



Welcoming Schools

Bias, Bullying, and Bystanders

Over three-quarters of middle school students who are harassed say that the **harassment is related to bias** about their race, ethnicity, national origin, gender, actual or perceived sexual orientation, religion, or disability.¹

Children who experience **discrimination based on their race or ethnicity** are more likely to report **depression and difficulty paying attention in school**.

Students **targeted with anti-gay put-downs** are more likely to report higher levels of depression and anxiety and a **lower sense of school belonging regardless of their sexual orientation**.

Students in classrooms where teachers establish classroom norms that **explicitly value diversity** are less likely to be **teased** based on ethnicity and are more likely to value school, feel like they belong, and get better grades.

Student and adults who **perceive that others in their school would jump in to stop bullying** are **more likely to intervene** when they witness bullying.

“A team of educators and parents in my school chose books that included three themes – race, economic status, and families with same-sex parents – to include in their language arts curriculum. We hosted a meeting for families to review the books, ask questions, and to learn how this initiative tied into bullying prevention and academic achievement. Many parents said they were uncertain about how to have these conversations with their children and they thanked us for providing a chance to think about these topics.”

– Elementary School Principal

¹ See www.welcomingschools.org for research citations.

Tips for Elementary School Educators

Be an upstander. You are a role model for your students. They watch what you do and will follow your lead. They notice whether you stop hurtful name-calling or comments based on bias: skin color, gender, religion, weight, ability, family structure. They worry if they might be the next target of a mean remark.

Practice. Practice. Practice. Improving your skills at anything takes practice – including stopping hurtful bullying and teasing. Practice with colleagues what you could say to students to stop harassment, to educate, and to let all students know that you expect respect and accept diversity. Practice responding to students' questions about differences.

Teach your students how to be an ally. Work with your students so they know what they can do if they witness bullying – including talking with or befriending the targeted student, confiding in an adult, talking with the student who is being mean, causing a distraction to help stop the harassment, or speaking up in the moment.

Involve families. Host a family night with a panel of diverse families from your school community. Hold a book night with students or teachers reading from books that show a range of diversity – including racial, ethnic, religious, economic status or family structure.

Use books to engage students.

Read books featuring diverse families such as *The Great Big Book of Families* by Mary Hoffman or *The Family Book* by Todd Parr. Create hallway displays with students' drawings of their families or important adults/relatives in their lives.

Read books such as *One* by Kathryn Otoshi or *Benjamin and the Word / Benjamin y La Palabra* by Daniel Olivas to spark discussion of hurtful teasing and ways to be an ally to classmates. Discuss with students the real put-downs they hear, paying close attention to ones that target a child's or their family's identity.

“I choose books to read to my students as a way to hear from them what they experience in school. When I used the book, *One*, students came up to me afterwards to tell me ways that they had been hurt and seen others hurt. I let them know that it's not tattling to try to get someone out of trouble. That's different than coming to me just to get someone in trouble!”

– Elementary School Educator

What You Can Say to Stop Hurtful Language and Educate

- That was a stereotype. Stereotypes are a kind of lie and they hurt people's feelings. Everybody is different with their own strengths and own way of being.
- In this classroom, I want everyone to be respected. Making negative comments about a person's skin color is very disrespectful and will not be accepted. It's what's inside that is important.
- Do you know what that word means? It's a put down for someone's religion. There are many different religions in this world and in this school we respect all religions.
- It's unacceptable to say that to a classmate. All students are welcome here at (name of school).
- You may not have meant to hurt anyone, but saying "That's gay" can hurt those around you. Do you know what gay means?

If no, a simple response could be – the word gay is used to describe a man and a man or a woman and a woman, who love each other and want to be family to each other.

In the future I expect you to use that word respectfully and not in a hurtful way.

- That is not okay. I will not allow someone to be left out in this classroom because of where they come from or how they talk.
- It is not ok to call someone a "girl" to insult them. When you call someone a girl as a putdown, you are insulting ALL girls.
- It's true that some boys don't like to play with dolls but some boys do! Just like some of you like to draw and some of you don't and some of you like to play kickball and others don't. No one should have to pick and choose what they do just because they are a boy or a girl.

“When my son was five years old, he went to a party with his classmate wearing a pink shirt and sparkly blue sneakers. An adult mistakenly referred to him as a girl in front of the whole group. One child in the room said, “He’s not a boy. He’s a boy who dresses like a girl.” Most of the children in the room began laughing. Then one child said loudly, “He’s my friend, stop laughing at him!” The laughter stopped immediately. If this young child could speak up and make a difference, then surely we can too.”

– Mother of a 3rd grader

Engage Students in Teachable Moments

When elementary school students use language based on bias about another child's identity, they may just be repeating what they have heard. They may have no idea how hurtful that language is.

Instead of just, “Don't say this,” follow-up with open ended questions like “Why do you think that?” and “Do you know what that means?”

Questions that lead to deeper conversations:

- Why do you think it's wrong for boys to wear pink?
- Has anyone called you a name that made you feel bad?
- Why did you think it was okay to make fun of the way someone looks?
- Do you know what the word faggot means?
- Where have you heard that kind of language before?

“In my classroom when students would use the word gay in a negative way I would always tell them to not say that. One day I overheard a student talking to friends about a gay relative in a respectful way. One of the students saw me nearby and whispered, “Shhh, stop! Mr. B doesn't like gay people.” That was an aha moment for me. I learned that stopping negative language is not enough. We need to educate students about why language is hurtful and help them appreciate the diversity in our schools and in the world.”

– 2nd Grade Teacher