



Prevention of Bullying Youth Committee Focus Group

The following is a report on the data collected through a focus group with the Alberta Prevention of Bullying Youth Committee on September 15, 2006. This Youth Committee provides feedback and advice on the proposed strategies, recommendations and findings of Alberta's cross-ministry *Prevention of Bullying Working Group* and works with youth networks across the province to address bullying at a community level. The committee consists of Alberta youth ranging in age from 15 to 22 with a variety of backgrounds and experiences, including rural, urban, Aboriginal, and at risk youth. The purpose of the focus group was to obtain the youth perspective on issues related to bullying in schools.

Discussion Topics and Data Collection Methods

The focus group session was facilitated by two staff members from the Society for Safe and Caring Schools and Communities. An initial discussion was held with the large group (n=12) and was tape-recorded. This portion of the focus group took approximately 45 minutes. The following questions were asked:

- 1) What do you think are the underlying/ root causes of bullying?
- 2) In your school experience, what is the school doing to prevent bullying?
- 3) If an average youth was involved in a bullying incident, where would they go for help?

Youth were then asked to split themselves up into four small groups of three to four people and were given 15 minutes to answer the following related questions. These answers were recorded by the youth on paper.

- 1) What could youth do to prevent bullying and violence?
- 2) What would make an average student stick up for someone who is being bullied or victimized or include someone who is different from him or her?
- 3) What could schools do to encourage students to include others?

Summary of Results

Three general themes emerged from both the large group discussion and the small group brainstorming.

1. The need to train and educate

First of all, the need for more education related to bullying and violence prevention for staff and students was echoed in many of the responses. More specifically, participants said school staff need to learn: (1) specific strategies for promoting respect, empathy, acceptance and inclusion among students; (2) how to use classroom activities to bring students together and form tighter bonds so that all youth can be a part of a strong peer group; (3) available support for youth and how they can access it and (4) how to detect warning signs in youth at-risk for violence, bullying and suicide, and what to do to help youth. The youth participants felt students should also learn strategies for promoting respect and inclusion, dealing with bullying, standing up for others and accessing available support and information.

Participants also discussed certain aspects of training and education in order for programs to be effective at preventing violence and promoting a positive school culture. In particular, they said that specific programming needs to (1) start at early age, (2) involve all school staff, (3) include parents and other community members and (4) focus on respect and building a positive environment.

2. The need to expand the youth support system

Many responses underscored the lack of support or places to go for help. Along with informing staff and students about available resources, there appears to be a serious need for safe places youth can go when they need help with a problem.

Educating staff and students through violence prevention programs addresses this issue partially by increasing the number of knowledgeable people able to intervene or stand up for others, however participants also expressed the need for more outlets for youth to deal with fears, concerns and life's problems in general.

An important aspect of an effective support system for youth is to ensure students feel safe supporting one another and going to adults for help with any kind of problem. School staff may need to expend extra effort communicating this commitment to a safe, supportive environment. Youth may expect school staff, and perhaps adults in general, to have a certain attitude toward youth problems, so teachers and administrators may need to create specific opportunities to show students that they are supported and can come to them for help.

3. The need to use consistent and logical consequences

A few participants specifically identified the need for consistent consequences that all students understand. Several others alluded to the importance of consistency throughout the focus group session. In the discussions about positive approaches to discipline, the participants framed consistent consequences within a positive environment that promotes respect and encourages students to help one another.

Large Group Results

The underlying/ root causes of bullying

The participants reported several reasons for youth engaging in bullying behaviours. Some were related to feelings and behaviours—pain, anger, lack of self-confidence, the desire to be in control, the exertion of power and responding violently as a learned behaviour. These responses underscore the need for violence prevention and character education programming to (1) begin at early childhood and (2) extend beyond the confines of the school to reach parents, relatives, coaches, business owners and other community members.

However, many of the reasons given were external to the person doing the bullying—getting peer pressured into bullying, wanting to be popular, pressure or pain from relationships, tragic life experiences, lack of support and ignorance or misunderstanding. These responses highlight the importance of all school staff being trained in strategies to help youth with bullying and violence and to promote respect, acceptance and other prosocial values among the students. This also stresses the importance of specific programming for students to address and resolve these issues.

What are schools doing to prevent bullying?

Almost half of the participants said that nothing was being done at their schools to prevent bullying. A few others shed light on these comments by saying that some schools are trying to stop violence but there are so many other issues for school staff to focus on, such as academics and being drug-free, that these seemingly ‘bigger’ concerns take priority.

Several other participants said that their schools relied on suspension and expulsion to deal with bullying, however one youth said it was often the victim who was either expelled or segregated from other students. Two participants talked about victims leaving school because nothing could be done to stop the bullying. Another said that some schools will expel students who bully, but the school staff wait until someone complains rather than actively prevent bullying.

A few participants reported that teachers are not trained in any type of violence prevention and do not know how to intervene in a bullying situation. More agreed that school staff need to be educated in violence prevention strategies. Two participants stated that some teachers think it is not their responsibility to prevent violence, and that these teachers believe their role is simply to teach their subject.

Three participants discussed the stigma attached to participation in school-organized anti-bullying groups. They said that students who attend these meetings become labelled “losers” and are more likely to be bullied as a result.

Only two participants elaborated on positive actions taken in their schools to prevent bullying. One participant discussed the school working hand in hand with the community to ensure consistent and logical consequences to violence and inappropriate behaviours. The other participant stated that the administrator at the school made all the difference. The principal, who was “in-touch” with his/ her student population and promoted a positive school culture, gained the respect of students and this led to a more prosocial and respectful environment.

Which disciplinary approaches in schools are most effective?

The delivery of consistent and recognized/ understood consequences was the key to both of the positive approaches identified in the previous question. In one instance, community hours (which involved cleaning the playground, mowing lawns for elderly people or other similar tasks) worked as an effective deterrent in one small community. The participant said youth who were punished this way were ashamed because everyone knew what he or she had done. In the other example of a positive disciplinary approach, a participant explained how the principal sets the tone of the school's approach to discipline. This youth described an effective administrator as one who: (1) ensures that there are consistent consequences that students understand, (2) deals fairly with all students and (3) focuses on building a positive environment and a productive culture. Another participant added that an environment of respect in schools would help solve many of the problems. Two others agreed that bullying incidents seem to end when another youth stands up to the person doing the bullying.

Several participants discussed the inability of suspension and expulsion to prevent bullying. One participant said that expulsion at least helps to separate the bully from the victim; however others felt that expelling the bully does not help anyone.

Where would a young person go for help with a bullying situation?

A few participants said their school counsellor is helpful. He/ she listens to each student that comes for help and honestly tries to do what he/she can to help them solve the problem. Participants who said their school counsellor is not helpful described him/ her as useless and not interested in helping.

Four participants said youth would likely go to friends in their social circle or peers through peer support programs. One added that some school staff seem more likely to help if a student goes for help with friends. This student felt the problem appears to be more urgent when others are supporting the victim so it becomes more of a priority in the eyes of the staff member.

Several participants felt that there is nowhere for youth to go to for help. Some clarified that this is only the case in some schools. In these circumstances, one participant explained that students learn to help themselves. This person went on to say that some groups of youth cannot go to the authorities for help because they have been labelled 'bad' kids. The authorities see these youth as a problem, not as a group of kids in need of support.

Another participant reported that there are several resources available to help youth but that most young people would never use them, either because "it is too embarrassing" or because youth need help long before "the risk consumes them". This participant elaborated that many youth will wait until they reach their breaking point before they reach out to family and friends or seek help from outside. Most of these youth likely would not access websites or phone help lines because once they get to that point, "it's too late". Prevention strategies need to focus on providing support to at-risk youth before they reach this state. Another participant added that youth always send out warning signs that people need to learn to pick up on. A third reported the need for more avenues for venting and more vehicles for expressing anger and fear or for getting help. "There needs to be something to do or somewhere to go".

Two participants shared their experiences calling a hotline for help. One reported that the call "helped a lot". The other said the operator did not handle the situation in a way that helped the participant feel safer or better. In this participant's case, he/ she had begun attempting suicide and the operator did not

ask the youth to stop the attempted suicide or tell him/ her that help was on its way. The participant explained that he/ she would have stopped the behaviour and waited for help to arrive had he/ she been aware that someone was coming.

Small Group Results

What could youth do to prevent bullying and violence?

The most common response, from all four groups, was that youth could prevent bullying and violence by being respectful, promoting tolerance and focusing on mutual understanding rather than difference. Two out of the four groups also said that youth could stand up to people who bully and could educate staff and other students about how they can prevent bullying. Other approaches mentioned were getting involved in school activities to prevent bullying (ie. starting a Bullying Prevention Committee), getting involved in community solutions and making a point to include others.

What would make an average student stick up for someone who is being victimized or include someone who is different from him or her?

The only common response (among three of four groups) was that teaching students to have empathy for the victim would make them more likely to stick up for others or include people who are different. Other ideas for encouraging students to include and stick up for one another were (1) supporting students who stick up for others and ensuring a safe environment in which to do so; (2) teaching students the importance of including others or sticking up for them, and the effects it may have; (3) providing incentives to students, such as recognition and respect; (4) arranging for students to take part in a self-esteem program and (5) establishing consistent and understood consequences and making youth feel guilty about engaging in anti-social behaviours.

What could schools do to encourage students to include others?

Each group listed various activities and strategies that school staff can use to promote inclusion and acceptance. Two of the four groups stressed the importance of using organized activities to develop specific life skills in addition to the general strategies used in day-to-day teaching practice.

Activities

Implement “Buddy” programs and self-esteem building programs for the entire student body.

Use group activities in the class more often.

Help students get to know peers and classmates that they are not friends with.

Organize activities that identify positive aspects of one another.

Organize specific activities to help integrate any new students.

Implement whole school activities that combine students from different grades.

Educate youth about the support and information available (from early childhood on).

General strategies

Use different strategies for grouping students—do not let students choose their friends for group work every time.

Encourage students to invite others to be a part of their group.

Use teachable moments to identify similarities among peers.