

The Role of Socializing Adults in Bullying Prevention

We lack research on the role of socializing adults, other than parents and teachers, in preventing bullying and promoting healthy relationships among children and youth. This research gap reflects the previously held perspective that bullying is primarily a school problem. There is growing recognition that bullying can unfold in all of the contexts in which children and youth come together. There is a pressing need for research on the important role that other socializing adults play in promoting safe and healthy relationships.

The impact that coaches, mentors, instructors, camp counselors, club leaders, faith leaders, and other socializing adults have with regards to bullying and victimization is likely similar to that of teachers and parents. We refer the reader to the fact sheets on the roles of teachers and parents for research relating to the role that significant adults play in children's lives.

In efforts to address bullying problems, it is essential that children and youth receive consistent messages throughout the community. Drawing from the African saying that "It takes a village to raise a child", it is time to recognize the important role that other socializing adults have and to provide them with the training and tools to enable them to prevent bullying and promote healthy relationships and healthy development.

Key Themes

Although there is a lack of research on the role of other socializing adults, there is a substantial body of research on the role of parents and teachers. From this research, we are able to identify key principles about the role of adults in socializing children, which may also apply to other significant adults in the lives of children and youth.

Adults play a critical role in promoting children's healthy relationships by:

- Establishing relationships with children and youth that are caring, mutually warm and positive.
- Creating positive social experiences that promote the development of skills, insights, attitudes, and competencies for healthy relationships.
- Establishing and communicating clear expectations and limits for children's behavior and with consequences that accompany misbehavior.
- Rewarding and reinforcing children's socially competent behaviors serve to increase those behaviors.
- Following through when children bully with consequences that are instructive and non-aggressive (i.e., positive discipline) will work to reduce the likelihood of bullying in the future.
- Providing supportive and educational consequences for children and youth who bully so that they learn positive ways of achieving status and social goals.
- Providing supportive coaching and peer support for children who are victimized.
- Modelling for children and youth, leading by example, and avoiding using their own inherent power aggressively.

- Creating environments and social experiences that promote children's positive relationships and minimize the opportunities for bullying and negative peer interactions.

Implications

The following guidelines for leaders working with children and youth have been developed based on the above principles (excerpted from the PREVNet website – www.prevnet.ca : Making a Difference in Bullying: What Recreation Leaders Need to Know).

Lead By Example

Children watch adults' behavior closely. If we model respectful and empathic behavior and positive conflict resolution strategies, then children are more likely to adopt similar behaviors in their peer relationships. On the other hand, if our interactions are critical, demeaning, or aggressive, how can we expect the children around us to behave any better? Think carefully about the words you choose and the way you behave.

Establish a Code of Conduct

Involve children and youth in developing a code of conduct about what they consider to be acceptable and unacceptable behavior during recreation activities. If children are responsible for creating a group policy around bullying, they are more likely to follow and enforce it with their friends. Post the code of conduct to remind children (and adults) about what will and will not be accepted in your organization.

Use Consequences that Teach

These are consequences that are designed to send the message that bullying is unacceptable while also providing support for children who bully to learn the skills and acquire the insights they are lacking. For example, a child who bullies may be asked to sit out of an activity and use that time to write a letter of apology or draw a picture of what it feels like to be bullied. Children who bully need help understanding the impact their behavior has on others.

Encourage Children to Report

Convey the message that it is the leaders' job to deal with bullying and that you want to know about all incidents. Clarify the difference between tattling and telling: Tattling is what you do to get someone into trouble, telling is what you do to get someone out of trouble. Providing alternative ways to report bullying, such as an anonymous bullying box, can help reduce the discomfort children feel around reporting bullying.

Acknowledge Positive Behaviors

You can encourage positive connections among children by praising respectful and cooperative behavior whenever you see it. The more you praise a behavior, the more often it will happen. Children love praise and they will work hard to get it from you. Try to focus on the positives of children and youth in your organization, even when they need correcting. Remember, children are works in progress—they can't always get it right.

Reduce the Chances of Bullying

Organize activities so that the child who is being bullied is always surrounded by children who will stand up for him/her. How do you do this? Leaders should take the lead in selecting children's teams, groups and seating arrangements. If children are allowed to make these decisions, those children who are bullied will always be left out and teased. Break up groups of children who may act aggressively together.

Teach the Social Skills Children Lack

Children who are bullied often have difficulties standing up for themselves. Leaders can help them practice this skill through role plays and modeling assertive behavior. Help children to determine whether their behavior could be exacerbating a bullying situation. Children who bully need help with learning different problem-solving skills and resisting peer pressure to bully. Give them frequent reminders of these strategies and share your optimism that they'll successfully avoid bullying others.

Build on Children's Strengths

Children who are bullied often have low self-esteem. Encouraging them to participate in activities they enjoy can help these children feel good about themselves. Highlighting their talents for other children to see can change their reputation in the peer group. For children who bully, provide opportunities for them to use their natural leadership skills in positive ways (e.g., teaching younger children a new sport or skill).

Trust Your Instincts

If you suspect that a child is being bullied, you are probably right. Children will often deny bullying out of shame or fear. If it looks like bullying and feels like bullying, it most likely is bullying, even if children and youth deny it. Trust your instincts and intervene.

Be Ready to Listen and Help

If a child reports being bullied, be ready to listen right away. Don't put it off. Thank the child for having the courage to come forward and explain that it is his/her right to feel safe. Ask for details about the incident and convey your concern. Be willing to respond to all reports, even the seemingly trivial ones such as name-calling. Consistency matters!