interactions, become leading players on athletic teams, obtain admission to a high ranking university, and obtain a dynamite job where they can rise in status within a hierarchal corporation, and gain wealth.

Dominance motivated hurtful students are perceived as leaders by many school staff members. When they are hurtful, they do not display outbursts. They engage in persistent hurtful acts, which cause profound harm to the target—but these single acts are often not perceived as of significant concern. Especially if they target “misfits,” these students may have engaged in concerning behavior. When these targeted students report they are being trotted badly by a dominance motivated hurtful student, this often does not lead to a positive intervention by the school.

Social dominance theory studies group-based social hierarchies that legitimize social inequality and mistreatment of marginalized social groups. People differ in their “social dominance orientation”—the degree to which they support these inequities. There are two strategies to achieve leadership positions. Dominance leaders gain and maintain social rank by using coercion and intimidation. Prestige leaders gain and maintain social status by displaying valued knowledge and skills that support the community’s well-being. This research has also not been integrated into bullying. Engaging and empowering the prestige leaders in schools holds the key to shifting the school climate away from supporting the dominance motivated hurtful students.

Hurtful behavior that would likely not be considered “bullying” is a significant source of disruption in schools. These are situations of either bi-directional hurtful behavior or impulsive retaliation. Bi-directional hurtful behavior is situations where both students are being hurtful to each other and are roughly equivalent in social status. These may be situations of true conflict where both students have been equally involved or where one student instigated hurtful actions that targeted a rival. This is often called “drama” by students. Impulsive retaliation is a form of reactive aggression. This occurs when a targeted student becomes dysregulated and impulsively responds in an aggressive retaliatory manner.

An highly significant concern of hurtful behavior is staff who are hurtful to students. This concern is not at all well addressed. Staff bullying is an abuse of power that tends to be persistent and involves degrading a student, often in front of other students. The manner in which school staff treat students models guidelines on how students should treat others.

There are two kinds of teachers who engage in bullying: Those seen as intentionally humiliating students. Those seen as being overwhelmed by situations, including a lack of support from the administration and lack of training in effective classroom management, and classes that were too large. There are usually no negative consequences for staff who engage in bullying. Students who are targeted often are vulnerable, have some devalued personal attribute, are unable to stand up for themselves, and others will not defend them.

Teachers may view their actions as an appropriate disciplinary response or good classroom management. The students who are reportedly being bullied by teachers are the ones who are at highest risk of being bullied by students and experiencing long lasting harm. Identity-based staff bullying of sexual and gender minority students, students with disabilities, overweight students, and religious minority students are documented concerns.

Schools are advised or required to have anti-bullying policies, to implement a bullying prevention program, and to tell students to report. There are significant concerns regarding the effectiveness of these approaches. A meta-analysis of the effectiveness of policies concluded that while educators tend to perceive policies are effective, most studies have found no positive associations. A recent international meta analysis of evaluation studies suggested that anti-bullying programs can reduce bullying at a very modest level. The rate of effectiveness varied greatly across studies. Most studies used self-report measurements, which may not measure actual behavioral change. It is also challenging to determine what aspects of such programs resulted in the modest level of effectiveness. In the U.S., competing demands on student and teacher time for

standardized testing is a considered a limitation. Programs showing effectiveness in some countries may not be effective in other countries. A recent meta-analysis demonstrated zero effectiveness of such programs for students in eighth grade and beyond.

Research suggests that staff overwhelmingly think they have effective strategies and respond effectively to the bullying incidents they witness or are reported. The student perspective is that staff are not doing enough, ignore the hurtful incidents they witness, and generally make things worse when they respond.

It is well established that the majority of secondary students do not report hurtful incidents. When students either do not report or do not report again if things became worse, school leaders may mistakenly believe that bullying is not a significant concern in their school, despite student reporting data indicating otherwise. Students' lack of willingness to report to school staff appears to be because most students believe that school staff will make the situation worse if they intervene or that staff are not interested in taking any actions against bullying.

Students perceive numerous barriers that prevent them from obtaining help from adults at school. Students will calculate whether the risks outweighed the benefits. The risks include public disclosure, fear of ridicule, retaliation, and the lack of effectiveness of a possible adult intervention. Sexual and gender minority students may fear disclosure to parents. Educators often appear to think that they are effectively responding to incidents that are reported to them—which is not the case. The vast majority of students do not report. When students do report, if this has not resolved the situation or has made things worse, students are less likely to report continuing or new concerns. Several studies have shown that when students do report, the situation is likely to stay the same or get worse.

In the US, there are no federal statutes that address “bullying.” There are federal civil rights laws that address discriminatory harassment of protected class students. There are anti-bullying statutes in every state. In December 2010, USDOE released a document entitled *Key Components for State Anti-Bullying Laws*. This guidance encouraged states to enact more comprehensive bullying prevention statutes and districts to address bullying as a disciplinary code violation. The guidance is based on the perception that students will readily report to the school if they are being bullied and that the intervention by the school will effectively resolve the problem. There are numerous concerns about the approach outlined in this document.

- When school staff use authoritarian practices to address student misbehavior, this results in an increase in bullying and aggression and reinforces the idea that those who have power are able to dominate others. Punitive responses often cause problem behaviors to increase rather than diminish. This approach turns the situation from a harmful offense that should require remedy, to an investigation of an alleged violation of a school rule.
- The inclusion of enumeration of specific populations in statutes has caused profound confusion. The requirements under civil rights regulations are more stringent.
- Student misbehavior generally must meet the standard of causing a “substantial disruption” to warrant any disciplinary consequence. The situation of students who are targeted in a persistent manner—in a series of ongoing, but more minor, incidents—does not meet this standard.
- In 2010, USDOE advised schools to respond to bullying by imposing a disciplinary consequence. In 2014, schools were directed to avoid imposing exclusionary discipline. School leaders were told: “Apply sanctions to stop bullying.” Then, they were told: “Don’t use sanctions.”

Under *ESSA*, states, districts, and schools must describe their plans and provide data related to school climate and discipline in their annual district and school report cards. This includes measures of school climate, rate of exclusionary disciplinary actions, rates of absenteeism, and incidences of violence, including bullying and harassment. The *ey Components* guidance advised states to enact a state statutory provision to require schools to make annual public reports on the number of bullying incidents. In states that have made this a statutory requirement, the rates of bullying reported by the schools are very low. However, the rate at which students report being bullied on surveys has remained constant or has increased.

An analysis of what has happened in New York (NY) after 2011 the passage of the *Dignity Act for All Students* (DASA) statute is helpful. DASA requires that all schools make an annual report of bullying incidents. A 2017 report analyzed this report data from the 2013-14 school year and found that 71% of New York City schools reported zero incidents of bullying of students for that entire year. What appears to be happening is that schools want to avoid “black marks.” Principals who admit to problems of bullying in their schools may be seen as ineffective leaders. As principals are the ones who decide whether a reported incident meets the policy definition, they can control such reports. A similar annual reporting of incidents was incorporated into *ESSA*. A review of the data for any district on the USDOE site will reveal an exceptionally low level of reports.

Schools have been advised by USDOE to use Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (PBIS) and Restorative Practices as an alternatives to exclusionary discipline. Both of these programs have many positive benefits. However, both also have components or have been implemented in ways that are counter productive in the context of the challenges associated with bullying and hurtful behavior.

- The behavioristic authoritarian manner in which PBIS is implemented presents concerns. Schools that function in an authoritarian manner have higher levels of bullying behavior. The underlying foundation of PBIS is grounded in behaviorism, which predated the research on the impact of trauma or neurodiversity on student behavior. Students who have challenges in maintaining their behavior repeatedly experience the situation of failing to meet expectations and, thus, often feel shamed and excluded in front of their peers. Use of tangible rewards has been found to decrease intrinsic motivation, which is essential for students to maintain positive relationships. When schools use token rewards, it becomes very apparent that some students are identified by school staff as “good” and others are “bad.” The PBIS rewards approach models relational aggression. Approaches that publicly identify to all students the teacher’s assessment of each student’s behavior contributes to labeling and stigmatization.
- The underlying principles and objectives of Restorative Practices are excellent. There are concerns related to the current implementation approaches. There is confusion about what Restorative Practices are and no consensus about the best way to implement such practices. Mediation or Conflict Resolution can be useful practices if there is an equivalent level of wrongdoing by both parties and an equivalent level of personal power.—but can be dangerous in situations where there is an imbalance of power between students. A logical consequences is a superior approach to punishment. Logical consequences are still a consequence that is being imposed by an authority that may or may not remedy the harm. Restorative Circles should never be used to discuss misbehavior of an individual member of the class, especially if hurtful conduct has been directed at another student. Restorative practices are grounded in the practices of indigenous peoples, where wrongdoing is viewed as a violation of relationships and people and the well-being of their community.

Institutional Betrayal occurs when an “institution” fails to respond in an effective manner when it knows or should know of the harmful treatment being experienced by a target of hurtful conduct. When those who are victimized reach out for help, they must place a great deal of trust in the institution from which they are seeking help. When the institution does not respond in an effective manner to such reports of abuse, this is associated with a significant increase in trauma-related outcomes. Institutional Courage requires a commitment to respond in an effective manner to address concerns that are reported.

## KEY COMPONENTS OF ENGAGE STUDENTS TO EMBRACE CIVILITY

The key components of engaging students to embrace civility are:

- **Engage Students.** Empower students in efforts to maintain positive relationships and respond effectively when hurtful incidents occur. Students are the ones who are interacting with each other—in positive or negative ways. Students are the ones who either support or encourage hurtful behavior. When

students express their disapproval, hurtful behavior most often stops. When students support those who are treated badly, the distress is better resolved. Adults are not in control. We must empower students to maintain positive relationships.

- **Focus on Civility.** Focus on “embracing civility,” rather than “anti-bullying.” This is a shift from the negative to the positive. This focus on civility also seeks to avoid a focus on identity groups and identity politics—focusing on the goals of unity along with respect for diversity, where every student feels safe, welcomes, and respected.
- **Collaboratively Build a Positive School Climate.** Build a school climate that will foster positive relationships—rather than relying on adult control “rules and punishment” approaches. Shift from an authoritarian approach to an authoritative approach that maintains a strong focus on maintaining positive values, not domination to ensure compliance. Ensure the voices of students, parents or caregivers, and community partners are collaboratively engaged. Focus on community developed standards and values that support positive relationships and will create an environment where everyone feels welcomed and supported.
- **Address all Forms of Hurtful Behavior.** Focus on reducing all forms of hurtful behavior. Do not focus solely on what is called “bullying”—which has too many conflicting definitions. Hurtful incidents that do not meet the various definitions of “bullying” can also disrupt the school community and cause students to experience emotional distress. This includes hurtful acts directed at students because of their identity, persistent but more minor hurtful acts, pervasive hurtful acts, retaliation situations, and bi-directional hurtful acts. Strong school community norms against hurtful behavior, in all forms, will create an environment where all students are focused on maintaining positive relationships.
- **Empower Targeted Students.** Empower targeted students by supporting them to build their underlying self-confidence and social skills to reduce the likelihood of their being treated badly, effectively respond when they are, and to reduce the likelihood of emotional harm by maintaining support networks and a focus on their future. Assuming that “victimized” students will always require the assistance of adults to protect them will only result in the continuation of their victimization. These students cannot control what might happen to them. They can control how they feel about themselves and respond.
- **Address the Concerns of All Hurtful Students.** Address the concerns of the students who are the greatest source of hurtful behavior—the popular, “leadership” students who are hurtful to achieve dominance and social status. There are two kinds of students who engage in hurtful behavior. This includes the “at risk” students, who have both experienced adversities and are now being reactively aggressive. But socially-skilled popular students are the greatest source of hurtful behavior. As these students are generally compliant, staff may not recognize or acknowledge the hurtful behavior they direct at others. Risk prevention approaches will not achieve success in reducing this hurtful behavior. Shifting these students away from the path of being hurtful to others to achieve dominance will require a focus on positive social norms and elevating in status other kinds of leadership students in your school—those who are consistently kind and step in to help.
- **Address Staff Bullying of Students.** Ensure appropriate policies and practices are in place to prevent staff maltreatment of students. Unfortunately, staff maltreatment of students is a generally unrecognized concern. Further, there are generally no negative consequences when staff are hurtful to students. This must change. When staff consistently model kindness and respect for all students, the hurtful behavior of students can be significantly reduced.
- **Empower Compassionate Student Leaders.** Identify and empower a diverse group of students who are consistently kind and inclusive, who step in to help, and who have a natural drive for leadership to function as a student leadership team encouraging civility, positive relationships, and positive peer intervention. Make sure your empowered team of student leaders is diverse and represents all student groups within your school—except for those who are hurtful to achieve dominance. This is a way to communicate to all students which leadership approach is supported in your school.

- **Emphasize Positive Social Norms.** Recognize the vast majority of students do not like to see their peers be hurtful to others. Further, they strongly admire those who are kind and respectful, step in to help, respond to being treated badly in a positive manner, and stop themselves and say they are sorry if they were hurtful. It is possible to solicit these positive social norms via a local survey. Schools can then provide insight into these positive norms, along with insight into strategies students can use to better maintain positive relationships, through indirect instructional approaches that are coordinated by positive student leaders.
- **Reduce Impulsive Retaliation.** Reduce impulsive retaliation by supporting students in gaining increased self-regulation and personal power, knowing that others can change, having effective problem solving skills, and having positive connections with supportive peers and adults. Impulsive retaliation appears to be frequently implicated in hurtful situations.
- **Focus on Accountability.** Engage students who have been hurtful in a process that leads to acceptance of personal responsibility, efforts to remedy the harm, and a commitment not to engage in further hurtful acts. By treating hurtful situations as disciplinary matters, the school staff member usurps the position of the student who was treated badly, who deserve a remedy of the harm. The disciplinary approach turns the matter into a violation of a rule with a punishment that is imposed by the adult authority—and frequently leads to retaliation against the targeted student.
- **Provide Trauma and Resilience Informed Support.** Provide support for students who are persistently targeted, as well as those who have suffered adversities, are treated badly at school, and who are also being hurtful. These students should be supported to better maintain positive relationships, self-regulate, and achieve happiness.
- **Increase Positive Peer Interventions.** Increase positive peer intervention by students who witness hurtful incidents by empowering students to effectively step in to help, be supportive of those who are treated badly, encourage those who were hurtful to stop and remedy the harm, and report serious or unresolved situations to an adult who can help. This requires a focus on motivation, personal power, self-efficacy, school climate, the role of friends, and, most importantly, a focus on positive norms that support such positive intervention actions.
- **Support Staff to Effectively Intervene in Minor Incidents.** Support staff in gaining the skills to effectively intervene when they witness hurtful incidents. Research documents significant concerns regarding the effectiveness of school staff in responding to the hurtful incidents they witness. This is not surprising given that generally staff are only taught about the enforcement school rules and not how to help students resolve hurtful incidents. Staff must also identify when a more minor incident they witness is evidence of a more serious persistent hurtful situation.
- **Ensure Effective Interventions When Students Report.** Implement a diversionary restorative approach in more serious, persistent, or pervasive hurtful situations that holds those who are hurtful accountable, supports and empowers those who are treated badly, addresses any school environment concerns that are contributing to the situation, and monitors to ensure things have gotten better for all involved students. The majority of students do not report. Simply repeatedly telling students to “tell an adult” and setting up new digital reporting systems are not approaches that will lead to greater numbers of students reporting—if when they do so there is a significant likelihood that things will not get better.