

# The Bully-Free Classroom

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by [Allan L. Beane, Ph.D.](#)

## Effective strategies and activities to stop bullying before it starts

Say the word bully to anyone you know, and the stories will start pouring out — about the fourth-grade bully who regularly tripped kids, the second-grade bully who made girls cry, the sixth-grade bully who lay in wait for kids who were walking home from school. If bullying is, as some people claim, a normal, natural part of childhood, why do our memories of bullying incidents remain so vivid — and so universally painful?

We now know that bullying is not normal, natural, or acceptable. Young victims get hurt, both emotionally and physically. Young bullies can grow up to be abusive adults. And it's not just the victims and bullies who are affected; people around them are distracted, intimidated, and upset. Bullying in the classroom prevents students from learning and teachers from teaching.

While the victims of bullying need to learn skills to avoid such treatment, the bullies also need to be taught better ways of relating to others. This is where you can help. By making a commitment to prevention and intervention, you will be helping to build a positive environment where everyone feels safe, accepted, and valued. It's not enough to stop the bullying that is already happening; we also need to keep students who aren't yet bullies or victims from starting down that road.

The following pages give you some strategies and steps to help prevent bullying and to intervene once it occurs.

## Expose the Myths

Before you can solve or prevent a problem, it helps to define it. There are many myths about bullying. The "True or False Checklist" on page 44 will expose some of the myths and start students thinking about what bullying is and how it affects everyone.

Read each myth statement aloud and encourage students to discuss each one. You might introduce these concepts into the discussion:

- Bullying takes at least two people: bully and victim.
- Bullies like to feel strong and superior.
- Bullies enjoy having power over others.
- Bullies use their power to hurt other people.

Then read the answer to each myth statement. How did students' ideas compare with the answers given? Discuss and analyze the differences. To emphasize the importance of the information, you might make copies of the answers to give to older students after the discussion.

Take the time to agree on a class definition of what constitutes bullying. Your definition might use different words but should include these basic ideas: Bullying is

- When a stronger, more powerful person hurts or frightens a smaller or weaker person deliberately and repeatedly.

## Building Conflict-Resolution Skills

Conflict between people is normal and inevitable, and not all conflict is harmful or bad. The difference between destructive and constructive conflict consists in how we choose to manage it. Destructive conflict damages relationships, creates bad feelings, and leads to future problems. But constructive conflict helps us to learn, grow, and change for the better. We become more open-minded, tolerant, and accepting. We see

things from other perspectives.

Everyone benefits from learning and practicing conflict-resolution skills. Bullies discover the real power of solving problems without using force or intimidation. Victims are empowered to seek solutions instead of giving up and giving in. Your classroom becomes a place where people are willing to work together to achieve a positive outcome.

Research has shown that conflict-resolution programs work. If you don't yet have access to one in your school, here's a basic approach you can teach your students now: List the "8 Steps to Conflict Resolution" (below) on the chalkboard, or on a chart for permanent display. Discuss each step with students, and reinforce the ideas with practice, role-plays, skits, and more. But remember that conflict resolution isn't learned or taught in a day. You might want to reproduce these "8 Steps" for students to keep in their notebooks as a reminder.

## 8 Steps to Conflict Resolution

1. Cool down. Don't try to resolve a conflict when you are angry (or the other person is angry). Take a time-out, or agree to meet again in 24 hours.
2. Describe the conflict. Each person should tell about what happened in his or her own words. No put-downs allowed! Important: Although each person may have a different view of the conflict and use different words to describe it, neither account is "right" or "wrong."
3. Describe what caused the conflict. What specific events led up to the conflict? What happened first? Next? Did the conflict start out as a minor disagreement or difference of opinion? What happened to turn it into a conflict? Important: Don't label the conflict either person's "fault."
4. Describe the feelings raised by the conflict. Again, each person should use his or her own words. Honesty is important. No blaming allowed!
5. Listen carefully and respectfully while the other person is talking. Try to understand his or her point of view. Don't interrupt. It might help to "reflect" the other person's perceptions and feelings by repeating them. Examples: "You didn't like it when I called you a name." "Your feelings are hurt." "You thought you should have first choice about what game to play at recess." "You're sad because you felt left out."
6. Brainstorm solutions to the conflict. Follow the three basic rules of brainstorming:
  - Participants come up with as many ideas as they can.
  - All ideas are okay.
  - Nobody makes fun of anyone's ideas.

Be creative. Affirm each other's ideas. Be open to new ideas. Make a list of brainstormed ideas so participants will remember them all; then choose one solution to try. Be willing to negotiate and compromise.

7. Try your solution. See how it works. Give it your best efforts. Be patient.
8. If one solution doesn't get results, try another. Keep trying. Brainstorm more solutions if you need to. If you can't resolve the conflict no matter how hard you try, agree to disagree — sometimes that's the best you can do. Also realize that the conflict doesn't have to end your relationship. People can get along even when they disagree.

## True or False Checklist

**1. Bullying is just teasing.**

**False.** While many bullies tease, others use violence, intimidation, and other hostile tactics. Sometimes teasing can be fun; bullying always hurts.

**2. Some people deserve to be bullied.**

**False.** No one ever deserves to be bullied. No one "asks for it." Most bullies tease people who are "different" in some way. Being different is not a reason to be bullied.

**3. Only boys are bullies.**

**False.** Most bullies are boys, but girls can also be bullies.

**4. People who complain about bullies are babies.**

**False.** People who complain about bullies are standing up for their right not to be bullied. They're more grown-up than bullies are.

**5. Bullying is a normal part of growing up.**

**False.** If you think bullying is normal, you're less likely to say or do anything about it. Getting teased, picked on, pushed around, threatened, harassed, insulted, hurt, or abused is not normal.

**6. Bullies will go away if you ignore them.**

**True & False.** Some bullies may go away. But others will get angry and keep bullying until they get a reaction.

**7. All bullies have low self-esteem. That's why they pick on other people.**

**False.** Some bullies have high self-esteem. They feel good about themselves, and picking on other people makes them feel even better. Most of the time, bullying isn't about high or low self-esteem. It's about having power over other people.

**8. It's tattling to tell an adult when you're being bullied.**

**False.** It's smart to tell an adult who can help you do something about bullying. It's also smart to tell an adult if you see someone else being bullied.

**9. The best way to deal with a bully is by fighting or trying to get even.**

**False.** If you fight with a bully, someone might get hurt. Plus, you might get into trouble for fighting. If you try to get even, you're acting the same way as the bully. And the bully might come after you again to get even with you. Either way only makes things worse.

**10. People who are bullied might hurt for a while, but they'll get over it.**

**True & False.** It really depends on the person and how severe or prolonged the bullying is. But bullying can hurt for a long time. Many adults can remember all too well when they were bullied as children.

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