CONDUCT AN EVALUATION  

School personnel need information about the extent of the problem. Which students are involved, what forms bullying takes, where and when bullying is occurring, what students perceive is causing it, how school staff respond, and whom students are likely to turn to for support.

CRAFT A STRATEGY  

Based on the intelligence gathered from the evaluation, schools can select strategies that are tailored to the needs of their community. Some schools may opt for an evidence-based bullying prevention program (visit www.pacer.org/bullying to learn more). Some may adopt a program focused more broadly on social-emotional learning. If schools aren’t sure about which efforts to implement, we recommend they consult with professionals familiar with available programs. Any program you try out should be considered part of an ongoing effort—changes won’t happen overnight and rarely in just one academic year.

CHECK YOUR RESULTS  

By conducting ongoing evaluations, schools can determine the effectiveness of their programs and adjust their efforts to address the changing needs of the student body.

Such an approach might sound expensive and time-consuming, but it doesn’t have to be. When Green and Holt approach a school, their first recommendation is an anonymous schoolwide assessment. “It could be as simple as a paper-and-pencil survey that all students complete,” says Holt. Once they’ve found out when and where bullying is going on, they can tailor advice to a particular situation.

In one junior high school, says Green, teachers were convinced the locker rooms were a bullying hot spot. Her assessment found otherwise. Students “were really most concerned about it happening in the hallways during passing periods, between classes.” The recommended solution was a simple one: have teachers stand outside their rooms between classes.

A year later, Green went back to find that rates of passing-period bullying were down substantially. It cost the school nothing—extra time perhaps—but helped students feel safer and more supported.

ADJUSTING TO COLLEGE LIFE  

The two researchers are also investigating incidences of bullying closer to home: at BU and other college campuses. Although bullying has reduced to a trickle by the time students reach 18, Green says the impact of earlier bullying involvement on the adjustment to college life is little studied. With the help of SED undergraduate researchers, they’ve already completed a survey at BU and will soon be rolling it out at three other local universities.

“We’re concerned about how students who were previously bullied manage when they arrive on college campuses,” Green says. “We know that rates of other kinds of peer victimization, such as dating violence, sexual harassment, and rape, do ramp up in college.” Some might consider those problems, and bullying in general, intractable. Green and Holt disagree.

“Bullying has been around for as long as schoolchildren have been around,” acknowledges Green, “but there are things schools can do to prevent bullying and respond thoughtfully to it. We are learning more about bullying and how to respond to it in ways that are likely to be effective.”

LEARN THE STUDENTS’ STORIES  

The broader social-emotional histories of the students involved can inform the nature of their bullying involvement and the ways in which it affects them, as well as suggest the most effective interventions. Some questions schools should consider include: Is the student involved in other forms of violence or victimization at school or outside of school? Is he/she involved in bullying in multiple settings, or is it specific to the students that he/she is interacting with? Using information unique to each student and his or her history will allow schools to tailor effective interventions.

COULD PUTTING AN END TO BULLYING REALLY START WITH SOME PAPER AND PENCILS? TWO SED RESEARCHERS THINK IT MIGHT.  

BY ANDREW THURSTON ILLUSTRATION BY ANGUS GREIG

THERE’S SOMETHING LIKE  

a one-in-four chance that one of these applies to you. As a child, you were bullied. Or you bullied. Some may have called it “just kids being kids,” part of growing up. But if it was repeated, intentional, and involved an imbalance of power, it was bullying.

If only you’d known SED’s bullying prevention experts, Jennifer Greif Green and Melissa Holt. Assistant professors and trained psychologists, they visit local schools to assess harassment levels and existing prevention programs—and recommend new strategies. What researchers think it might.

Rates of bullying tend to rise through elementary school, peak in middle school, and decline during high school. A once-popular child can suddenly be excluded from a peer group, seem anxious, avoid going to school, or come home minus a lunchbox.

“It’s similar to an abusive relationship,” says Green, an assistant professor of special education. The comparison is depressingly apt: Bullies and their victims are, she adds, “more likely to be involved in aggressive and violent relationships as they get older.” Many victims also struggle long into adulthood with psychological distress and depression; bullies are more likely to garner a criminal record and take greater risks with their sexual health. Those who are both bullies and targets have an even bleaker future.

And yet, bullying still goes on. “In general, I think schools are motivated and have good intentions in terms of trying to stop bullying,” says Holt. “What can sometimes happen, particularly as more states adopt bullying legislation, is that schools can too quickly try to find a prevention program or put something in place that meets the state standards.”

Many of those hastily implemented programs are based on outdated approaches or, while successful in one institution, are a bad fit for another. Holt says that schools under pressure to boost standardized test scores will sometimes tell her that “they don’t have the time in the school day to address bullying.”

In the latter instance, she will point to research she conducted in a Massachusetts district that showed lower school test scores were associated with higher bullying rates. They also reassure administrators that their approach to bullying prevention may be simpler—and cheaper—than some might think.

SIMPLE SOLUTIONS  

“One of the biggest mistakes schools make is to assume that all aggressors and targets in situations where there’s bullying are the same,” says Green. “Schools that do a good job really try to individualize their interventions for specific students.”

Common Mistakes  

Sometimes bullying is visible; sometimes it’s not. A slur might even be so commonplace—“That’s so gay”—it stops being noticed. And, with children often too scared or embarrassed to ask for help, it’s hard to put a number on just how many are verbally, socially, or physically bullied. Some estimates suggest 20 percent, others up to one-third.

“It’s not that the majority are experiencing it at high levels, but I think it’s really affecting all students in the school in some capacity,” says Holt, who teaches SED courses in counseling psychology and was formerly a behavioral scientist at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. “Since we know it’s having deleterious outcomes, it’s something that needs to be addressed more than it is.”

Conductive an evaluation  

School personnel need information about the extent of the problem. Which students are involved, how bullying takes place, where and when it is occurring, what students perceive is causing it, how school staff respond, and whom students are likely to turn to for support.

Craft a strategy  

Based on the intelligence gathered from the evaluation, schools can select strategies that are tailored to the needs of their community. Some schools may opt for an evidence-based bullying prevention program (visit www.pacer.org/bullying to learn more). Some may adopt a program focused more broadly on social-emotional learning. If schools aren’t sure about which efforts to implement, we recommend they consult with professionals familiar with available programs. Any program you try out should be considered part of an ongoing effort—changes won’t happen overnight and rarely in just one academic year.

Check your results  

By conducting ongoing evaluations, schools can determine the effectiveness of their programs and adjust their efforts to address the changing needs of the student body.

Too cruel for school  

Could putting an end to bullying really start with some paper and pencils? Two SED researchers think it might. By Andrew Thurston Illustration by Angus Greig

Research