

# *Teachers: The Authoritative Agents in Intervening School Bullying Incidents*

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**Abstract:** School Bullying is a universal problem that leads to physical and mental harm to involved students for a long time. Teachers are the authoritative agents to intervene in bullying incidents in school. Teachers' effective intervention in bullying incidents is beneficial to balance the power relationship among students and reduce the rate of school bullying incidents. Some effective strategies for teachers were introduced in this article to intervene in school bullying incidents, including how to work with the bully, work with the victim, working with students involved in bullying and enlist other relevant people in handling bullying incidents. In addition, some suggestions were put forward on the use of intervening strategies, which are of great significance for teachers to master these intervening strategies better.

School bullying is an aggressive behavior with power imbalance among students, including direct physical, verbal abuse and social exclusion, which may induce long-term fear, be repeated over time<sup>[9]</sup>. Teachers, the main agents of school educational activities, play an important role in the prevention and intervention of school bullying<sup>[16]</sup>. Specifically, teachers could balance the relationship of power by clarifying class norms and creating a supportive class atmosphere, which prevented school bullying among students. Besides, positive intervening strategies of teachers have been found to stop bullying incidents effectively, change students' negative cognition of bullying, relieve the anxiety, depression and other internalized problems of victims<sup>[5]</sup>.

Students also expect their teachers to intervene in bullying incidents positively<sup>[4]</sup>. However, Pepler et al.<sup>[10]</sup> found that even though 85% of teachers reported that they always or often intervened in bullying, only 35% of students reported that their teachers had intervened in bullying incidents. For students, teachers simply responding to students' calls for help is not enough to solve the bullying problem. Teachers should make students perceive their positive intervening attitude and actions, and ensure the long-term effectiveness of the intervention by cooperating with other important relevant people.

The majority of teachers expressed a desire to learn how bullying can be addressed more effectively, and to obtain as much support as possible from schools and parents<sup>[14]</sup>. Therefore, some effective strategies for teachers were discussed in this article to handle bullying incidents, including how to take positive interactions with the bullies and victims, and how to cooperate with other relevant people (e.g., parents, classmates, school administrators, etc.) in the process actively. These

strategies and suggestions have important implications for teachers to improve their ability to intervene in bullying incidents.

## 1. Working with the Bully

It's beneficial to the bully to correct their behaviors by teachers' timely dissuasion, critical education and appropriate punishments, which represent the school norms and attitudes against bullying. It should be noted that teachers ought to focus on condemning the bullies' behaviors rather than the students themselves, or which may cause students to resist and be reluctant to change their behaviors<sup>[6]</sup>. Teachers can also take some non-punitive strategies to adjust the bullies' cognition and activities<sup>[11]</sup>. For example, teachers could communicate with the bully sincerely to understand the reason why they took bullying actions, point out the impact on victims to arouse their sympathy, or help them find ways to repair the social relationship with victims<sup>[2]</sup>. In addition, teachers can also divert the bullies' attention from bullying behaviors to themselves. For instance, teachers could encourage the bully to participate in class activities that bring out their strengths, which to help them gain self-affirmation through the activities instead of bullying others.

Previous study has shown that a combination of punitive and non-punitive measures was more effective in reducing bullying among students than a single measure alone<sup>[7]</sup>. Punishment alone is effective in the short term, but in the long term, taking punishment alone can lead to indirect or covert bullying, making bullying harder to identify and intervene<sup>[3]</sup>. Therefore, making it clear that bullying is not tolerated in school is very important. What's more, it is also significant for teachers to arouse the sympathy of the bullies, and encourage them to repair the relationship with victims or participate in class activities instead of punishment.

## 2. Working with Victim

For the victims, teachers shouldn't attribute the problem to the victim and ignore their calls for help but need to give them reassurance and support timely. In the emotional aspect, teachers could affirm the painful feelings of victims to make it clear that being bullied is not their fault, which benefits to relieving anxiety, depression and other emotional issues of them. In terms of action, the teacher could pay attention to the activity track of victims through the class monitors or other students next to them in order to stop the bullying incidents again in time.

Besides, it is beneficial to provide some coping suggestions to victims that help them adapt to the current class environment better. However, either teachers offer inappropriate coping advice (such as letting students face their own problems and reflect on their own mistakes) or they only offer advice without support may cause greater distress to the students. One study found that when teachers advised victims to be assertive, boys experienced more bullying; And when teachers advised students to avoid the bullies or learn to deal with them alone, both boys and girls had more internalization problems<sup>[13]</sup>. The results may be inconsistent with teachers' expectations. In fact, teachers hope that students can realize that avoiding conflict or changing themselves is an effective way to improve their situation, but they ignore the disadvantaged position of victims. The victims may have difficulty getting away from the bully, or standing up may put them in more danger. For the more vulnerable victims, getting support from teachers is the most effective way to protect them.

Teachers' positive advice should convey a firm attitude to students that no one should be bullied no matter who he or she is. Based on an objective evaluation of the bullying incident, teachers should advise victims to accept themselves and improve their social skills rather than blame their mistakes. Teachers should advise victims to seek help to solve the problem of bullying rather than face it alone.

### 3. Working with students involved in bullying

Teachers can try to solve bullying incidents by working with students involved in bullying. Some activities could be organized which allow students to generate high levels of creative engagement as students interact with each other with minimal guidance from the teacher and move toward an agreed solution to their problem. Three methods were commonly used to help teachers organize activities, including Restorative Practices, Mediation, and the Support Groups Method <sup>[11]</sup>.

Firstly, Restorative Practice is introduced. Those students identified as bullies are asked to attend a meeting where the victim is also present. They need to listen to the victim describe what happened and how he or she was affected by the bullying behaviors. To raise their awareness of the harm done and cause them to feel remorse or shame, bullies are asked to reflect on what they thought then and what they think now. Then, bullies are asked what to do next. It is expected that bullies will decide to take remedial actions, apologize and take some other strategies possibly. The victim may accept or not accept such remediation. Ideally, the relationship between the bully and the victim is restored. However, one possible drawback is that the way the teacher asks the bully for a solution can put some pressure on the bully which make them feel resistant.

Secondly, teachers can also organize mediation activities among students involved in bullying as mediators. Some trained students (called peer mediators) can also be involved in solving problems together. In mediation, students involved in bullying incidents are invited to attend meetings with mediators. The mediators ask each student to take turns explaining the events in their own view. The other student listens to the story without interrupting, and finally repeats what was said, precisely to the satisfaction of the first speaker. Then the roles are reversed. Next, each person is asked to suggest possible ways to resolve the problem. All suggestions are recorded to figure out which recommendations can be agreed upon. It is important to note that teachers and peer mediators need to remain truly neutral in reaching a solution. It is important to balance the relationship of power between students. An evaluation reports indicated that mediation approaches have been highly successful in resolving conflict among many students <sup>[8]</sup>. However, an important drawback to this approach is that for bullies who have support in the group, they don't want to lose their advantages. They may not care what the victim said. Its importance lies in dealing with conflict cases that are likely to lead to bullying. The mediation approach does offer the promise of creative solutions, and because solutions are produced without coercion, it may be durable.

Finally, the Support Group Method is also used by teachers to handle bullying incidents <sup>[12]</sup>. The support group Method is thought to be particularly appropriate in situations where a number of students are involved in bullying another child. To provide support to the child and to understand exactly what was happening to the child, especially how the child is suffering, the victim is firstly arranged to attend an individual meeting with the teacher. After being assured that no one would be punished, the victim is asked to name the perpetrators. Then, teachers can hold a meeting as a group with these bullies with a number of other students who were expected to support the victim. The victim is not required to present. At the conference, teachers can share the suffering experienced by the victim and stress the responsibility of those present to take action to improve the situation. Everyone is asked to say what they would do to help. They are told there will be a further meeting to assess progress. Before leaving, the teacher can encourage them to talk to each other about what they are going to do. There is a drawback that while students are assured that no one will be punished, there is a lot of moral pressure on the bullies. They are confronted with powerful evidence of the harm experienced by the victims.

There are some suggestions to help teachers choose appropriate activity to face different types of bullying incidents. Restorative practices and the Support Group Methods can be used in cases where a number of students are involved in bullying another student as there are more students getting

involved in helping the victim. In both activities, the bullies are told that they have a personal responsibility to act to reduce harm, and they are individually asked to say how they would discharge this responsibility. Mediation can be used to resolve general bullying incidents, which can help clarify the rules and restore their relationship.

#### 4. Enlisting Other Relevant People

Whether other relevant people (such as parents, classmates, school administrators, etc.) need to be enlisted in handling the bullying depends on the teachers' comprehensive evaluation of the bullying incident that occurred. For the less serious incidents that occur occasionally (such as a student giving another student an insulting nickname) or there are a few students involved in bullying incidents, the teacher can handle it independently without the enlistment of other relevant persons. However, if bullying incidents caused serious distress and harm to students, or there involved a large number of students (such as a student who was often intentionally isolated or beaten by a group of students), the teacher needs to contact their parents, classmates and other teachers.

Teachers can handle bullying incidents with others by setting up a class meeting about bullying prevention, informing the parents of the students who were involved or reporting to the school leadership and relevant departments and so on. Some studies have found that the enlistment of other relevant people could indeed restrain the bullying behaviors to a large extent <sup>[1][15]</sup>. However, the attention of others also increased the social pressure on the bullies, and may bring too much personal evaluation beyond the objective facts, which caused a negative impact on their mental health and social relationships.

The point of enlisting others is to draw attention to handle bullying incidents better, not to focus on the bullies for punishment. Teachers should aim to work with parents and classmates to obtain more information about the reasons why students took or experienced bullying incidents, so as to help the bullies improve their social behaviors and reduce the negative effects caused by bullying. In communication with parents and classmates, it is critical that teachers maintain an objective evaluation of the students involved in bullying incidents. This means that teachers need to both demonstrate a firm attitude against bullying and affirm the reasonableness of students' need to be respected and valued in interpersonal interactions. In addition, teachers could pay attention to creating a better public opinion environment for students involved in bullying incidents. Teachers should sincerely express concern and expectation for students' mental health and future development, guide parents and students in the class to better help them play characteristics, adapt to the environment, and grow together.

Teachers' active intervening strategies in bullying incidents could help students to obtain the correct cognition, moral and behavioral standards of school bullying, which reduce the possibility of bullying incidents again. Teachers need to master effective bullying intervening strategies and accumulate experience in the process of practice. All of intervening strategies have positive significance in solving bullying incidents and reducing bullying victimization of students.

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