

# insights

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## The Relationship Between School Climate and Bullying

**October is National Bullying Prevention Month, a time when school personnel might review bullying policies, and conduct awareness activities within their districts. This process is critically important, as a recent study published in *School Psychology Quarterly* has re-affirmed that school climate factors (e.g. policies, staff reaction to bullying) do impact the frequency of bullying and aggression within schools.**

“School Climate” is typically defined as the overall quality and character of school life, including teaching and learning practices, organizational structures, norms and values, and the extent to which students and parents feel connected to the school. Besides an increased frequency of victimization and bullying, poor school climate is also related to lower attendance rates, increased disciplinary incidents, and increased health risks for students (e.g., substance abuse and risky sexual behavior).

The authors of the current study used a variety of surveys to measure how perceptions of school climate correlate with student-reported incidents of bullying, victimization, and aggression, and with by-standers’ willingness to intervene. Thirty-six middle schools in the Midwest participated, with 3,616 6th grade students and 1,447 teachers and staff completing detailed surveys about both their perceptions and behaviors.

The school climate scales used in this study included perceptions of staff and student intervention in bullying; aggression as a problem; administrative support and opportunities to prevent bullying and violence; positive teacher-staff-student relationships; and gender equality and intolerance of sexual harassment. The authors found that in schools where teachers and staff reported a greater commitment to bullying prevention, reported an intolerance of sexual harassment, and viewed teacher-student relationships as positive, the students reported a lower frequency of bullying and aggression, and a greater willingness to intervene on behalf of peers.

The authors encourage schools to involve all stakeholders in a school climate council that would regularly administer school climate measures, and use the data to design and implement an ongoing school improvement plan. But on

a daily basis all school personnel can immediately contribute to bullying prevention by engaging in certain behaviors:

- By explicitly reminding students that bullying is not acceptable; that bullying behavior has consequences; that “telling” an adult is not “tattling”; and that creating a positive school climate is everyone’s responsibility.
- By immediately intervening to stop bullying behavior; reporting each incident to school administrators; and using observed bullying incidents as “teachable moments” to engage students in difficult discussions such as why bullies are sometimes popular among peers, or why by-standers are often unwilling to come to the aid of peers.
- By including specific statements about bullying and about expected respectful behaviors toward peers in lists of classroom rules.
- By actively monitoring those areas that are associated with bullying – e.g. bathrooms, hallways, locker rooms.
- By assisting children who might be vulnerable to bullying by connecting them with “buddies” for the lunchroom, for walking between classes, for going to the bathroom.
- By treating colleagues with respect, thereby modeling appropriate, respectful behavior.

For further information, school staff can access Bullying: A Module for Teachers on the website of the American Psychological Association at <http://www.apa.org/education/k12/bullying.aspx>. ■

### Resources:

Espelage, Dorothy L., Polanin, Joshua R., & Low, Sabina K. (2014) Teacher and staff perceptions of school environment as predictors of student aggression, victimization, and willingness to intervene in bullying situations. *School Psychology Quarterly*, 29, 287-305.

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