



STEPS for Teachers

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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.

Overview

How often have you heard the expression “you have to look before you can see”? As educators, we often miss incidents of social 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 social 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 Normative Beliefs

- a. Write down the norms and display them in your classroom
- 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. Creating school-wide policies and procedures to address Peer Aggression
- b. Making common school areas safer social environments
- c. Empowering the bystander to make a difference.

Step One: SEE Aggressive Behaviors

While the first step may appear to be the easiest, it is the most critical. We are often tempted to jump ahead and try to solve problems once we recognize them, but careful observation and reflection are often the keys to lasting changes.

What is aggression?

Overt aggression is defined as bullying that is done out in the open. The bully physically or verbally attacks the classmate who is usually not part of his social circle (i.e. is not a friend) Overt aggression is often easier to identify and includes:

- *Most forms of physical aggression including threats*
- *Name calling based on race, religion, gender or sexual orientation*
- *Verbal abuse including put-downs and sexual harassment*
- *Taunting*

Covert aggression, commonly referred to as *Relational Aggression*, often occurs within the social circle and is more common among girls. It is more subtle, ‘under the radar screen’, and requires careful observation. It is the way in which students use their relationships to hurt one another and can include:

- *Excluding*
- *Building alliances*
- *Spreading rumors and gossip*
- *Covert physical aggression*
- *Cyberbullying*

Aggression takes many forms

All forms of peer aggression are hurtful and harmful. Too often, peer aggression is written off as “boys will be boys” or “that’s how girls act sometimes”. Research shows, however, that peer aggression has a negative impact on self-esteem, one’s ability to form and create friendships and one’s sense of belonging. All of these, in turn, have an impact on a student’s academic life.

At the end of this section is a list of Examples of Peer Aggression Behaviors that includes specific examples of peer aggression. It can be used to bring to light the specific behaviors that often go unnoticed or are ignored and as a checklist to help a group of educators or parents identify those behaviors that are most problematic in a school, a classroom, or even a clique.

When you begin to look for these behaviors, some of the more overt examples will be evident. **“I can get away with it without teachers ever knowing.”** This quote from a middle school girl illustrates how students know they can get away with covert aggression. Train yourself to look for the *covert* behavior.

Carefully watch what students do and what they say.

- Transition times as they enter class
- Group work
- Class discussions
- Time between classes in the hallways or by their lockers
- Lunch
- Outdoor or unstructured times

Look Carefully

In order to zoom in on what is actually happening in the interactions between students, it is important to make the time to look. Here are some ways to begin the observation process:

1. Set aside 5-10 minutes once or twice each week to sit back and observe your classroom dynamics. Take notes, but refrain from intervening.
2. Do these observations at different times of the day and in different locations: e.g. the hallways, cafeteria, as students enter and leave your classroom
3. Invite another teacher to come into your room to observe

If you sense that a student in your class is involved in an aggressive situation, observe that student over a period of time. What is really going on?

WARNING

Be aware: sometimes the teacher's favorite student may be the worst aggressor, especially with relational aggression. Highly aggressive girls often have high social intelligence and use their skills to please adults. It gives them power. In addition, they may be excellent academic students. Be observant. Their aggression in class is usually covert: eye rolling, showing non-verbal disrespect, "just kidding" are good clues. Note that they may be in the "in crowd". You will not help them or their targets until you recognize how they maintain their social power.

Step Two: TEACH the Language of Peer Aggression

Language is power.

Having the vocabulary to describe the dynamics of an incident and to explain the emotions and thoughts that relate to one's experience brings the covert to light. The 'vocabulary' of peer aggression is the powerful tool that enables us to begin to address this issue. School counselors share that they spend less time getting to the bottom of a social problem because students, who know the language of peer aggression, are able to describe the dynamics of the problem. In this step, we identify key vocabulary, share strategies for building a vocabulary of emotions, and reference the Ophelia Project's Peer Aggression Glossary which is Appendix A to this manual.

Understanding and using the vocabulary enables teachers and students to:

- *Communicate about social dynamics and conflict*
- *Become better observers of their own actions and the actions of others*
- *Report a problem or to ask for help*

Review the Peer Aggression Glossary and familiarize yourself with the terms until you feel comfortable enough with the language to introduce it to your students. The basic place to start is by introducing:

- *The three main types of aggression: physical, verbal and relational*
- *The three main roles in an aggressive incident*
 - *The aggressor*
 - *The target*
 - *The bystander*
 - *The upstander*

Get to know the bystander

We are all familiar with the roles of aggressor and target. The Bystander includes the student(s) considered on the sidelines and not involved. This is a key person who can change the dynamics of the incidents.

When an incident occurs, how the bystanders respond to both the aggressor(s) and the target(s) will influence the outcome. When the bystander(s) support the aggressor, they empower him/her and condone aggressive actions. When they support the student being bullied, they strengthen the "victim" while drawing power and attention away from the bully. When bullying is viewed as an antisocial behavior, prevention must include strategies that create a pro-social solution. **A bystander who chooses to support a target and change the situation for a positive resolution is an UPSTANDER.**

Bystanders can play a powerful role in supporting their peers and changing the dynamics of social interaction. You can:

- Find examples of the difference that one person can make from personal stories and through literature.
- Acknowledge students who make an effort to intervene.
- When appropriate, talk about times when it would be safe to intervene, or stand up to the aggressor
- When an incident is reported, pull one or a few students aside and help them see how they could speak out ‘the next time’ in a way that would make a positive difference for the victim.

Generate distinctions within language.

Often, there are fine lines between what is appropriate and acceptable and what is not. Much depends upon who is involved, where it is happening, the relationships that already exist, individual’s temperaments (some have tough skins than others). Students need opportunities to draw distinctions for themselves and practice their understandings in the safe environment of the classroom or in the home. The CASS Program uses continuums to help students create clearer distinctions within the language. For more information, see the section on Using Continuums in this manual.

Build an emotional literacy.

Often students have a limited vocabulary when trying to describe how they are thinking and feeling in a social situation. “I feel mad.” “I’m just sad.” If we are to attend to the social development of students, it is important to take time to expand and enrich their vocabulary of feelings. Areas to explore include:

- Identifying feelings beyond mad, sad, glad, and bad
 - Build a word wall of feelings
 - Outlaw certain words in the classroom
 - Use the emotion charts and ask students to identify how they are feeling when they enter the classroom in the morning
 - Share stories that express your feelings and emotions with your students.
- Practice exploring empathy and perspective taking– expressing how it feels to be in someone else’s shoes
- Introduce coping strategies - appropriate times and ways to express one’s feelings
- Teach civility – how language builds community and allows us to get along; Go back to basics with manners
 - Teach please and thank you
 - Greetings
 - Table manners at lunch
 - Taking turns
- Emphasize the need for different opinions and points of view

Step Three: EMPHASIZE Positive Normative Beliefs

A major effort needed to create a safer classroom is to change normative beliefs of students and adults.

Norms are self-regulating beliefs about the appropriateness of social behavior. To change the culture in a school, everyone needs to agree on a set of pro-social normative beliefs. These normative beliefs (norms) are based on the premise that every one of us participates in creating a safer social climate. Every teacher, student, staff member, bus driver and parent is responsible for implementing the norms in order to create a school environment that promotes pro-social behaviors and discourages all forms of peer aggression.

Help your students understand normative behaviors by putting them in a historical context, i.e. share how social norms have changed in their lifetime. For example, there was a time when:

- *People threw trash out of their cars on the highway; now there are laws to prevent this behavior.*
- *It was considered “cool” for adults to smoke; today people are more aware of the medical risks and fewer people smoke.*
- *Cars did not have seat belts; now all cars have them, along with safety seats for infants and children.*

Beliefs influence behavior

We know that beliefs predict behavior. The more likely a person is to believe that certain behaviors (such as sarcasm, teasing, excluding, humiliating) are okay, the more likely s/he is to produce those behaviors or to tolerate them in others. As students, teachers, administrators and parents intentionally replace negative peer aggressive behaviors with pro-social normative behaviors, the climate of the school begins to transform into a kinder, more supportive environment. The pro-social norms that we share with CASS schools are found below. These can be adapted by schools and posted throughout the building. Encourage your students to offer other examples.

Gain consensus on beliefs

A discussion like this often happens at the beginning of the school year when you are establishing classroom rules and procedures. The key is to repeat this conversation frequently throughout the school year and consistently reinforce these messages.

Use this list to bring out all the ways students hurt each other. Add your own observations and values to this process. Then decide together which guidelines/rules/ norms you follow to creates a classroom where kindness and caring flourishes.

Be clear and specific

For example, what does ‘be respectful’ look like, sound like, and feel like? Students can act appropriately and create a safer social climate when they know what these behaviors really look like in the classroom.

1. **Reinforce the norms** in your classroom by having students:
 - *Create posters describing the norms that can be displayed throughout the room and school.*
 - *Use journal writing to allow students opportunities to reflect on their own experiences.*
 - *Review the norms frequently in classroom meetings.*
2. **State your expectations clearly, consistently, and positively.**
3. **Hold yourself as well as your students accountable** for implementing these norms, you are a role model!
 - *Reflect on your own experiences and share them with the class. Stories are powerful ways to teach and to share ourselves with our students. Many of us have stories to share with our students.*
 - *Observe how you speak to your students. Be sure your directions are clear.*
 - *Avoid sarcasm. While it is prevalent in our culture and in the way we communicate, it is a very hurtful technique and easily misunderstood. What is funny to one student might be hurtful to another. All students learn about us and the classroom code of conduct every time we address an individual student.*
 - *When students are disrespectful, model the kind of language and tone you want them to use e.g. “Bryan’s idea is a new one; how can we add that to what we already have?” or “Thank you for sharing your experience, Dana. It isn’t always easy to talk about feeling in a group setting” etc.*
 - *Share ways that you resolve conflicts with your students. .*
 - *Acknowledge when students are kind or thoughtful to each other*
 - *Acknowledge when you have made a mistake or have treated a student or the class unfairly.*
4. **Catch your students ‘being good’** when they implement the new norms; let them know when they act appropriately.

Step Four: PRACTICE Pro-social Skills

Teachers always create the climate in their classrooms. Therefore, they can intentionally create one that fosters pro-social behavior.

The ideas in the above steps may seem like adding even more to a teacher's plate that is already too full. The secret to creating a safer classroom is to identify the teachable moments as they occur within your daily interaction with students and in the on-going curriculum. Spending a few extra minutes teaching and reinforcing these norms in context teaches students pro-social skills. These efforts, in turn, can enrich your lessons and make them more meaningful to your students.

Once norms have been created and implemented, the next step is to integrate them into your ongoing curriculum. The way you set up your classroom and your day to day interactions with students will serve to reinforce the norms.

What does a pro-social classroom look like?

You have to decide upon the kind of climate you want before you can state your expectations to the students. Ask yourself: What would my classroom look like if it were a safe social climate? What would I say and do? What would my students say and do? The characteristics of a pro-social classroom below are consistent with the Norms discussed in Step #3. Embodying them in how you structure your classroom, moves you closer to creating a climate that discourages peer aggression while reinforcing positive and inclusive social interactions.

Characteristics of a pro-social classroom

1. The focus is on academic content, social development, and the process of learning.
2. Cooperative learning and collaborative activities are valued and encouraged.
3. Cliques and exclusion are discouraged.
4. Diversity is appreciated.
5. Peer aggression and put downs are not tolerated.
6. Emotional intelligence is valued.
7. Teachers model and teach strategies for:
 - Negotiation and compromise
 - Conflict resolution
 - Decision making
 - Cooperation
8. Students are encouraged to take risks; raise their hands; respond to questions.
9. Students are not permitted to belittle the opinions of others.
10. Individual success and group accomplishments are equally valued.

Integrate pro-social norms into your classroom

Look for teachable moments to reinforce the norms and behaviors that create a safer social climate in your classroom. If your curriculum allows, use books, stories and activities that deal with friendship and relationship issues. Literature and history classes provide frequent opportunities to focus on the good and bad influences of relationships and the power that one person, the bystander, has in making a positive difference.

Reinforce the norms in the ways you interact with your students: Notice when students demonstrate the new norms. Catch them being good friends and partners. Both in class and in private, let students know what you have seen and thank them for it. Positive feedback is especially important for the aggressor. Frequent support for the target may give them the encouragement they need to take a stand.

Look for opportunities to write notes praising student's efforts: These messages can be attached to homework assignments, report cards, or progress reports. The surprise positive note from a teacher is a powerful way to reinforce pro-social behavior.

Provide your class with activities that encourage them to reinforce each other:

Talk about "random acts of kindness" and have students define what they might be. Decide as a class to begin this practice. Play it forward is a powerful practice in building a climate of caring. Pick a goal of the number of acts of kindness, and when it is reached, celebrate with a party in class. Plan an activity where students write complimentary notes to each other. Then share them with the class.

Frequent attention to pro-social norms creates a learning environment where it is cool to be kind.

Teach skills students need to address peer aggression

An important part of creating a pro-social climate is to teach students alternate, positive behaviors (APB) by showing them alternative ways of handling situations. Students need to learn, reflect upon and practice pro-social skills to manage their lives effectively and interact more appropriately with their peers.

Many schools already implement a social skills curriculum or have social skills embedded in their health curriculum. The critical skills that will help students deal with conflict more directly and decrease their reliance on covert or relational aggression include:

- Conflict resolution and problem solving skills;
- Friendship building skills: how to make a friend, enter a social group, move on from a friendship in an appropriate way; treat another respectfully even when one may not like them;
- Empathy and compassion;
- Perspective taking;
- Ability to identify and express emotions.

In order to form successful peer relationships, students must go beyond empathy and learn to show compassion for others. Equally important, they need to be able to view situations from another's perspective. In addition, students need to learn problem solving skills in order to resolve conflicts and reconcile differences peacefully. These include skills in communication, negotiation, and compromise. While children and adolescents (and adults) will still experience jealousy, competition, anger and frustration, they will have new and more appropriate ways to deal with these feelings.

Other strategies to help you teach pro-social skills:

Hold classroom meetings to practice conflict and negotiation skills. Before a real conflict occurs, use decision making as a way to teach students positive ways to deal with different points of view, e.g.

- Decide the location for a field trip
- Pick a theme for a school event
- Create a list of topics for outside reading
- Plan a special class or school project
- Select a community service project

Teach students how to reach a compromise. When students are practicing decision making skills, teach them the basic elements of compromise:

- There is more than one opinion expressed.
- Opinions must be expressed positively and honestly.
- The goal is to reach a decision that respects both opinions.
- Everyone comes away with something, but not necessarily everything s/he wanted.

View mistakes as an opportunity to grow. This is an important message for students to hear. School is the place where students try on new behaviors and get productive feedback. Mistakes are how students and adults learn. Acknowledge that everyone makes mistakes and encourage students to ask each other for clarification to avoid misunderstandings.

Teach students how to apologize by setting an example. If you have misunderstood a situation, model how to ask a student for clarification. Use your own mistakes to show students what a sincere apology sounds like.

Teach students ways to “make it right” when they hurt each other. What does it mean to apologize with ‘sincerity’? What does it mean to “make it right”? How will students change their behavior to avoid hurting peers in the future? What happens when my apology is not accepted by the target?

Step Five: SHARE What You Know

The entire school community must be involved in systemic change in order to create a safer learning environment for students and adults.

Creating a safer social climate in your classroom is a major step in changing the culture of your school. The social climate consists of everyone involved in the school community. To work toward lasting change adults and students need to view the entire school environment as a pro-social environment. This requires a commitment to systemic change. There are many efforts that can be taken beyond the classroom. Many of them are described below.

Establish school-wide policies and procedures.

When incidents of Peer Aggression occur, students, faculty and parents all need to know how to respond. A school task force made up of administrators, faculty, students and a parent representative can address this need by creating school-wide policies and procedures for reporting and responding to incidents of aggression. Using the CASS Task Force Handbook helps schools to create effective school-wide policies and procedures.

As students and faculty become more aware of peer aggression and a system of policies and procedures are in place, students will begin to examine their own roles in aggressive incidents.

Acknowledge peer aggression outside the classroom

Once students learn about the language and impact of peer aggression and have begun to examine their own behaviors, they will become more aware of Incidents of peer aggression that occur in common areas including: Lunchroom, Hallways, Locker Room, Playground, School Bus

In many schools, teachers have diffused responsibility for these areas. Although adults may be present, often there is no one who is identified by the students as the one “in charge”. With no formal adult supervision, students are on their own to act in ways that are often in conflict with the school’s stated behavioral norms. One solution is to create policies and procedures for these common areas that

- Define specific acceptable and unacceptable behaviors;
- Clearly delineate which teachers and staff members are responsible for direct supervision;
- Provide clear consequences when norms are not followed
- Empower bystanders to take action

Lunchroom

In any school cafeteria, students decide where to sit and with whom. Most significantly, they decide where they will not sit. Observing the room provides valuable information about the school society. Are there cliques? Do athletes segregate themselves? Are there students who wander from table to table, unsure of where they will be welcomed? Which students sit alone?

If the school has other areas where students are permitted to eat, i.e. hallways or specific teacher's classrooms or common meeting areas, observation will also tell you a great deal about your school's culture.

The most common incidents of peer aggression in the lunchroom include:

Exclusion: one student tells another that s/he cannot sit at the table. This may be verbal, or expressed with body language.

Students throw another student's food away, pour water or milk into their food, or play "keep away" with their lunch tray.

A student may trip someone who is carrying their lunch, "accidentally" hit a lunch tray, or prevent a student from purchasing his/her lunch.

When addressing aggression in the lunchroom, it is extremely helpful to involve the cafeteria staff in looking for solutions. They are on the front lines and often see everything that occurs during lunchtime.

Playground/Outdoor areas

The outdoors is typically an area where students create their own structure and rules. If the area is large, there will be several, separate areas for different activities. Designating an adult to supervise sends a strong message to students that Peer Aggression will not be tolerated. Adults need to:

Be Visible! Supervising adults need to continually walk around the playground area and scan with their eyes

Make frequent eye contact with students and call them by name.

Refrain from talking to other adults on the playground.

Share concerns about students who may be targets or aggressors with other teachers

Some schools look for support from parent volunteers. Whoever supervises the outdoor areas needs to know the school's policies and procedures and whom to contact if an incident of Peer Aggression occurs.

Hallways

Moving between classes, stopping at lockers, using the restrooms; these are times of the school day where students are largely on their own. They are also the times when the majority of bullying and relational aggression is likely to occur. Students gather at lockers before school to talk about the dramas of the previous evening. Who e-mailed who? Who was on instant messenger and for how long? "Did you hear about...?" "Did you see...?" These comments can be heard in any school hallway on any given morning.

What can teachers and school staff do?

- Rotate faculty responsibilities so that half of the teachers are standing in the hallway between classes and at the start and end of the school day; i.e. left side of the hall one week, and right side the next etc.
- Wander purposefully through the hallways in the morning or end of the day.
- Stand at your classroom door halfway in the hall during class changes.
- Greet students by name as they walk into the room.
- Note when a student enters the room very preoccupied or upset.

School bus

Ask any teenager how it feels to be able to drive to school and you will have only a small picture of how many students fear the yellow school bus! It is probably the least supervised environment that students face and the most dangerous. We rely on the bus driver to transport student's safely through traffic and inclement weather and at the same time supervise students behind them on the bus. This is an impossible task and we know that many buses are rampant with incidents of physical bullying and relational aggression.

The goal is to view the school bus as a school environment and therefore one that is also a safe social climate. Communication is the key! Increasing the communication between the drivers, teachers, parents, and students about policies and consequences is important. Here are some recommendations:

- Include a discussion on bus conduct at Back to School night
- Speak to students quarterly about bus conduct – not just in the beginning of the school year
- Find a way for parents and students to develop empathy for the challenges of being a bus driver. How can one drive a bus safely on icy, slick roads in a snow storm, while students are standing up, shouting, and carrying-on?
- Find ways to use High School mentors on the buses.
- Empower the bystanders take an active role in ensuring bus safety. .
- Evaluate the benefits of implementing a bus code of conduct that parents and students sign at the start of the year.
- Give students opportunities to brainstorm solutions to problems on the bus
- Follow-up. Find other ways to give drivers positive opportunities to speak their minds and communicate to parents and students; post norms or rules on the buses.

Most important, view bus drivers as an important part of your school staff team. Build in an opportunity for them to share their experiences on the bus and to become better acquainted with the students they transport. In the same vein, bus drivers need to appreciate the struggles of students and their parents. Ask them for ideas that work such as assigned grade level seating on the bus. Communicate to students, faculty and parents that bus safety is everyone's responsibility.

A Safer Social Climate Supports Teachers

While assuming new responsibility for common school areas may initially seem like an added teaching responsibility, observing students in these areas and providing clear adult supervision will help the quality of your classroom experience. Students who enter the classroom with peer interaction concerns on their minds are not available to learn. Those who are consistently late to class, or are traumatized on the bus or on the playground, enter class too pre-occupied to concentrate. Pro-active attention to these common areas will enhance students' academic work, rather than detract from it.

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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