

Beyond the “Bully”

As a performance education troupe, your goal is to prevent bullying, harassment, and related violence at your school. There are many different perspectives and philosophies about how this work should be done. Many programs attempt to prevent bullying by teaching students skills for standing up for themselves when they are confronted with “bullies”. Some programs work with teachers, staff, and administrators at schools to identify “bullies”, and then work to get “bullies” professional help for their behavior. Some programs train peer mediators to bring the “bully” and the victim together so that they can try to mediate a solution to the issue. Other programs train students to act as student hall monitors, playground monitors, or lunch monitors, to bring “bullies” to the attention of adults.

What do all of these programs have in common? They all focus on identifying and interrupting the behavior of so-called “bullies”. So what is a “bully”? The Pacific Violence Prevention Institute (PVPI) defines a bully as:

Bully: *An individual identified as having a pattern of using violent, aggressive, or intimidating behavior to gain control over others.*

Most students can identify the handful of students at their school that fit this description. Stereotypically, this person is a large, or in some way physically or verbally intimidating student, who roams the halls terrorizing his/her victims. Research has shown that students who are identified as “bullies” are often victims of abuse themselves, do not have close connections with family, friends, or teachers, and may have a dangerously low self-esteem. In fact, the behavior of students fitting this definition is very similar to those who demonstrate a pattern of domestic or relational violence (Olweus, 2003). It is very difficult, and usually not very safe, for students to take effective steps to intervene in the behavior of a “bully”, because in many cases, this student’s behavior requires professional intervention. Many school districts have policies and procedures in place to identify these students, and refer them to mental health professionals, where they can be properly evaluated and treated.



While the stereotypical “bully” does exist, and does cause problems at every school, in our work with countless high school and middle school students we have learned that this is not the main problem. We have learned that most students are able to identify the “bullies” and avoid them, thereby avoiding victimization. Only a small percentage of students are actually victimized by the defined “bully” on a regular basis, and while it is highly important that adults at school are able to recognize and intervene in this type of violence, there is another type of violence that is far more prevalent, that the vast majority of students that we work with report experiencing as

a victim and as a perpetrator, practically on a daily basis. The PVPI has defined this type of violence as **Bullying and Harassment Behavior**:

Bullying and Harassment Behavior: Any type of violent behavior (emotional, physical, sexual) that is used to gain approval from one's peers, gain control over one's peers, or that creates and unsafe or unwelcome environment.

While this definition may seem very similar to the definition of a "bully", there are some important differences. One of the most important differences is that most people engage in bullying and harassment behavior, while very few are identified to have a pattern of violent behavior. The goal of bullying and harassment behavior is often to gain approval from peers. Bullying and harassment behavior may occur without provocation, however, in some cases the perpetrator may feel that they are justified in their behavior, based on some sort of interaction that the perpetrator has had with the victim in the past. Those who engage in bullying and harassment behavior are usually more popular with their peers than students who are simply mean or aggressive.

The actions that constitute bullying and harassment behavior are many. Some of the most common forms are not physically violent. To name a few, these behaviors include spreading rumors, putting people down, shunning, telling inappropriate or offensive jokes, or using words that may be offensive to individuals or groups of people. Bullying and harassment behavior can be committed whether the victim or target is present or not. These behaviors are so prevalent that they create an atmosphere that makes it easier for acts of violence to escalate. In many cases fighting or other forms of physical violence can be traced back to acts of violence that may seem much less severe.

By focusing this prevention program on bullying and harassment behavior, rather than focusing on the "bully", your troupe will be able to address a problem that affects everyone. At one time or another everyone has experienced bullying and harassment behavior, as victims, perpetrators, or as bystanders, so your troupe will be able to approach this topic with its audience in a guilt-free manner, and rather than lecturing its audience about how they shouldn't be bullies, it will be able to work with its audience to develop solutions to a problem that everyone experiences.