

**FIVE
CRITICAL
STEPS
FOR REDUCING PEER
AGGRESSION**

S
SEE
Aggressive
Behaviors

T
TEACH
the Language
of Peer
Aggression

E
EMPHASIZE
Positive
Norms

P
PRACTICE
Pro-Social
Skills

S
SHARE
What You
Know

the
Ophelia
project®

Introduction

The Ophelia Project has established a mission to create a socially healthy environment through awareness, education, advocacy, and systems change. We believe 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.

The Five Critical Steps for Addressing Peer Aggression serves as a tool for anyone seeking to establish a safe social climate within schools. However, once familiar with the steps, it is easy to extrapolate them to other environments such as the home, sports, work environments, and any other environment where people come together.

Students who are preoccupied with managing negative social interactions are not available to learn. A middle school student who sits at home crying because her friends have excluded her from their weekend shopping trip is not able to concentrate on her homework. A boy who takes a circuitous route from Math class to English class each day to avoid being in the hallway with aggressive classmates is always late for class. The nervous teenager who spends hours each night on the Internet monitoring her Facebook wall has little time or energy left to work on her history paper.

Teachers know that when students are on edge during class, little work gets done. They describe "off days" when "something is in the air" and no one is on task. Many times this "something" is peer aggression. Teachers often find themselves dealing with aggression in a reactive manner without having all the information or strategies that they need.

Becoming pro-active is critical. Rather than reacting to incidents of peer aggression after they occur, students, teachers, and school administrators must work together to create a school culture that values cooperation, friendship, and a true appreciation of diversity.

The *Five Critical Steps* in the following pages describes a comprehensive approach to identifying peer aggression: seeing the behaviors, naming the behaviors, stating positive normative beliefs, fostering pro-social skills, and finally developing practical prevention and intervention strategies.

The Five Critical Steps

How often have you heard the expression “you have to look before you can see”? As educators, we often miss incidents of peer aggression because we are not aware of what is occurring in our classrooms, school buildings and communities. We have to look carefully and thoughtfully for negative behaviors before we can truly see what is happening and begin to address it. The following steps are a way to start:

1. See Aggressive Behaviors

- a. Expand your thinking to include all forms of overt and covert aggression
- b. Challenge your own normative beliefs
- c. Consider your past experiences
- d. Become a careful observer

2. Teach the Language of Peer Aggression

- a. Teach students the language of feelings and peer aggression
- b. Describe the behavior that you are observing and call it aggression

3. Emphasize Positive Norms

- a. Write down the norms and display them
- b. Hold your students accountable for demonstrating these norms
- c. Express your behavioral expectations to students clearly and frequently
- d. Model these norms in the way you structure and conduct your classes

4. Practice Pro-Social Skills

- a. Teach pro-social skills to enhance empathy, emotional intelligence, relationship building, and conflict resolution
- b. Develop intervention strategies to deal with peer aggression when it occurs
- c. Support and encourage the bystanders to speak out in appropriate ways
- d. Take advantage of teachable moments to reinforce the norms and integrate them into your lesson plans
- e. Reinforce the new behaviors in your day-to-day interactions with students, colleagues, and parents
- f. Integrate the concepts into your on-going curriculum. Teach students alternative positive strategies for dealing with conflict and friendship issues

5. Share What you Know

- a. Create school-wide policies and procedures to address peer aggression
- b. Make common school areas safer social environments
- c. Embrace opportunities to educate others in The Five Critical Steps

Research Support for The Five Critical Steps

The systematic study of school climate has led to a growing body of research that attests to its importance in a variety of overlapping ways, including social, emotional, intellectual and physical safety; positive youth development, mental health, and healthy relationships; higher graduation rates; school connectedness and engagement; academic achievement; social, emotional and civic learning; teacher retention; and effective school reform (Cohen & Geier, 2010, p. 1).

The Ophelia Project exists to establish safe social climates and we lend a great deal of our expertise in aggression prevention, identification, and mediation to schools. All Ophelia Project curricula and programming is based on the latest research to provide schools with research-based strategies and solutions for creating a safe school. The Five Critical Steps for Addressing Peer Aggression is a model designed to empower school administrators and teachers as agents of change in developing positive social norms and a common language to prevent, identify, and mediate aggression.

Research from The Ophelia Project (2006) and other studies (see Bybee & Gee, 1982; Goldstein, Apter & Harootunian, 1984; Heydenberk, Heydenberk, & Tzenova, 2006; Olweus, 1993; Pietrzak, Petersen & Speaker, 1998.) have confirmed that aggression takes place more often in unstructured locations within schools including: the cafeteria, hallways, restrooms, the school bus, or playground. Also, The Ophelia Project (2006) states that “students report seeing relational aggression more regularly in ALL locations compared to physical aggression.” Knowing areas and situations in which aggression is more likely to happen can allow schools to adjust monitoring and supervisory efforts.

Once personnel within the school have become more aware of aggression and better monitor aggression, it is necessary to build a vocabulary to specifically identify aggressive behaviors. This “Language of Peer Aggression” should be developed with both adults and students in the school. This language is then infused with pro-social skills such as empathy development, intervention strategies, leadership qualities, personal reflection, and action planning.

Building emotional literacy and pro-social skills is a vital, and often overlooked step in the process of creating a safe social climate. According to Heydenberk, Heydenberk, and Tzenova (2006), “Unfortunately, learning the conflict resolution steps alone often does not change student attitudes or behavior. A balanced approach that includes activities to increase affective vocabulary and empathy and that promotes skill development may, in the long run, be an efficient use of school time by reducing time spent on conflicts, increasing school attachment and achievement,” (p. 67).

According to Nixon and Werner (2010), 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 supported by members of the school community,” (p 607). Thus, in a school-wide systemic model, schools address the overall way that aggression is perceived and dealt with. The guiding infrastructure for this concept is the normative beliefs held by all members of the school community 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) strongly supports a systemic approach aimed at changing the normative of beliefs of students as the means for reducing relational aggression and victimization.

Once schools identify the positive normative beliefs that they wish to promote in the school community, they need to accordingly structure their disciplinary codes and the consequences for disciplinary measures to reflect the adoption of these beliefs. “Schools in which students report that the rules are fair and the discipline is consistently managed experience less disorder, regardless of the type of school and community,” (Gottfredson, Gottfredson, Payne, & Gottfredson, 2005, p. 435). All schools have discipline policies, but it is the structure of the policy and the students’ perception of the policy that makes it effective. Gottfredson and colleagues go on to discuss the importance of student perception of fairness and consistency in the structure and enforcement of the policy, and also the importance of the clarity in how the discipline policy is written. The policy should be based upon the positive normative beliefs that are held in consensus by all members of school community and consistently reinforced in a supportive manner encouraging right action between all persons in the school – adult and youth.

Traditional school disciplinary policies have a list of inappropriate or undesirable behaviors accompanied by a list of consequences. Policies may include zero tolerance, restorative justice, or a complex system of consequences that may consists of demerits, detentions, suspensions, and expulsions. When creating a climate focused on safety and order within a school, Skiba and Peterson (2000) state, “harsh and punitive disciplinary strategies have not proven sufficient to foster a school climate that can prevent the occurrence of school violence. Rather, a broader perspective, stressing early identification, comprehensive planning, prevention, and instruction in important social skills is necessary...” (335). Thus, a policy focused on proactive, rather than reactive discipline is more effective when creating a safe social climate within a school.

Another point brought up by Gottfredson and colleagues (2005) is that, “although most schools employ many different strategies to prevent problem behaviors, approaches that emphasize individual deficits (such as counseling and instructional programs) are considerably more common than attempts to alter the psychosocial climate or the quality of interactions among people in the school. It appears that school personnel operate more on the basis of an individual-deficit theory of problem behavior causation than on the basis of a theory of environmental influences,” (p. 437). Thus, it seems that school staff members are more likely to blame “bad kids” than “bad norms.”

Discussion of the Research:

It is evident that when designing a school discipline policy, school administrators must ensure the policy is clearly and consistently constructed and enforced. Many schools start with discipline policy creation when determining schoolwide behavioral management. In the Five Critical Steps, however, writing the discipline policy is the final, not first, step. Prior to the construction of the policy, schools need to take steps to first identify and name the behaviors they do not want to see and then teach the skills to develop the behaviors they do want to see.

Take a few minutes and try to imagine a school that has no policy or intervention for physical aggression. Imagine a community where students are allowed to physically attack each other with no adult intervention or consequences. Imagine adults taking the position that “boys will be boys”, that aggression is just something we can expect, and if we let them alone they will work it out themselves. It is unthinkable because we know that physical aggression, left unchecked, will escalate. We know that aggression negatively permeates the social climate of a school and that most schools are mandated to have specific consequences for physical aggression, usually being zero tolerance. Yet relational aggression is not treated this way. Schools do not have policies. Adults do not know how to intervene. Parents do not know how to respond. Today we know that relational aggression and verbal aggression are just as harmful as physical aggression – and they are more prevalent (Ophelia Project, 2006). By not intervening, we have allowed the aggression become a normative expectation in our schools. Using The Five Critical Steps, you are able to challenge negative norms about aggression in our schools. Aggression is not “just a phase” or “something everyone deals with.” It is a preventable and manageable behavior within schools. The Ophelia Project, through The Five Critical Steps for Addressing Peer Aggression, will help you create a comprehensive plan for preventing, identifying, and mediating aggression within your school.

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