

Professional Advisory

Responding to the Bullying of Students

The Council of the Ontario College of Teachers approved this professional advisory on June 8, 2017.

This advice applies to all members of the College including, but not limited to, teachers, consultants, vice-principals, principals, supervisory officers, directors of education and those working in non-school board positions.

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Responding to the Bullying of Students

Professional advisories are intended to inform professional judgment and practice. The Council of the Ontario College of Teachers approved this advisory to assist members in their daily efforts to provide students a safe, inclusive and accepting school climate that helps all students reach their full potential. It may be read in conjunction with these previous advisories:

Use of Electronic Communications and Social Media, Safety in Learning Environments: A Shared Responsibility, and Duty to Report.

Introduction

What is bullying? What effect does it have on a student's self-esteem, development, and learning? How does bullying both inside and outside the classroom affect the learning environment? Can you recognize bullying in its various forms, including by electronic means? Do you know how to address and prevent bullying among your students?

Bullying means “aggressive and typically repeated behaviour”¹ that is pervasive in society, particularly among young people. In a comprehensive study conducted by the Nova Scotia Task Force on Bullying and Cyberbullying, 58 per cent of the 3,052 student respondents reported that they had been bullied and 30 per cent admitted to bullying others.² According to a 2015 Ontario study, 24 per cent (representing about 231,000 students) reported being bullied at school, and 13 per cent said that they had bullied others at school.³

The scale of the problem signals that “many children may not be learning the skills and competencies necessary to engage positively or

constructively in human relationships.”⁴ This has a tremendous negative impact on students and learning environments.

By understanding the characteristics of bullying, you can identify bullying behaviour and provide effective interventions that can minimize its effects and reduce occurrences.

This advice aims to help all College members reflect on their practice so that they can remain current in their knowledge and skills to make responsible, professional decisions when facing the challenge of bullying among students. Addressing the causes and responses to bullying is a collective responsibility. It applies to all Ontario Certified Teachers (OCT) including teachers, consultants, vice-principals, principals, supervisory officers, directors of education and those working in non-school board positions. All have a responsibility to keep students safe and to model positive and respectful relationships and attitudes for children and youth.

1 RSO 1990, c. E.2, s.1.(1)

2 A. Wayne MacKay, “Respectful and Responsible Relationships: There's No App for That” (The Report of the Nova Scotia Task Force on Bullying and Cyberbullying, 29 November 2012).

3 Boak, A., Hamilton, H.A., Adlaf, E. M., Henderson, J.L., & Mann, R.E. (2016). “The mental health and well-being of Ontario students, 1991-2015: Details OSDUHS findings” (CAMH Research Document Series No. 43). Toronto, ON: Centre for Addiction and Mental Health.

4 MacKay, 5.

Bullying Defined

Experts describe bullying as intentionally aggressive or unwelcome behaviour that is typically repeated over time and makes others feel uncomfortable, frightened, hurt, or humiliated. Bullying occurs where there is a real or perceived power imbalance between those involved. Whether direct or indirect, the behaviour and its effects are often intensified by the passive or active encouragement of others.

With the 2012 passage of the *Accepting Schools Act*, the government introduced the following definition of bullying by amendment into the *Education Act* to ensure that all schools in Ontario are safe, inclusive, and accepting of all students:

“bullying means aggressive and typically repeated behaviour by a pupil where,

- a. the behaviour is intended by the pupil to have the effect of, or the pupil ought to know that the behaviour would be likely to have the effect of,
 - i. causing harm, fear or distress to another individual, including physical, psychological, social or academic harm, harm to the individual’s reputation or harm to the individual’s property, or
 - ii. creating a negative environment at a school for another individual, and
- b. the behaviour occurs in a context where there is a real or perceived power imbalance between the pupil and the individual based on factors such as

size, strength, age, intelligence, peer group power, economic status, social status, religion, ethnic origin, sexual orientation, family circumstances, gender, gender identity, gender expression, race, disability or the receipt of special education; (“intimidation”)

The *Education Act* also now defines bullying by electronic means (commonly known as cyberbullying). This includes:

- a. creating a web page or a blog in which the creator assumes the identity of another person;
- b. impersonating another person as the author of content or messages posted on the internet; and
- c. communicating material electronically to more than one individual or posting material on a website that may be accessed by one or more individuals.

Bullying may require police involvement depending on the nature and extent of the activity. Criminal offences such as harassment, intimidation, mischief, identity fraud, and distribution of intimate images may be tied to instances of bullying or cyberbullying.

Bullying is deeply damaging to students, the learning environment, and the larger community, yet incidents, particularly online, often occur away from school or beyond a member’s view. Bullying resonates. It affects students wherever they are and can create lasting, negative effects on them, their families, their environments and their ability to succeed in school.

Realities

In a 2016 Ontario College of Teachers' study, 65 per cent of parents and members identified bullying as a top priority for the development of professional advisories.

Research shows that among students:

- 58 per cent are victims of bullying⁵
- 30 per cent bully others⁵
- 78 per cent have witnessed bullying, but fewer than half of those have intervened⁵
- 25 per cent are bullied and bully others⁶
- 12 per cent report being bullied once or more per week⁷
- 20 per cent of students in grades 7 to 12 report being cyberbullied at least once in the past year.⁸

Unfortunately, only 21 per cent of bullied students disclose the bullying to a teacher.⁹ This means nearly three-quarters of all students who are bullied do not disclose this to a teacher. College members, therefore, may not be aware of bullying behavior and incidents among students.

A student may not escape the effects of bullying or find respite or relief unless or until the cycle is broken. Bullies may have been victims of bullying themselves. There are also students who fluctuate between both roles. As a teaching professional, you are essential in disrupting the cycle of bullying.

Typical characteristics

Bullying devalues, disempowers, and humiliates its victims. A bullied student often feels afraid, anxious, and alone. Students who are bullied can suffer sleeplessness, depression, and loss of appetite. They often become isolated and withdrawn, even from activities they previously enjoyed. Their behaviour can sometimes become erratic and aggressive. They have difficulty focusing and suffer a severe loss of self-esteem. They may begin to be absent from school more often. They will sometimes be cut off from their peer group and even their friends.

Student victims and bystanders are reluctant to disclose bullying to an adult, research shows. Bystanders are concerned about being cast as “tattletales” and are afraid of attracting the attention of the bully. Victims can be ashamed, frightened and embarrassed and believe disclosure will not make any difference or may make the situation worse. Sometimes disclosure only occurs after long periods of repeated and intense bullying.

Educational context

The responsibility of Ontario Certified Teachers to student safety arises from sources such as statutes, regulations, board and employer policies, professional workplace standards and common law. OCTs also receive information from the Ministry of Education, the enhanced teacher education program, the College's additional qualification courses, and some professional associations and federations.

5 MacKay, Appendix B.

6 Faye Mishna et al, “Risk Factors for Involvement in Cyber Bullying: Victims, Bullies, and Bully-victims” (2012) 34 Children and Youth Services Review 63.

7 Natalie Rock Henderson et al, “Bullying as a Normal Part of School Life: Early Adolescents' Perspectives on Bullying & Peer Harassment”. (Safe Schools Safe Communities Conference, February 2002, Vancouver, BC.)

8 Boak, A. et al, “The mental health and well-being of Ontario students, 1991-2015” (2016) CAMH Research Document Series No. 43

9 MacKay, Appendix B.

From the *Accepting Schools Act*, for example, schools and school boards are legally obligated to address bullying in all forms, including cyberbullying, by taking preventive measures, following progressive discipline protocols, supporting students and promoting understanding and respect for all.

The Ministry of Education provides direction on bullying prevention and intervention and suggests that a whole-school approach is needed to bring about systematic change. A positive school climate exists when all members of the school community feel safe, included, and accepted. Vulnerable students – for example, those marginalized by racism, sexism, homophobia, ableism and classism – are at a higher risk of becoming targets of bullying.

Learning environments that actively promote positive behaviours and interactions can effectively reduce the incidents and mitigate the effects of bullying. The Ministry reminds school board employees that they “must take seriously all allegations of bullying behaviour and act in a timely, sensitive, and supportive manner when responding to students who disclose or report bullying incidents”.¹⁰

Ethical Standards for the Teaching Profession

The College’s *Ethical Standards for the Teaching Profession* and the *Standards of Practice for the Teaching Profession* provide the moral and practical groundwork for this advice. Developed by College members and members of the public to guide and inform

Ontario Certified Teachers, the standards – reflected in this advice and found on the College’s website – support professional judgment.

In their position of trust, members demonstrate responsibility in their relationships with students. They express their commitment to students’ well-being and learning through positive influence, professional judgment and empathy in practice. These commitments and values of care, trust, respect and integrity are integral to member efforts to effectively address bullying among students.

Members work to ensure all their students feel respected, valued, and safe, and that their students treat others with respect, courtesy, and consideration.

Legal and Disciplinary Considerations

Under the *Education Act*, all members have an obligation to maintain order and discipline in the classroom and on school grounds.¹¹ Additionally, teachers and all board employees are required to report to their principal any serious incidents or behaviour for which a suspension must be considered. This includes bullying.¹²

Principals have an obligation to investigate all reported bullying incidents and follow all additional and required protocols when dealing with these incidents.¹³ This can include speaking with the parents of involved students, implementing progressive discipline measures from verbal warnings to possible suspension, or involving the police when required.

¹⁰ Ontario Ministry of Education, Policy/Program Memorandum No. 144, “Bullying Prevention and Intervention” (5 December 2012) 7.

¹¹ RSO 1990, c E.2, s.264.(1)(e)

¹² s. 300.2

¹³ s. 300.2(3)

The responsibility of Ontario Certified Teachers for student safety extends to the treatment of students during daily interactions. As a professional, it is your responsibility to always model behaviour that aligns with the *Standards of Practice for the Teaching Profession* and the *Ethical Standards for the Teaching Profession* and that promotes safe learning environments for students.

Given the prevalence and seriousness of bullying and cyberbullying, remember that the *Professional Misconduct Regulation*¹⁴ notes that members may have committed professional misconduct for failing to comply with the provisions of *Education Act*.

Relevant legislation and regulations can be found on the College's website at www.oct.ca and on the Ontario government's website at edu.gov.on.ca and e-laws.gov.on.ca.

¹⁴ O. Reg. 437/97, s. 15.

Professional responsibilities

Members embrace a professional ethical responsibility to educate students in safe, caring, accepting, inclusive and equitable environments that honour students' well-being and dignity.

Ontario Certified Teachers have a professional responsibility to safeguard and educate students who have been placed under their care using every precaution reasonable in the circumstances. School administrators and teachers are responsible for creating safe and healthy instructional settings, integrating hazard identification, assessing risks, and controlling the situation in all aspects of the learning environment.

It is your duty to understand and follow your employer's policies, procedures, protocols, and expectations.

Advice to members:

Lead by example, promote good digital citizenship, and model positive, inclusive and respectful behaviour to all. Learn to recognize the characteristics of bullying and cyber-bullying and act accordingly.

Intervene early:

Research shows that bullying stops in fewer than 10 seconds – 57 per cent of the time – when someone intervenes.¹⁵ Adult supervision and increased presence can prevent bullying. Intervene early and often so that students understand social responsibility and the importance of standing up for themselves and others.

Encourage students:

Seek to provide assistance and support to students who are bullied. Look for opportunities to improve their self-esteem, develop confidence, change perceptions, counteract the effects of bullying, and reduce the likelihood of further incidents.

Promote disclosure:

By encouraging students to disclose acts of bullying, you become more aware of the behaviour and create opportunities to interrupt the bullying dynamic and correct behaviour. Talk about bullying openly. Be ready to listen, willing to act, and follow up accordingly.

Provide guidance:

Students who bully also need support and guidance. Help them to develop problem-solving and leadership skills in positive ways that do not involve aggression. Provide support and encouragement to help them understand that you have confidence in their ability to change their behaviour.

Review protocols:

Seek resources to further your learning. Ministry memoranda, for example, outline the progressive discipline protocol that involves interventions, supports, and consequences that promote positive behaviours.

¹⁵ "Bullying Infographic", PrevNet, undated

A self-reflective framework for addressing bullying

Detection

Ask yourself:

1. How do I detect bullying?
2. How do I recognize power imbalances among students of all ages that might lead to bullying?
3. How do I spot behaviour occurring outside the classroom or online that affects students?
4. How do I respond to smaller, subtle acts such as verbal slights, use of derogatory language and cutting humour that may lead to more harmful behaviour?
5. How do I encourage students to safely disclose bullying behaviour?

Intervention

Ask yourself:

1. How do I remain current with my responsibilities under my employer's policies, procedures, protocols and expectations regarding bullying?
2. How do I create an environment where students are safe and find relief from bullying?
3. How do I model and communicate the behaviours I expect from my students clearly and consistently?
4. How do I advocate for students as individuals and intervene on their behalf?
5. How do I act on information about bullying that occurs outside the school?
6. How do I show empathy for a victim of bullying?

7. How do I ensure fairness in my treatment of students who bully and those who are bullied?

8. How do I engage bystanders in prevention, intervention and follow-up?

Reporting

Ask yourself:

1. How do I involve colleagues, parents, and others in discussions about bullying?
2. Am I following the appropriate protocols with respect to reporting obligations?
3. Have I documented the incident and spoken with all those involved, including witnesses?

Reflection

Ask yourself:

1. How do I ensure that I take bullying seriously?
2. Do I understand why bullying happens and how it affects students, my classroom and the school community?
3. How do my experiences and biases colour my understanding, attitude, and actions with respect to student bullying?
4. How do I address a bullying/cyberbullying situation?
5. How have I created an environment where students feel safe from bullying?
6. What strategies do I use to encourage my students to stand up for themselves or their peers and to diffuse or confront bullying behaviour?

7. Do I know where to find resources for myself, my students, and their families?

8. How do I further my understanding and influence my practices regarding bullying and cyberbullying?

Can you say this with confidence?

- My words and actions show that I treat students with care, respect, trust, and integrity and that I expect the same from them.
- I am aware of the ethical and legal parameters that guide my professional practice.
- I am familiar with my employer's policies, procedures, protocols and expectations regarding bullying and cyberbullying.
- I reflect on past occurrences, monitor ongoing situations, and prepare for the unexpected.
- I, my school, and the learning community have a preventive and proactive approach to addressing bullying and cyberbullying.



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