



Mentoring Resource Center

CASE STUDIES IN YOUTH MENTORING **Bullying Prevention and Intervention**

TeamMates Mentoring Program
Lincoln Public Schools

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Bullying is a pervasive problem in American schools, one that places many students in physical and emotional danger and negatively impacts students' perceptions of school and their day-to-day experiences there. Bullying, in terms of both the actions of perpetrators and the consequences for victims, has received increased attention in the past decade, as incidents such as the Columbine tragedy have highlighted the severity of bullying behavior and its impact on school culture and safety. Educators in many schools struggle to find solutions for behavior once commonly dismissed as "kids being kids."

This case study looks at one program in Nebraska, Lincoln Public Schools (LPS) TeamMates, that has decided to address bullying at several schools through mentoring, using volunteers from the community to reach out to bullies and victims alike.

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Bullying is commonly defined in research as "a subtype of aggression" (Olweus, 1993) that can take many forms, both physical and verbal. One researcher describes all bullying as "intentionally harmful, aggressive behavior of a more powerful person or group of people directed repeatedly towards a less powerful person, usually without provocation" (Harris, 2004). In addition to common forms such as name calling or hitting, bullying can also come in the form of relational aggression (purposefully damaging peer relationships) and cyber-bullying (where the bullying behavior takes place in "virtual" settings, such as social networking Web sites and e-mails).

Some studies show that as many as 30 percent of American students report "frequent" bullying experiences, both as instigators and as victims (Nansel et al., 2001). Other research indicates as many as 44 percent of students are bullied at least once per year (Haynie et al., 2001). In general, boys are more likely to engage in physical bullying, while girls are more frequently

associated with relational aggression and other verbal and emotional forms of bullying. The research of Nansel and colleagues (2001) and others highlights an increase in bullying behaviors during early adolescence (Pellegrini & Long, 2002), affirming the importance of prevention and intervention work, such as the TeamMates program, during the transition from elementary to middle school.

The impact of bullying on individual students is substantial. Victims feel less connected to peers, adults, and the school itself. They tend to have poorer relations with classmates, participate less in extracurricular activities, and experience increased feelings of loneliness and isolation (Nansel et al., 2001; Resnick et al., 1997). Victims are more likely to experience depression and anxiety and attempt suicide (Graham & Juvonen, 2001). And if one doubts the negative impact bullying can have on an entire community, research conducted by the Secret Service indicates that 71 percent of school shooters had been victims of bullying (Vossekuil, Fein, Reddy, Borum, & Modzeleski, 2002).

Bullies themselves also face a number of negative circumstances and consequences, including depression, high levels of anger, low academic achievement, and negative perceptions of school climate. Many are frequently the victims of bullying or abuse themselves. One longitudinal study of male bullies in grades six through nine found that 60 percent of them were incarcerated by the age of 24 (Olweus, 1991).

There are several common intervention and prevention programs available to schools— such as the Olweus Bullying Prevention Program, Steps to Respect, and Let’s Get Real—that have shown quite promising results (see the Resources section on page 7 for additional information on these programs). However, many bullying prevention programs can be expensive, difficult to implement, and may not address some of the site-specific reasons why bullying is occurring. Many prevention programs also focus on group interventions for bullies, in spite of the fact that group interventions can often reinforce antisocial behavior by bringing groups of aggressive youth together (Dishion, McCord, & Poulin, 1999). Research has also found zero tolerance policies, a common school approach to bullying incidents, to be ineffective (Casella, 2003).

One prominent trend in recent bullying prevention examines bullying from a socioecological perspective, which recognizes that bullying involves many factors and contexts. This socioecological model focuses on the “complex interplay between individual children, their family, peer group, school and community, as well as their culture” (Espelage, 2004). Rather than viewing bullying as an isolated problem within the young person, this perspective seeks to identify and address root causes of bullying and the environmental and social factors that both encourage and discourage bullying behavior. This comprehensive approach to bullying emphasizes prevention efforts that address all factors that influence bullying.

Given the difficulties with traditional prevention and intervention strategies, TeamMates and Lincoln Public Schools decided to take an innovative socio-ecological approach and use one-on-one mentoring relationships to support bullies and victims alike. There is almost no formal research on the impact of mentoring on involvement in bullying, so this project will make a valuable contribution to the knowledge-base in both the mentoring and bullying prevention fields.

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The TeamMates program profiled in this case study is a partnership between the Lincoln (Nebraska) Public Schools (LPS), the TeamMates of Nebraska mentoring program (a statewide mentoring effort that has worked with LPS since 1991), and Target Bullying, a comprehensive research program led by Susan Swearer, an associate professor of educational psychology at the University of Nebraska and one of the nation’s leading experts on bullying behavior.

Swearer's research on bullying in LPS estimates that three out of every four school-aged youth experience bullying or victimization during a school year, a statistic that has made the creation of safe and positive learning environments a priority throughout the district. While there are a few prevention efforts already in place at some schools in the district, the TeamMates program is the first to use individual mentoring as a primary intervention.

The TeamMates program has been in operation in Nebraska since 1991. In this time it has created a number of positive outcomes for youth. A 2007 Gallup research project found that almost 44 percent of participating students improved their grades, 72 percent reduced their number of disciplinary referrals, and 86 percent improved their school attendance. Local TeamMates affiliates currently serve over 3,000 youth across the state.

The LPS TeamMates programming funded by the U.S. Department of Education targets students in grades four through eight at five middle schools and their respective feeder elementary schools. These schools have higher poverty, mobility, and minority rates than the district averages. The TeamMates program currently serves over 600 students, many from low-income neighborhoods, who have experienced a number of school and behavioral problems, including bullying and victimization. The goal of the three-year grant-funded project is to serve over 150 students who have been involved in at least one bullying incident. The project design places a TeamMates facilitator, who is responsible for implementing mentoring activities and supporting youth and volunteers, at each school site.

Mentors for the program come from all walks of life, but the program has several partnerships with local institutions that can provide mentors who are especially well-equipped for working with youth who have bullying or victimization issues. Targeted organizations include the Lincoln police department, the Lancaster County sheriff's department, and the Lincoln fire department. Mentors are also specifically solicited from several faith-based institutions in the community, as well as local businesses.

The TeamMates program has two overarching goals: The first is the creation of positive mentoring relationships that will improve academic achievement, school attendance, prosocial behaviors, and postsecondary planning in participating youth. Specific benchmarks related to bullying include yearly reductions in disciplinary incidents and referrals for participating students over the life of the grant. The second goal is in service of the first: increasing mentor retention rates so that they can form the lasting, long-term relationships research indicates lead to positive outcomes for mentored youth.

In an effort to boost retention, mentors are offered a number of supports, including advanced trainings to help them cope with shifts and challenges in the mentoring relationship, monthly "support group" meetings with other mentors, service projects they can plan with youth, and frequent check-ins and customized assistance from the site coordinators at each school. These services are all geared toward keeping mentors engaged and satisfied with the mentoring experience, even as they go about the often difficult work of addressing bullying behavior and its consequences.

Mentor matches meet primarily at the school site, although community outings are also allowed with parental permission and in the presence of another adult. Matches also keep in touch via phone and e-mail over the summer months, but the core services of the program, and the real work of impacting bullying behavior, happen through the many valuable services and activities presented during the course of the school year.

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Both mentors and youth are offered a wide range of supports aimed at preventing bullying, improving behavior, and increasing school and community connectedness.

Upon entering the program, all mentees take the Target Bullying survey, which provides insights into the socioecological nature of the students' bullying experiences. The survey, which has been implemented by schools and youth-serving organizations around the world, examines bullying actions, victimization, observed bullying, attitudes about bullying, relational aggression, the locations of bullying incidents, and the consequences of bullying behavior. Results of this survey inform the district and program staff of the characteristics of students' bullying experiences as a whole and can also be used to recommend specific forms of support for individual students based on their experiences.

Mentors are given specific content on many aspects of bullying and its prevention as part of their standard pre-match training. Swearer and the Target Bullying team are contracted under the grant to provide training on:

- An overview and definition of bullying
- Examples of bullying among school-age youth
- Ideas for talking with youth about bullying
- Tips for creating a climate where mentees feel comfortable talking about their bullying experiences

Key tools in the mentor training sessions include videos on middle school youth from *Stories of Us* (<http://www.storiesofus.com>), a bullying prevention program that focuses on positive peer relationships. Additional bullying-related strategies are given to mentors as needed, and the intensive emphasis on mentor retention ensures that mentors have the skills and strategies needed no matter what bullying issues their mentee is facing.

Once matched, mentors and youth engage in a number of activities that can reduce bullying behavior and increase personal resiliency. With the socioecological perspective on bullying as a foundation, the mentoring activities are intended to give youth the opportunity to develop emotionally as well as socially by improving their interactions with school, family, peers, and the community.

Strength exploration. Each mentee takes the Clifton Youth Strengths Explorer, a tool designed to help youth identify and develop talents and abilities they already possess. TeamMates also provides goal worksheets that help matches list and track personal goals, a great source of mentoring activity ideas and conversation starters.

Academic support. All matches have access to the tutoring and homework help resources of the 21st Century Community Learning Centers in the district. This allows mentors to focus on personal conversations and fun bonding activities.

Involvement with parents. Mentors and parents have a number of interactions throughout the school year, including the opportunity to jointly attend parent-teacher conferences and occasional group outings. Given the strong link between issues at home and bullying behavior at school (MacNeil & Newell, 2004), involving parents in the goals and activities of the mentoring relationship may be a way to change family circumstances that might be precipitating bullying behavior on the part of the student.

Service-learning. All matches are encouraged to participate in community service-learning projects that promote social responsibility and connectedness. TeamMates has a formal part-

nership with Volunteer Partners, a community volunteer center that helps matches identify and participate in relevant service-learning projects. School staff and site coordinators also work with the match to provide support and ensure that service projects are completed.

College planning. The EducationQuest Foundation, a Lincoln-based nonprofit organization with a mission to improve access to higher education in Nebraska, has agreed to give presentations to mentees, their parents, and mentors on the college planning resources they make available. EducationQuest provides a number of print and Web-based materials designed to get youth thinking about the steps they need to take to attend college. Their partnership with TeamMates has produced a number of specific tools for mentors to use with mentees for college preparation and planning.

In addition to providing these opportunities for matches, the Target Bullying staff is also working with the district, TeamMates, and in the community to address other factors related to bullying. The TeamMates advisory board, comprising community leaders, educators, and mentors, has established a subcommittee tasked with learning about crime, victimization, bullying, and delinquency. This group will then use this knowledge to strengthen the work of the mentoring program and establish a prosocial culture that reduces bullying in the participating schools.

These activities and change mechanisms are designed to address both the personal and contextual reasons why bullying occurs in schools and in community. The extra skills and information provided to mentors mean that they will have an understanding of the nature of bullying and be able to respond appropriately to whatever experiences their mentee has. The diverse match activities and growth opportunities for mentees get at the heart of the socioecological perspective of bullying prevention: changing the dynamic of how bullying children interact with the world around them and how they see themselves.

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All school-based mentoring programs have the ability to address bullying issues at some level. Mentors provide growth opportunities, access to new resources, and valuable friendship and understanding, all of which can change how a young person feels about herself, the future, and relationships with peers and school. The following tips can help your program address bullying and victimization with your mentees and work with your schools to change the socioecological contexts of bullying.

Create awareness among all participants and stakeholders. Being aware of the prevalence of bullying in the schools you work with is a key step in addressing it. Gather your advisory group or steering committee and talk with school personnel about bullying. Look at some of the readily available statistics and theories about bullying and its prevention (the Target Bullying Web site offers many statistics and recommended resources you can start with; see the Resources and Additional Reading sections below for more ideas). Check to see if there are statistics about bullying incidents in the schools you serve. Administering a bullying survey to the youth in your program might provide insight into the nature of the bullying your students encounter. Creating awareness of bullying, talking about it openly, makes everyone—mentors, staff, teachers, counselors, parents—better equipped to respond appropriately to the needs of students.

Create accountability for bullying behavior. As noted earlier, zero tolerance policies and expulsion are ineffective in curbing aggressive behavior; often they exacerbate it or simply transfer the problem elsewhere. But doing nothing about bullying is also unacceptable. Create anti-bullying policies that clarify behavioral expectations of your participating students and the consequences for failing to meet those expectations. Involve as many stakeholders in develop-

ing these policies as you can. The buy-in of everyone involved ensures that the response to bullying incidents is consistent and fair. These policies create “a system of accountability for students who bully as well as those who do not act appropriately when they witness bullying” (MacNeil & Newell, 2004).

Facilitate communication among stakeholders. Communication among teachers, administrators, counselors, mentors, parents, and program staff is essential for addressing bullying quickly and comprehensively. If a mentee is involved in a fight at school, how is that information made available to the program or mentors? Are teachers and other school staff appropriately reporting bullying they observe? If a mentor learns his mentee is being bullied, are there mechanisms in place for him to work with counselors and teachers to address the problem? Silence about bullying incidents, and a lack of coordination in responding to them, creates a context in which bullying can thrive.

Provide a wide variety of activities for mentees. If you are providing activities that affect many areas of a young person’s life, you are increasing your odds of addressing the cause or context of bullying, whether it’s at home, at school, or in the community. Change how the young people you serve relate to the world around them by using mentoring relationships and a variety of different activities to build on strengths and explore new ideas. Bullying problems are complex and multifaceted, and the mentoring activities you provide should respond accordingly by improving connections to family, peer groups, community, and the school itself.

Respond appropriately to bullying incidents. Your program will not solve bullying behavior for your students overnight. Expect that some bullying incidents will occur over the course of the year. When they do, your program, and your mentors, can respond appropriately by:

- **Refraining from harsh punishment of bullies.** This tends to lead to resentment and reprisal. Bullies often crave attention and nurturing. Give bullies the opportunity to work on their issues, build skills, and learn something from their behavior.
- **Providing victims with a chance to process feelings and develop coping skills.** Being a victim of bullying can be very traumatic, and mentees will need help reflecting on the experience and finding peace of mind about it. They might need referral to professional counseling or therapy. They will also need to develop skills that allow them to respond better to bullying situations in the future. Focus your mentors’ response to bullying on helping mentees process the past and prepare for future incidents.

There is one strategy that is unlikely to work when addressing bullying situations:

- **Do not put the onus to address the bullying on the victims.** Asking them to fight back, ignore the bully, or address the problem on their own ignores the fact that there is a power imbalance in bullying and that victims are largely incapable of solving these problems themselves. If they were, they wouldn’t be getting bullied in the first place. Putting the responsibility for addressing bullying on the victims will only make them feel more isolated and let down by the adults and institutions they are looking for support.

The Resources and Additional Reading sections below offer many more tools you can use to develop a comprehensive strategy to address bullying and victimization among the mentees you serve and the schools they attend.

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LPS TeamMates will soon complete its first year of the grant-funded bullying project. The program has an ambitious set of youth outcomes and benchmarks for success. The evaluation of the project is being conducted by the Nebraska Center for Research on Children, Youth, Fami-

lies, and Schools, a research team housed at the University of Nebraska. Over the course of the three years of the grant, the program will learn a great deal about the role mentoring can play in addressing bullying and victimization in schools and communities. This information will be invaluable to the mentoring field, as we learn exactly how mentors can address this prominent cause of youth depression and alienation. Until these findings are complete, all mentoring programs can begin to address bullying by simply providing a safe and nurturing environment where youth can explore their strengths and learn to face the challenges of life with the caring support of others.

Resources and Programs Mentioned in This Case Study

Lincoln Public Schools TeamMates Program
<http://www.lincolnteammates.org/>

Target Bullying Survey & Intervention System
<http://www.targetbully.com/home.php>

Stories of Us
<http://www.storiesofus.com/index.html>

EducationQuest Foundation
<http://www.educationquest.org/index.asp>

21st Century Century Learning Centers
<http://www.ed.gov/programs/21stcclc/index.html>

Clifton Youth Strengths Explorer
<https://www.strengthsexplorer.com/>

Olweus Bullying Prevention Program
<http://www.clemson.edu/olweus/>

Steps to Respect
<http://www.cfchildren.org/programs/str/overview/>

Let's Get Real
<http://www.groundspark.org/films/letsgetreal/index.html>

Additional Reading

Print

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Online

- About Bullying*. This collection of resources on the National Mental Health Information Center Web site provides a wealth of advice and resources for parents, educators, youth workers, and children themselves.
<http://mentalhealth.samhsa.gov/15plus/aboutbullying.asp>
- Bullying Facts and Statistics*. This page on the National Youth Violence Prevention Resource Center Web site offers a nice overview of key statistics.
<http://www.safeyouth.org/scripts/faq/bullying.asp>
- Bullying—For Girls*. The Girlshealth.gov site offers a number of tips and tools for addressing bullying issues with girls, including surveys to help youth determine the degree to which they are a bully or are being bullied.
<http://www.girlshealth.gov/bullying/index.htm>
- Helping Kids Deal With Bullies*. This brief article offers many tips for parents that could be adopted by mentors and other adults.
<http://www.kidshealth.org/parent/emotions/feelings/bullies.html>
- National Crime Prevention Council: Bullying*. The NCPC Web site offers a number of articles and tips for parents on bullying behavior.
<http://www.ncpc.org/topics/bullying>

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