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# Mediation in Schools: an Anti-bullying Strategy



Bullying has many forms and can happen to anyone, at any age. Traditionally we think of playground bullies as students who intimidate others using menace and the threat of violence. Those who haven't experienced bullying may imagine comical characters like Biff in *Back to the Future* or Nelson from the *Simpsons*. If you were bullied in school, however, your mind probably conjures up someone more like Bill Sykes or Principal Trunchbull. And make no mistake, bullying can have a lasting psychological impact.

Research carried out by the National Center for Education Statistics states that 21.5% of students report being bullied. That statistic is alarming enough but is probably much higher, as another survey reported that 64% of children who were bullied didn't report it. And of course bullying takes many forms.

## Types of Bullying

1. **Physical** - physically hurting someone, pulling hair, tripping, damaging belongings, stealing, etc. You may think pulling hair is benign or even a sign of affection, but it can hurt and intimidate, just like punching someone in the arm.
2. **Verbal** - Making fun of someone and attacking them verbally can have negative psychological effects that can be equal to physical violence. Relentless teasing - with the intent to upset - is another example.
3. **Social** - This form of bullying isn't always obvious and often has plausible deniability. This is where students ostracize someone and tell others not to associate with him/her. It includes spreading rumors. Race, religious beliefs, physical appearance, disability, socioeconomic status and even interests can be the catalyst for being socially bullied.
4. **Cyber** - According to DoSomething., nearly 43% of kids say they've been bullied online and of those, around 25% say it's happened more than once. As so many students have mobile phones, there are now many ways to receive negative messages. 'Trolling' is common on social media platforms such as Facebook. People set up false accounts (all too easy to do) with the express purpose of cyber-bullying. A common way to do this is by posting deliberately inflammatory comments. They egg people to respond and then the 'dialogue' escalates and becomes hateful.



## Victims of Bullying

- The student may become withdrawn, with confidence levels dropping.
- Performance at school may drop off.
- They may be reluctant to come onto school grounds or go home.
- They may avoid certain students or places.

## Spotting a (potential) Bully

- Violence is seen as a positive way of dealing with issues and the student gets into fights, either physical or verbal.
- Becomes increasingly aggressive and displays antisocial behavior in class
- Never accepts responsibility for their actions
- Befriends other known bullies
- Cares an inordinate amount about his/her reputation

## Anti-bullying Policy

Schools will already have in place a strategy to deal with antisocial behavior and bullying. This will include:

- Training teachers and staff to identify and report suspected bullying.
- Liaising with parents and if necessary, outside agencies.
- Offering guidance and counselling to both victims and bullies

These policies are written based on expert advice and can have a positive impact - but not always. Some schools feel ill-equipped to deal with both the student bully and their parent(s). No one wants to admit their child is a bully. It's like saying the parent has failed. So when you label a student a bully, you're also casting negative aspersions on the primary caregiver.



## What Is Mediation?

Mediation or conflict resolution, as it's sometimes known, is a process where an independent third party (mediator) intervenes to help participants come to a mutually acceptable solution. The mediator won't express opinions unless asked and never apportion blame. She subtly directs the participants to examine the situation at hand and then come to an agreeable resolution themselves. This sounds a simple process but the qualified mediator has a particular skillset that allows him/her to steer the proceedings in such a way that more often than not, the matter is laid to rest. The best thing about using mediation is that both participants keep their dignity. No one is labelled or chastised.

## Using Mediation in Schools

### Teacher as mediator

There is no doubt that using mediation techniques in schools is a positive way to resolve conflict situations between teachers, parents, students and even school board, however the jury is still out on whether or not it should be used for students in bullying situations. Certainly if the bullying involves drugs, weapons, has caused bodily harm, etc, then applying a zero tolerance policy is the right course of action. Other forms of bullying, however, can be effectively dealt with using mediation. Consideration must be given to a victim that doesn't want to face his bully in a mediation situation, in which case the session could happen online.

### Peer mediation

Research has shown that over half of bullying incidents cease when a peer intervenes on behalf of the victim. So why not take peer intervention to the next level? There are two schools of thought with regard to using peer mediation in schools to combat bullying:

- Bullying is a form of victimization, not conflict, and therefore using mediation techniques, through peers, can be seen as sending the wrong message to the bully. The message is that we need to work this out between you, whereas maybe the message should be that bullying is totally inappropriate and must be stopped at all costs.
- The opinion from peer mediation advocates is that this technique is a powerful and positive initiative that offers effective life skills, conflict resolution tools and support to anti-bullying strategies. And it teaches the bully these skills, which should in turn help them to deal with situations in a more acceptable manner.



## Training

It's highly recommended to use a qualified mediator with experience in using mediation in schools. This will consist of first learning about mediation and the skills necessary such as active listening. Then staff will take part in role plays, where one acts as mediator, one is the bully and the third is the victim. It's also an advantage to have an elearning course available, which is useful for new employees and for refreshing knowledge. Having a course tailored for your school means it can take account of your specific policies and procedures, making it more relevant for those taking the module. Schools may also wish to consider having a course created aimed at the students, with specific modules for different age groups.

Whatever a school's views on using mediation for an anti-bullying campaign, mediation is a proven method for dealing with conflict, which is why it should be considered when issues arise in school - whether they involve students, employees or parents.

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