

PARAEDUCATORS AND STUDENT-TO-STUDENT BULLYING

Paraeducators on Frontlines of Prevention Efforts

Bullying behavior is a growing concern among America's educators. Bullying is generally defined as repeated aggressive acts intended to do harm, and is characterized by a power or status difference between the students. Bullying includes not only physical aggression such as hitting or stealing, but also verbal aggression, such as threatening, name calling, spreading rumors, socially rejecting and isolating someone, or cyberbullying (where bullies can hide behind the anonymity of the Internet).

Students who have been bullied report feeling depressed, anxious, and isolated. Many have low self-esteem. Their school attendance and performance may suffer. And in some cases, they are so tormented, they take their own lives.

Paraeducators (teaching assistants, teacher aides, paraprofessionals, paras) are often more likely than teachers to be in a position to witness bullying and intervene in bullying situations, but while there are many curriculum materials that provide educators with tools to teach students about bullying, few training opportunities are provided to paraeducators on how to deal with bullying situations. We know that for any bullying prevention initiative to be successful, all staff members need to be engaged and trained on prevention and intervention strategies.

Students subjected to bullying reported feeling safer when paraprofessionals were nearby.

Bullying is known to occur most often in areas where there is little or no adult supervision, such as at bus stops, on playgrounds, and in hallways, cafeterias, bathrooms, and classrooms before the lessons begin. The fact that most of these areas are monitored by paras should alert us to the need to include these key personnel in trainings related to bullying.

A 2005 study of paraeducators and special education students by the Council for Exceptional Children found that



paras often served as a protective buffer in bullying situations. When informed of bullying incidents by students with disabilities, it was typically the para who advocated on a student's behalf to the principal or teachers. Paras also directly confronted students who bullied.

NEA has long been committed to bullying and harassment prevention and intervention. For decades, members have received training in how to recognize and intervene in student-to-student bullying situations. In 2010, NEA conducted the first nationwide survey to include the opinions of education support professionals as well as teachers on issues relating to bullying in public schools. Among the 2900 ESP respondents, 959 were paraeducators.

Highlights of the paraeducators' responses are presented on the next pages.

VIEW FROM A PARA

Connie Boylan, an Elementary Library Media Paraprofessional in Traverse City, Michigan, is no stranger to bullying. She recounts that in elementary school, she was picked on because she was taller than other kids her age. "The summer between third and fourth grades changed my life...I grew 7.5 inches," she recalls. "I went from being like every other child to being the tallest student in the school."

"My girlfriends made fun of me, called me names, excluded me from our circle of friends," she continues. "It was bad enough to feel like a giant, but to be treated like I didn't belong was devastating. I cried every day for months."

Connie says her personal experience has made her more sensitive and able to identify with students who are bullied and more aware of those who are the bullies. Training she received has added to her awareness. "I was fortunate to be trained along with my staff in *Talk It Out: Conflict Resolution in the Elementary Classroom*. We then trained students as Peace Makers and Peace Mentors," she recalls. "We dealt with all forms of inappropriate behavior and the program quickly became a way of dealing with bullying."

Connie observes that bullying at the elementary school level is often social, emotional, and not always physical. "Children bully by taunting, exclusion, threats... be they physical or emotional. Children who are different in any way seem to be targeted," she says.

"Bullying is already a part of who children are by the time they reach us in pre-school," Connie says. "As paraeducators, we are faced daily with the responsibility of dealing with the fallout when bullying occurs. We must help convey to our students that no form of bullying is permitted or acceptable. We must help them find solutions on how to deal with bullies or how to stop being the bully."

"I found tools in the library to help students understand just how many forms bullying takes," she continues. "I compiled a list of titles dealing with bullies and ordered books I could read with my Pre-K-6 classes during library time. When bullying is part of a story, it is easier to point out how bullying hurts those who are targeted," she says.

"Our district has adopted a Board Policy to protect staff and students from bullying which is strictly enforced," she concludes.

Write to cboylan@mea.org for her list of age-appropriate books dealing with bullying.



What Paraeducators Said

They witness bullying. Paraeducators were more likely than other ESPs to report seeing a student being bullied at their school. Over half of them reported witnessing it as frequently as several times a month.

Many students tell them about bullying. Approximately 40% of paraeducators indicated that a student reported bullying to them within the past month. In fact, paraeducators were more likely to hear reports of bullying from students than other ESPs. This is valuable information they can share with other school staff, both teachers and support professionals, to prevent further bullying.

Nearly all paraeducators say it's "their job" to intervene in bullying situations.

They feel it's their job to intervene. Nearly all paraeducators surveyed—97%—report that it is "their job" to intervene when they see bullying situations.

They need training on bullying prevention and intervention. Nearly all the paraeducators surveyed report that their school district has a bullying policy, but only half of them said they received training on that policy. Even though they are more likely to report receiving training than other ESPs, the remaining 50% of them represent a large untapped resource in school bullying prevention.

TIPS FOR PARAEducATORS

How to Intervene

- ✓ Learn about bullying so you know what you're looking for (see resources).
- ✓ Learn what your school's consequences for bullies are and what supports for targets exist.
- ✓ When you see something, do something—be assertive and calm.
- ✓ Express strong disapproval of and stop bullying when it occurs.
- ✓ Start with verbal warnings. Use the name of the student who is bullying.
- ✓ Label the behavior as bullying and refer to your school's anti-bullying rules/policy.
- ✓ During an incident, stand between the bully and the target, blocking eye contact.
- ✓ Safeguard the target; ask: Are you alright?
- ✓ Address the bully and advise of or initiate consequences for the behavior.
- ✓ Address bystanders and advise how they might intervene next time; use the teachable moment.
- ✓ Do not argue with or try to convince the student who is bullying.
- ✓ Deal with all bullying incidents consistently, appropriate to the situation.
- ✓ Report incidents as required by your school's policy.

- ✓ Maintain your own log of bullying incidents.
- ✓ Talk to other school staff about what you've witnessed so they are alert to possible retaliation during the balance of the school day.

How to Prevent

- ✓ Treat students the way you want to be treated and the way you want them to treat each other.
- ✓ Focus on developing empathy and respect.
- ✓ Use positive, non-verbal interactions—a smile, a nod, a thumbs up, a high five, a pat on the back.
- ✓ Notice something positive the students do and say something about it to them or someone else where they can hear it.
- ✓ Avoid physical forms of discipline or intimidation.
- ✓ Initiate conversations with students about bullying.
- ✓ Don't expect students to solve bullying incidents themselves; they lack the skills.
- ✓ Encourage students to report incidents of bullying to you and other adults.
- ✓ Ensure younger students know the difference between tattling and telling.
- ✓ Role play with students on diffusing a bullying situation and engaging bystanders.

Source: US Department of Education and US Department of Health & Human Services

They want training on different forms of bullying.

More than two-thirds of paraeducators reported that they need additional training on how to address different forms of bullying—physical, verbal, relational, cyberbullying, and sexting—and in situations involving children being bullied because of sexual orientation, disability, race, gender, and religion. They need to be invited/encouraged to join school committees on bullying prevention. Among all ESPs, paraeducators are the group which is most likely to be involved in formal bullying prevention efforts in their schools. However, compared to teachers, their numbers are strikingly low. Only 32% reported being involved in school teams, committees or prevention programs dealing with bullying.

They report feeling slightly more connected to their school community than other ESPs, which influences bullying intervention.

Connectedness is the belief by adults in the school that they are cared about as individuals and professionals involved in the learning process. Research has shown there is an important link between feeling connected to the school and being comfortable intervening with all forms of bullying among all types of students.

They are likely to live in their school community. The NEA survey found that 67% of paraeducators live in the school community where they work, a rate twice as high as that of teachers. This means they know the students and their families, and can be an invaluable resource when seeking answers to bullying incidents.

Inform Yourself and Your Association

- ❑ Visit www.nea.org/neabullyfree, a good go-to-source for resources about how to help bullied students and how to prevent bullying in your school.
- ❑ Seek input and collect data from other school staff to whom students go for support.
- ❑ Request a bullying prevention and intervention training session from NEA and ensure all paraeducators are invited to attend.
- ❑ Ask your school district to provide more training on current policies for bullying prevention and intervention and ensure all paraeducators are invited to attend.
- ❑ Become involved in bullying prevention teams, committees and other activities at your school or Education Association.
- ❑ Initiate meetings with other staff to share concerns about bullying in general or specific students in particular.

Resources:

www.nea.org/neabullyfree

NEA's official website for the NEA Bully Free: It Starts with Me campaign

www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocr/letters/colleague-201010.html
Guidance on bullying from the U.S. Department of Education

www.pta.org/bullying.asp

National PTA guide on safeguarding children from bullying

NEA'S BULLY FREE PLEDGE

I agree to be **identified** as a caring adult who pledges to **help** bullied students. I will **listen** carefully to all students who seek my help and **act** on their behalf to put an immediate stop to the bullying. I will work with other caring adults to create a safe learning environment for all students in my school.



Be that caring adult. Take the pledge at nea.org/neabullyfree

Bully Free: It Starts With Me!

www.bnetsavvy.org/wp/

NEA Health Information Network cyberbullying resource

www.nea.org/home/3207.htm

Education Support Professionals website with links to bullying resources, including the 2010 NEA Nationwide Study of Bullying

www.stopbullyingnow.samhsa.gov

Educator Tip Sheets are available, such as: *How to Intervene to Stop Bullying: Tips for On-the-Spot Intervention at School*

www.nrcpara.org

National Resource Center for Paraeducators has been compiling materials on and for paraeducators into bibliographies for 20 years, which include articles related to bullying

Source:

Perspectives of students with intellectual disabilities about their experiences with paraprofessional support. 2005. Council for Exceptional Children, v.71, no. 4, p.423

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