



# Positive Normative Beliefs of The Ophelia Project

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## **Our Mission:**

*...to create a socially healthy environment through awareness, education, advocacy, and systems change.*

The Ophelia Project serves youth and adults who are affected by relational and other non-physical forms of aggression by providing them with a unique combination of tools, strategies, and solutions. To achieve long-term systemic change, we help build capabilities to measurably reduce aggression and promote a positive, productive environment for all. *We are dedicated to creating safe social climates.*

## **What we believe:**

The Ophelia Project believes that everyone deserves a safe, healthy setting for personal and professional growth. Whether it's a child in a classroom or a worker in his or her office, everyone should expect a secure environment, free from emotional torment. We believe that each individual can contribute to creating these safe social climates, in the home, in the school, throughout their communities, and within the workplace.

What is a safe social climate? It's an environment where people are protected, respected, encouraged, and held accountable for their actions. It also fosters inclusion, healthy relationships, and civility. In a safe social climate, every individual has the opportunity to reach their full potential.

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## Why reform the norm?

Normative beliefs are self-regulating beliefs about the appropriateness of social behavior (Huesmann and Guerra, 1997<sup>1</sup>). Simply put, they are our guidelines for understanding of right and wrong. Specifically applied, social norms are the most widely shared beliefs or expectations in a social group about how people in general or members of the group ought to behave in various circumstances (National Social Norms Institute, 2010<sup>2</sup>). When people act as part of a group, they generally seek out a group consensus for what actions are tolerable or intolerable. The Ophelia Project seeks to create positive normative beliefs that aggression is neither acceptable nor tolerable and we pursue a systemic approach to changing the normative beliefs that allow aggression to persist.

According to Nixon and Werner (2010)<sup>3</sup>, a systemic approach to aggression prevention and intervention is supported by research (see Greenberg, et al., 2003; Nation et al., 2003; Weissberg, Kumpfer, & Seligman, 2003) and these approaches are, “generally whole-school or universal approaches that involved addressing aggression as a group process” (p 607). Thus, it is imperative to address the overall way that aggression is perceived and dealt with within a culture or subculture such as a school. The guiding infrastructure for this concept is the normative beliefs that are held by all members of a group regarding peer aggression. Nixon and Werner further suggest that changing students’ normative beliefs is critical when predicting changes in relational aggression over a period of time. Their research (Nixon & Werner 2010; Werner & Nixon 2005<sup>4</sup>) strongly supports a systemic approach aimed at changing the normative of beliefs as the means for reducing relational aggression and victimization.

According to research by Cross and Peisner (2009)<sup>5</sup> regarding relational aggression, “It appears that communication about true peer group behavior framed in a positive, healthy, and ‘cool’ normative message can reduce the perception that ‘everyone is doing it.’” The Ophelia Project emphasizes the need for innovative and engaging strategies presented in a manner relevant to youth and aligned to their developmental needs. We know the power of positive peer pressure and hope to encourage youth to promote healthy normative beliefs regarding peer aggression prevention, intervention, and mediation.

The Ophelia Project creates long term systemic change by promoting positive normative beliefs through innovative, engaging strategies for building healthy, positive relationships.

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<sup>1</sup> Huesmann, L.R., & Guerra, N.G. (1997). Children's normative beliefs about aggression and aggressive behavior. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 72(2), 408-419.

<sup>2</sup> National Social Norms Institute. (2010). *What are Social Norms?* <http://www.socialnorm.org/FAQ/questions.php#whataresocialnorms>

<sup>3</sup> Nixon, C.L., & Werner, N.E. (2010). Reducing adolescents’ involvement with relational aggression: Evaluating the effectiveness of the Creating a Safe School (CASS) intervention. *Psychology in the Schools* 47(6), 606-620.

<sup>4</sup> Werner, N.E., & Nixon, C.L. (2005). Normative beliefs and relational aggression: An investigation of the cognitive bases of adolescent aggressive behavior. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, 34(3), 229-243.

<sup>5</sup> Cross, J., & Peisner, W. (2009). RECOGNIZE: A social norms campaign to reduce rumor spreading in a junior high school. *Professional School Counseling*, 12(5), 365-377.

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### **The Ophelia Project's normative beliefs:**

- 1. Aggression is everyone's problem.**
- 2. We treat everyone with respect and civility.**
- 3. We are each accountable for our actions.**
- 4. After we make a mistake, we make it right.**
- 5. Adults help us deal with aggression.**
- 6. We protect each other.**

### **Understanding the norms:**

The Ophelia Project does not label people as chronic bullies or victims, but instead examines individual situations and then identifies the aggressors, targets, and bystanders. We acknowledge that these roles are fluid and ever changing with a person serving as an aggressor one day, a target the next, and a bystander each and every day. It is for this reason that we state our first normative belief: **Aggression is everyone's problem**. In taking ownership of the problem as a group, we can work together and support each other in creating a climate where aggression is not tolerated. Everyone has an obligation to address aggression.

#### **What this norm is:**

- Acknowledging that aggression is a problem.
- Telling an aggressor to stop being aggressive.
- Being a "courageous kid" and standing up for a target.
- Refusing to participate in aggression such as spreading rumors, building alliances, excluding others, name calling, taunting, etc...
- Enforcing rules and consequences when necessary to mediate aggression (whether this is in a school or the legal system).

#### **What this norm is not:**

- Ignoring aggression because "it's none of my business." Aggression is everyone's business and we are all obligated to take steps to stop aggression whether during an incident or afterwards.
- Labeling "mean girls" and "bad guys" as the only people who are aggressive.
- Telling someone to "suck it up" or "be a man."
- Saying that adolescent aggression is "just a phase" that everyone goes through.
- Denying that aggression exists. "We don't have a bullying problem at our school," or, "These are good kids. They wouldn't be aggressive."

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The second normative belief is that **we treat everyone with respect and civility**. We do not believe that respect needs to be earned. Every person being deserves a modicum of respect as an acknowledgement of their humanity. Civility acknowledges the rights of everyone to be allowed to go about their lives without harassment, torment, or intrusion from another person.

**What this norm is:**

- Using manners and being polite.
- Acknowledging the rights and opinions of others, even if we do not agree with them.

**What this norm is not:**

- Using slurs or stereotypes based on gender, race, ethnicity, religion, sexual preference, political affiliation, or any other social construct.
- Excluding, avoiding, or ignoring others. “You can’t sit here” or, “Don’t invite Susan. We don’t like her.”
- Using relationally aggressive measures to discredit someone such as rolling your eyes as someone is speaking.

Aggression, in its commonly accepted definition, is behavior that is intended to hurt or harm others (Berkowitz, 1993; Brehm & Kassin, 1990; Gormly & Brodzinsky, 1993; Myers, 1990; Vander Zanden, 1993; cited in Crick & Grotpeter, 1995<sup>6</sup>). Following this definition, in acknowledging that aggression is a deliberate choice and action on the part of the aggressor, it is necessary to then reinforce the normative belief that **we are each accountable for our actions**. As previously mentioned, having ownership of a problem allows a person to better take action to make it right. It is necessary for aggressors to recognize when they have been aggressive.

**What this norm is:**

- Admitting that you have hurt or harmed someone.
- Accepting any consequences for aggression without complaint.
- Reassuring the target that you will do your best to avoid being aggressive in this way again.

**What this norm is not:**

- Saying, “Just kidding” or “It was a joke” when confronted about aggression.
- Dismissing the extent to which your actions were harmful. “She’s way too sensitive. It wasn’t a big deal.”
- Blaming someone else. “She made me do it” or, “Well Brad was doing it too.”
- Lying about or denying that you were aggressive.

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<sup>6</sup> Crick, N.R., & Grotpeter, J.K. (1995). Relational aggression, gender, and social-psychological adjustment. *Child Development*, 66(3), 710-722.



Once an aggressor has accepted accountability for his actions, he can then take steps to restore the relationship because **when we make a mistake, we make it right**. Making it right can consist of the words, "I'm sorry" or be any restorative action to repair the relationship and reestablish civility between the aggressor and the target. At The Ophelia Project, we stress that an aggressor can both "say sorry" and "do sorry." Making it right consists of both words and actions.

**What this norm is:**

- Say sorry: This can consist of a spoken or written apology but must be sincere. If spoken, the apology must be accompanied by an appropriate posture, tone of voice, and facial expression.
- "Do sorry" (example 1): A hug, a high-five, or other appropriate gesture to reassure the target that the aggressor has acknowledged wrong action and will not do it again. (Think of cutting off another car while you are driving. You do not get out of the car, go over to the other vehicle and offer a spoken apology. You raise one or both hands with an appropriate facial expression to convey your apology to the other driver.)
- "Do sorry" (example 2): Fixing anything that was broken as a result of the aggressive incident.
- Reassuring the target and bystanders that the aggressive act will not happen again.
- Serving any consequences of the aggressive act as dictated by a school discipline policy or legal obligation.
- Making a concerted effort to avoid the behavior in the future.

**What this norm is not:**

- Avoiding the target after the aggressive incident.
- Mumbling "sorry" and shuffling away from the target.
- Apologizing but then continuing the behavior.
- Refusing or rebuking any consequences of aggression.

Children and adolescents cannot always handle aggression on their own. It is important for youth to have adults whom they can trust to help them identify and resolve aggressive situations. The belief that **adults help us deal with aggression** reinforces that young people are not alone in dealing with aggression.

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**What this norm is:**

- Talking to a trusted adult about aggression.
- Adults offering help to youth who are exhibiting symptoms of aggression.
- Role playing how to handle different types of aggression from each of the three roles (aggressor, target, and bystander).
- Discussing and practicing strategies and solutions for aggression.

**What this norm is not:**

- Calling someone who seeks adult help a tattletale or snitch. “Snitches get stitches” or, “Can’t you fight your own battles?”
- Telling youth to handle their problems themselves or just “suck it up.”
- Writing off aggression as “just a phase” or “something everyone deals with.”
- Dismissing or diminishing the concerns of a target or bystander. “You’re blowing this out of proportion.”
- Lying or denying that aggression has taken place. “My daughter would never do that.”

A key role in aggression is the bystander. The bystander, or witness to an aggressive act, has an amazing power to do nothing and allow the aggression to continue, or to intervene as a “courageous kid” and come to the aid of a target during or after an aggressive act. When bystanders become courageous kids, they help reinforce the norm that aggression is everyone’s problem. It is for this reason that **we protect each other** is the final positive normative belief.

**What this norm is:**

- Helping a target during an aggressive act. Saying to the aggressor, “Stop. I don’t like what you’re doing.” or “That’s not funny.” This can also be saying something nice about the target or walking away from the aggressor with the target.
- Helping a target after an aggressive act. Saying, “Sorry that happened to you, how can I help?” or telling aggressor, “I didn’t like what you did back there. Please don’t do it again.”
- Getting help from other bystanders or adults.
- Telling an adult after an aggressive incident what you have witnessed.

**What this norm is not:**

- Ignoring an aggressive incident.
- Cheering on or encouraging an aggressor.
- Doing nothing when you witness aggression.
- Refusing to get involved because “it’s none of my business.”

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