BULLYING

What is it? How do we prevent it?

AN ISSUE GUIDE PREPARED FOR ALABAMA ISSUES FORUMS
DAVID MATTHEWS CENTER FOR CIVIC LIFE
The David Mathews Center for Civic Life is a 501 (c) 3 non-profit organization that works with citizens who want to make positive, innovative decisions that lead to action in their communities on issues that concern them. The Center works to encourage sustainable community practices that are aimed at building and preserving a healthy democracy. We do this through signature programs such as Alabama Issues Forums, Teachers’ Institute, Citizens’ Congress, and Coaching Community Innovation Workshops. We take a non-advocacy, non-partisan approach to facilitating the important work that citizens must do to maintain a civic environment that promotes engagement. The Center honors the life and work of David Mathews, a native of Grove Hill, Alabama and acting president and CEO of the Kettering Foundation in Dayton, Ohio. Our offices are housed at the American Village in Montevallo, Alabama, because we share their passion for educating the next generation of citizens.
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On behalf of the David Mathews Center for Civic Life, I would like to formally welcome you to Alabama Issues Forums (AIF) 2012–2013! Throughout this upcoming project cycle, citizens across the state of Alabama will deliberate on the bullying issue, and, as a participant, you are now a part of this statewide conversation!

Public deliberation is a process that requires citizens to weigh costs, consequences, and trade-offs when discussing multiple approaches to a public issue. Rather than engaging in a debate environment, forum participants actively listen to differing perspectives and work to identify common ground for action. In a forum, there are no winners or losers. Public deliberation is about making decisions and acting publicly, and we believe that Alabamians will develop innovative community-based approaches to the bullying issue by participating in AIF 2012–2013.

Throughout AIF 2010–2011, citizens identified bullying as a key problem affecting schools and communities across Alabama. Defining the issue is a challenge, so we invited Dr. Cynthia Reed, Gerald and Emily Leischuck Professor of Educational Leadership and Director of the Truman Pierce Institute at Auburn University, to author an essay that we believe you will find helpful. Her essay offers a definition of bullying, identifies the effects of the behavior, and addresses the impact it has on communities. Equally important is the way citizens name and describe the problem, and this forum provides an excellent opportunity for that kind of public work to take place.

Following Dr. Reed’s essay, you will find three approaches to addressing the bullying issue. Each approach features a brief introduction, examples of what might be done, and consequences to consider. Over the course of the next two hours, your moderator will facilitate your deliberation and ask questions related to the issue guide. The Mathews Center has modeled this process after decades-long research that has been conducted by the Kettering Foundation and National Issues Forums.

We look forward to seeing these deliberative experiences unfold over the next year, and we believe that Alabamians will develop unique and inventive programs and projects focused on eliminating bullying!

Let’s remember the words of American sociologist Margaret Mead: “Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has.”

Sincerely,

Chris McCauley
David Mathews Center for Civic Life, Executive Director

Fellow Citizen,

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– Margaret Mead

FACTS

on BULLYING

Authored by Dr. Cynthia Reed, Auburn University, Gerald & Emily Leischuck Professor of Educational Leadership and Director of the Truman Pierce Institute

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Some researchers claim that bullying is a LEARNED BEHAVIOR, resulting from ABUSIVE SITUATIONS, at home and is INTERGENERATIONAL.

There is mixed evidence to support this claim, but we do know these alarming statistics:

BULLYING IS UNWANTED, AGGRESSIVE BEHAVIOR THAT INVOLVES A REAL OR PERCEIVED POWER IMBALANCE.

To be considered bullying, the behavior must include specific characteristics identified by the U. S. Department of Health and Human Services:

- AN IMBALANCE OF POWER: Those who bully use their power—such as popularity, physical strength, or access to embarrassing information—to control or harm others.
- REPETITION OF A PATTERN OF BEHAVIOR OVER TIME: Bullying behaviors happen more than once or have the potential to happen more than once.
- TARGETED AND UNWELCOME ACTIONS: Bullying includes actions such as making threats, spreading rumors, attacking someone physically or verbally, and purposely excluding someone from a group.

NINE TYPES OF BULLYING:

1. Verbal
2. Intentional social exclusion or isolation
3. Physical, such as hitting, kicking, spitting, or shoving
4. Telling of lies and spreading of false rumors
5. Taking of money or other belongings or intentional damage to belongings
6. Threats or forcing others to do things they don’t want to do
7. Racial
8. Sexual, particularly in relation to sexual identity
9. Cyberbullying, disseminating bullying via the Internet or through cell phones

SOURCE: OLWEUS BULLY PREVENTION PROGRAM

EVERY 30 MINUTES, a CHILD COMMITS SUICIDE as a DIRECT RESULT of BEING BULLIED

EVERY 7 MINUTES a CHILD is BULLIED on a SCHOOL PLAYGROUND, 85% HAPPEN without INTERVENTION

28% of CHILDREN CARRYING GUNS HAVE WITNESSED VIOLENCE in THEIR HOMES.

AT LEAST 100,000 CHILDREN CARRY GUNS TO SCHOOL AS A RESULT of BEING BULLIED.

19,000 BULLIED CHILDREN ATTEMPT SUICIDE over the COURSE of ONE YEAR.

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100,000 MORE than 85% of TEENAGERS say REVENGE AFTER BULLYING is the LEADING CAUSE of SCHOOL SHOOTINGS & HOMICIDE.

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A recent national study found that 17% of all students reported having been bullied within a school term. Students who are being bullied often have few, if any, friends with whom they spend time. Many bullied youth appear anxious and depressed. They are afraid to go to school, afraid to walk to or from school, afraid to ride the bus, and afraid to take part in organized school or community activities with their peers. They often lose interest in doing schoolwork and may suddenly do poorly in school. They are often sad, moody, teary, or depressed, and they frequently develop physical problems such as headaches and stomach aches. It is not unusual for them to have bad dreams and trouble sleeping or to experience a loss of appetite.

According to the Olweus Bullying Prevention Program, students who bully can have a wide-ranging impact on the students they bully, on the students who observe the bullying, and on the overall climate of the school and community. In a bullying environment, there are those who bully, followers who take an active part and support the bullies’ actions, passive bullies who call attention to the bullying but don’t actively participate, passive supporters or potential bullies who like the bullying, disengaged onlookers who neither get involved nor take a stand, possible defenders who dislike the bullying and think they should probably help but do nothing, and finally, defenders who dislike the bullying and try to help. Everyone is involved or impacted in some way.
ALTHOUGH BULLYING IS OFTEN THOUGHT OF AS ONLY A SCHOOL-RELATED PROBLEM, IN REALITY IT AFFECTS US ALL. Bullying can be students, parents, teachers, administrators, work colleagues, or others in the community. Likewise, bullying can occur at school, at work, at church, or at other community functions. Those who bully others are not necessarily stronger or bigger than those they bully. The power imbalance can come from a number of sources—including popularity, strength, and cognitive ability—and those who bully may have more than one of these characteristics.

COMMON CHARACTERISTICS OF BULLIES:
- Aggressive or easily frustrated
- Limited parental involvement
- Think badly of others
- Difficulty following rules
- View violence in a positive way
- Have friends who bully others

TYPICAL VICTIMS:
- Those who withdraw, are passive, and are viewed by others as weak.
- Those who are hot-tempered, restless, anxious, and likely to become aggressive toward others.

TYPICAL BULLIES:
- Some are well-connected to their peers, have social power, are overly concerned about their popularity, and like to dominate or be in charge of others.
- Others are isolated from their peers and may be depressed or anxious, have low self-esteem, be less involved in school or community, be easily pressured by peers, and be unable to identify with the emotions or feelings of others.

Both types of victims have the potential to act out, hurting themselves and/or others. It is important to understand the type of bullying victim one is working with to ensure that successful intervention takes place. Those who are bullied, those who observe bullying, and those who bully others may have serious, lasting problems. Students who are bullied often suffer from depression, low self-esteem, health problems, poor grades, and suicidal thoughts. This is especially true for those who are bullied because of their perceived or actual sexual orientation (Schneider et al.).

Those who bully others are more likely to get into fights or disagreements, to steal or vandalize property, to drink alcohol or smoke, to report poor grades in school or poor work performance, to perceive that there is a negative environment at school or work, and to carry a weapon. Further, bullying can be predictive of future criminal behaviors (Ttofi et al.). On the other hand, not all who bully others have obvious behavioral problems. In fact, some bullies are highly skilled socially and are able to convince others of their innocence. For these reasons, it can be difficult to identify bullies or to even imagine that some individuals could engage in bullying behaviors.

Today, most states have legislation requiring schools to address bullying. Yet bullying remains prevalent in our schools, workplaces, and communities. More than half of all bullying events are never even reported, as documented in Dear Bully: Seventy Authors Tell Their Stories.
Approach One:

GET TOUGH ON BULLYING

REPORTS OF BULLYING INCIDENTS ARE REACHING EPIDEMIC PROPORTIONS. Bullying is unacceptable. It must be treated with zero tolerance. Increased reports of bullying in our schools demand that schools, principals, and school districts do more to help prevent and provide tougher consequences for bullying. We must ensure that district anti-harassment policies and student codes of conduct in Alabama are strictly enforced.

POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS

- Implement zero-tolerance policies and procedures.
- Institute tougher consequences for bullying in student codes of conduct to communicate that bullying is unacceptable.
- Distribute anonymous surveys to gauge how widespread bullying is at each school campus.
- Station a police officer in each school to reinforce that bullying and violence have severe consequences.
- Require teachers and staff members to report bullying within 24 hours of incidents.
- Emphasize the need for bystanders to communicate that bullying is unacceptable. Educate young people regarding what to do when they see bullying.

CONSEQUENCES TO CONSIDER

- Zero-tolerance policies may push students out of school prematurely.
- Imposing tougher consequences ignores the underlying issues that incite young people to bully.
- Some research shows that bullying may not be the "epidemic" it is portrayed as being.
- Stationing police officers in each school can be costly. Police efforts are better focused on criminal behavior outside of the schools.
- Teachers are forced to turn playground spats into formal bullying reports under zero-tolerance bullying policies; overreacting may create more problems.
- Many incidences of bullying, such as cyberbullying, occur outside the school and require the attention of the entire community, not just the schools.
STUDENTS NEED PRACTICAL KNOWLEDGE AND SKILLS ON HOW TO REACT TO & REPORT BULLYING. Not every young person understands what constitutes bullying and how to respond to it. Many feel powerless as victims and/or bystanders. Many bullies do not understand the effects of their actions. The lines between victims and bullies often become blurred when circumstances change and/or victims retaliate. The bullied may be charged as bullies if they retaliate. We should concentrate our efforts on educating students about bullying and how to respond to it. We should create supportive, enriching school cultures that equip young people to address the root causes of bullying.

EQUIP STUDENTS to ADDRESS BULLYING

Approach Two

POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS

- Develop a school-wide awareness program to inform young people of the types of bullying and their effects.
- Implement self-confidence training to teach young people how to respond to bullies; explain to young people the difference between “tattling” and “reporting.”
- Ensure that young people know whom they should contact if bullying occurs.
- Encourage peaceful solutions and peer mediation programs to help bullies build social skills to stop bullying.
- Educate school counselors, teachers, staff, coaches, and administrators to address root causes of bullying and to serve as role models for positive interactions.
- Create a culture of respect in our schools.

CONSEQUENCES to CONSIDER

- Awareness campaigns will do little to alleviate bullying if parents and the community do not emphasize positive behaviors.
- Assertive actions by victims could bring on greater torment from bullies, and bullies may still view reporting as “tattling” or “snitching.”
- Schools and teachers do not have the time and resources to adequately address every instance of bullying.
- Without tough consequences for bullies, young people may not take the bullying problem seriously.
- Addressing the complex root causes of bullying is best left to the expertise of mental health and behavioral professionals.
- It is the responsibility of parents and community members to instill strong character in young people and determine moral standards.
Engage the Community & Parents in Bullying Solutions

Bullying is a widespread behavior. It is not limited to schools. Parents and the community should accept more responsibility for talking about and preventing bullying. The cost is too high for the community if bullying is not addressed. Bullies take up school time and police time. Bullies can end up convicted of crimes when they reach adulthood. Teachers and administrators do not have the time, personnel, and resources to eradicate all bullying. They cannot address its complex root causes outside the school environment. We, individually and through our community organizations, must communicate to young people that bullying is unacceptable. A great amount of bullying and violent behavior begins in the home. We must reach out to parents. We must reach out to young people. Some young people do not have supportive home environments and need community help.

Possible Solutions
- Encourage greater parental monitoring of their children’s cell phone and Internet use, and promote acceptable policies for using social media and the Internet.
- Conduct presentations about bullying in PTA and community meetings—its nature, its impact, and its warning signs.
- Ensure that a parent is present when his or her child has been accused of bullying or has been bullied.
- Advocate that civic groups and businesses address bullying in meetings and service projects.
- Equip community members and parents to be able to identify the signs that a child is bullying or being bullied.
- Encourage community mentoring and character education programs to reinforce positive behavior and to combat bullying.

Consequences to Consider
- Many parents suffer from a “knowledge gap” in regard to their children’s use of social media and the Internet.
- Parents often lack time to devote to PTA meetings and community initiatives.
- Many parents may not have interest in participating in extra school meetings; moreover, some young people come from homes without parents or adequate parental support.
- Communities may not have the time, personnel, and resources to devote to bullying prevention; further, community initiatives may be unequally distributed and may vary in cost and effectiveness.
- Schools, not the community, have the responsibility to address bullying, as most young people are in the school environment.
- Most bullying happens in school, so the emphasis must be on school efforts.