

# Features of a Positive Classroom Environment

When other people don't call us by our names and we don't use theirs, we lose an important part of who we are. It also is difficult to have a real conversation or form a relationship with someone without sharing that first layer of identity. Throughout this guide, we will look at strategies for creating the kind of supportive classroom climate in which bullying is less likely to occur. Just like calling people by their names, many of the strategies involve simple actions that encourage positive connections within the classroom.

Bullying presents a significant challenge for teachers. Our goal is to reduce bullying in the classroom while creating an environment that enhances student learning.

Three features are central to a supportive classroom setting for students:

**1. Engagement** is characterized by strong relationships among students, teachers, families, and schools, as well as strong connections between schools and the broader community. Student engagement is multifaceted and includes the following:

- *Behavior* such as maintaining good attendance, following rules, completing assignments, coming to class prepared, and participating in class and school activities
- *Positive emotions* conveyed by students such as liking school and being interested in and identifying with school
- *Cognitive expression* whereby students exert the effort to do well in school, self-regulate, show high academic self-concept, and set goals for academic success
- *Belonging*—a sense of feeling connected at school—which is fostered by relationships with other students and staff who are respectful, trusting, supportive, and caring
- *Respect for diversity* through cultural and linguistic competence (behaviors, attitudes, and policies that enable people to work effectively in cross-cultural situations), an awareness of one's own cultural identity, and an understanding about differences, while celebrating the variations among cultures and ethnic groups
- *School participation*, as demonstrated by the connection among staff, students, families, and the community at large and their involvement in school activities and governance

**2. Safety** involves schools and school-related activities in which students are protected from violence, bullying, harassment, and substance use. Safety includes the school's responsibility for managing emergencies, including violence, crime, natural disasters, epidemics, and accidents. Safety includes the following:

- *Emotional*: supporting individuals to feel secure when expressing emotions, to feel confident when taking healthy risks and embracing challenges, and to feel excited to try something new
- *Physical*: protecting all stakeholders—families, caregivers, students, school staff, and the community—from violence, theft, and exposure to weapons and threats, thus establishing a secure learning environment; includes preventing bullying, cyberbullying, and substance use

**3. Environment** encompasses the facilities, classrooms, school-based health supports, and disciplinary policies and practices at the school. Environment includes the following:

- *Physical* upkeep, ambient noise, lighting, indoor air quality, and thermal comfort in the school's physical building and its location within the community
- *Instructional*, behavioral, and personal aspects of the classroom experience
- *Physical health* and well-being of the school community and its members
- *Mental health*—emotional and psychological well-being—of individuals, promoting healthy development and functioning and increasing the capacity of individuals to live productive lives while striving to reach their full potential
- *Discipline*, rules, and strategies applied in school to manage student behavior and practices used to encourage self-discipline

## Benefits of a Positive Classroom

A positive classroom provides many benefits for students that help reduce bullying. Students who feel close to their teachers work harder, have more confidence, and attend more regularly.

In short, a positive classroom climate helps students...

- Do better academically
- Attend school more regularly
- Feel better about themselves and have better relationships
- Engage in fewer risky behaviors such as drinking alcohol or using drugs
- Engage less in bullying and other problem behaviors

## Benefits for Teachers and Staff

A positive school and classroom environment tends to strengthen student and adult feelings of being valued and connected to the school, which is important in reducing or preventing bullying in schools and classrooms. Feeling valued and connected, moreover, are important predictors of the willingness of staff members to intervene in bullying episodes and their developing an elevated sense of confidence in doing so. Feeling comfortable intervening correlates with expectations of support and having intervention skills.

**Expectation** of support comes from connection with the school community—teachers, staff, paraeducators, and students—and is generated naturally when positive relationships communicate trust, affirmation, and concern.

**Intervention skills** come from learning effective strategies for responding to suspected bullying episodes.

### *Bullying Is a Relationship Problem That Requires a Relationship Solution*

Bullying behavior is a complex social interaction that takes many forms and is heavily influenced by the social context. Simplistic strategies are ineffective in reducing bullying behavior in schools. Bullying requires a multifaceted approach that includes prevention, immediate response, information gathering, appropriate consequences, and support for serious incidents. No doubt you can see that incorporating these strategies throughout a school community dedicated to maintaining

a general culture of respect—with students, families, administrators, teachers, paraeducators, and staff such as bus drivers, nurses, cafeteria workers, and front office staff—enhances bullying prevention efforts.

## Important Things Teachers Do

What you model in your relationships with students and other adults contributes to positive student-to-student relationships. These relationships can help reduce bullying behavior by encouraging students to feel safe and confident and to stand up for each other. Of the many habits and qualities that make a difference in student lives, some of them make especially significant contributions to the teacher-to-student relationships found in supportive classrooms.

**Stay available.** Students prefer teachers who invite positive relationships, are accessible to them, and check in to find out how they are doing. Students respond to teachers who are interested in more than just their academic performance—who take a personal interest and show they care about all aspects of their lives.

**Listen.** Teachers who engage students in conversation about their lives and actively listen to their concerns and worries demonstrate respect, empathy, and an understanding of student needs. Listening conveys empathy, which is implicit in fairness; being treated fairly is certainly important to students.

**Remain positive.** Teachers who encourage and model positive thinking with their students have students who show elevated levels of engagement and preparedness. Such students also display elevated levels of self-confidence in their ability to overcome barriers. Students want teachers to identify and encourage their gifts and talents while challenging them.

**Have fun.** Student ease increases with teachers who keep control of the classroom and motivate with ready humor. Humor can help build positive personal connections.

**Be real.** Teachers who are comfortable being themselves around their students promote the kind of bonding that is important to sustaining a supportive classroom. Sharing appropriate personal information can help students know their teacher as a real person who values them enough to disclose some of his or her life with them.

## Inclusion—Respect—Communication

We all need to feel like we belong, already described as feeling connected, which is a factor in engagement. A general sense of belonging is fostered by a climate of respect, inclusion, and open communication. The most important role here is the one teachers play by modeling for their students ways to make everyone feel included, showing respect for students and other adults, and demonstrating their willingness to communicate about bullying in formal and informal ways.

### Inclusion

Teachers can design and implement class routines that engage student learning in a safe and inclusive environment and teach students to talk about differences in respectful and informative

ways without drawing attention to individual students. Several specific actions go far in establishing a culture of inclusion.

**Devise ground rules for inclusive behavior** that welcomes all students. Make sure the ground rules clearly explain how students are to treat each other.

**Expand student knowledge of diversity** by exposing them to role models through literature, lessons, and classroom guests. Make sure students have the opportunity to choose books that portray diverse families as well as men and women who live outside gender stereotypes. Integrate examples of people from various backgrounds into classroom discussions and stories. Seek out diverse speakers, mentors, and role models for classroom participation.

**Use inclusive language** when referring to students, families, and those outside the classroom. Doing so models respectful and inclusive word choice. (A 2015 study found that when the classroom curriculum included diverse groups—in terms of culture, race, ethnicity, gender, and sexual orientation—LGBTQ students, specifically, experienced an enhanced positive school climate. They experienced a decline in homophobic and negative remarks about gender expression and transgender people, and they felt safer.)

## Respect

We cannot make students respect each other, but we can model interactions that demonstrate respectful behavior and attitudes. Teachers can create a social environment in which students are encouraged to get to know and respect each other.

**Define respect clearly** for students as it would appear in various school settings— classroom, hallway, playground, before school and after school -- so students have a common understanding of what it looks like.

**Set a tone of respect** in the classroom, which includes managing student behavior so everyone feels safe. Well-managed classrooms are much less likely to have bullying.

**Present accurate information and positive representations** of students who other students in your classroom might perceive as different from them.

**Make time to learn and practice** a range of positive, respectful behaviors pertinent to student interactions and relationships. Connect students' experiences with learning, but avoid singling out individual students.

**Talk about differences respectfully**, providing examples of people with varied backgrounds and orientations.

**Clarify civil discourse** by teaching the difference between respectful debate and intolerant dialogue or name calling. This means providing a safe atmosphere in which to discuss these issues.

## Communication

Communication takes many forms in the classroom: class lessons, conversations with individual students, posting information including classroom ground rules, and more.

*Always get permission from individual students before asking them in front of their fellow students to talk about their heritage, religion, sexual orientation, family background, or any other aspect they may consider private.*

*Avoid putting them on the spot or surprising them with a request for personal information.*

Classroom discussion can serve as an important and useful setting in which teachers promote respect, inclusion, and a generally positive environment. Teachers can use these forums to raise awareness about bullying and other issues, consider conflict resolution strategies, guide students through practicing appropriate behaviors, and provide students with a safe place to ask questions or express concerns. Regular classroom discussions and meetings also can keep teachers informed about what's going on with students.

Within the safety of the discussion, students who have been bystanders to conflict get the message that they are not alone in their distress at witnessing inappropriate or negative behavior, including bullying. They can brainstorm solutions to common bullying situations. Such discussions work best in classrooms where a culture of respect is already established. They can be held in the main classroom, during homeroom, or in the course of an advisory period. As always, be sure that you recommend actions that comply with school policy.

**Establish discussion guidelines.** Students should feel free to discuss issues without fear. *Classroom meetings are not a time to discuss individual conflicts or gossip about others.* Reinforce existing classroom ground rules.

**Start the conversation.** Focus on specific topics, such as bullying or respectful behaviors. Meetings can identify and address problems affecting the group as a whole. Stories should be broad and lead to solutions that build trust and respect among students. Use open-ended questions or prompts; for example:

“What do you think you would do if...?”

“What do you think might happen if you...?”

“If you could create the perfect response to the situation, what might it be?”

“How hard or easy would it be to step in? Why?”

“How can adults help?”

**Remind students that they have a part** in making the school a positive place to learn and that it is everyone's job to help make that happen. Encourage them to talk to teachers or other trusted adults if they see bullying or are worried about how someone is being treated.

**Follow up when necessary.** Monitor student body language and reactions. If a topic seems to be affecting someone, take the student aside afterward to talk about it. Be ready with resources to support students affected by bullying.

## Positive Classroom Management

Managing a classroom to keep order and promote inclusion, respect, and communication also helps avert bullying. Teachers who employ positive classroom management do the following:

- Emphasize what students *should* do—rather than what they *should not* do
- Reinforce rules as role models who also follow them
- Use one-on-one feedback and avoid public reprimands
- Show students respect
- Reward good behavior

## Clear Classroom Ground Rules

Ground rules that lay out classroom expectations regarding student behavior and their treatment of each other are a factor in building a sense of inclusion. Developing clear ground rules with student input gives students a stake in establishing their own culture of respect and responsibility and provides them a say in how they wish to be treated. Ground rules are most effective when they pertain to all students and help build a safe and inclusive environment and the following conditions are present:

- Tied to both positive and negative consequences
- Aligned with schoolwide rules
- Developed with student input
- Simple and understandable
- Posted in the classroom
- Fairly enforced
- It is critical for teachers to teach, model, and reinforce expected classroom behavior as developed by students in order for them to be effectively operationalized.

## Stepping Up Rather Than Standing By

**Adults** responding to an incident that appears to involve bullying must follow school policy.

Responding as the grown-up means you are modeling appropriate behavior while you enter the conflict. You should monitor your demeanor to avoid escalating the intensity of an incident.

Therefore, you can help turn down the emotional heat of the situation by doing the following:

- Stay calm.
- Speak assertively rather than aggressively, and state school rules if necessary.
- Avoid assumptions about what you think is happening.
- Take time to listen carefully.
- Refrain from belittling, embarrassing, or labeling any of the students.

**Students** typically find the kind of positive classroom culture we're talking about to be highly effective at encouraging them to intervene in a bullying situation. However, they may not know what to do to stop the bullying behavior, or they may feel unsafe speaking up. Students often

worry that if they say something, they're snitches. Younger children in particular need to understand the difference between tattling (trying to get someone in trouble) and reporting (trying to get someone out of trouble). Pay attention to what students tell you regarding their feelings or experience.

Responding confidently and safely as a bystander and ally to someone who appears to be under attack requires concrete skills, which students can practice in the classroom. Make sure they understand that intervening is one option among various choices, and discuss the following alternatives with them:

**Walk away.** Refuse to participate in the bullying behaviors and deny the incident an audience. Other behaviors—from laughing, to encouraging the student who is bullying, to fighting on behalf of the student who is being bullied—can make matters worse.

**Offer support.** Be an ally to the bullied student if it is possible do so safely. At the time of the episode, if it's safe, help the student who is being bullied leave the situation or get adult help to do so. Away from the situation, allies can offer support to the student who was bullied by listening and assuring the student that it was not his or her fault and by accompanying the student to seek help from a trusted adult.

**Report the incident.** Tell a trusted adult what is happening. Help students identify adults who can be trusted and know how to help. Make sure that students are aware that you are a safe and trustworthy adult through your actions and words.

**Speak up assertively.** Tell the person who is bullying to stop. The simple act of telling someone to stop can end the event and also empower other students to step up.

*REMINDER: Make time for students to practice the various intervention strategies and perhaps master them through role-play.*

## **General Strategies for Building a Caring and Supportive Classroom Climate**

Many of the strategies also revolve around a sense of belonging among students in the classroom, which involves inclusion, respect, and communication.

The primary features of a supportive classroom are engagement, safety, and environment.

Establishing a norm within the classroom that bullying is not okay can have a significant impact on reducing rates of bullying behavior.

It is critical that teachers send a clear message to their students that they are concerned about bullying and that students can come to them if they have issues or concerns.

Research suggests that only one in three students who are bullied tell an adult.

## **Features of a Supportive Classroom Environment**

Engagement is evident in strong relationships among students, teachers, families.

- Expected behavior includes maintaining good attendance, following rules, completing assignments, coming to class prepared, and participating in class and school activities
- Students convey positive emotions such as liking school and being interested in and identifying with school
- Students exert effort to do well in school, self-regulate, show high academic self-concept, and set goals for academic success
- Students feel a sense of belonging at school, which is fostered by relationships with other students and staff who are respectful, trusting, supportive, and caring
- There's evident respect for diversity through cultural and linguistic competence, an awareness of one's own cultural identity, and an understanding about differences, while celebrating the variations among cultures and ethnic groups
- Participation, as demonstrated by the connection among staff, students, families, and the community at large and their involvement in school activities and governance

**Safety** involves schools and school-related activities in which students are protected from violence, bullying, harassment, and substance use. Safety includes the school's responsibility for managing emergencies. Safety includes the following aspects:

**Emotional:** supporting individuals to feel secure when expressing emotions, to feel confident when taking healthy risks and embracing challenges, and to feel excited when trying something new

**Physical:** protecting all stakeholders—families, caregivers, students, school staff, and the community—from violence, theft, and exposure to weapons and threats, thus establishing a secure learning environment; includes preventing bullying, cyberbullying, and substance use

## Environment

*Environment* includes all aspects of a school that promote student safety and student health.

- Walk your talk. Weave positive behaviors into your daily interactions with students and colleagues. Follow the rules yourself. Show students respect.
- Set a positive tone in your classroom. Manage student behavior well, demonstrating appropriate boundaries and expectations for positive relationships.
- Examine your own beliefs. Become more aware of your own assumptions, biases, or stereotypes. Do you expect boys to act one way and girls another? Challenge these assumptions and intervene when you hear others using questionable assumptions.
- Treat students fairly. Work directly with students who are being bullied and with students who are bullying others (but independently).



- Establish a culture of respect for differences. Make everyone feel they belong, and talk about differences in respectful and informative ways.
- Engage parents and youth. Work together to send a unified message against bullying.
- Create a safe environment. Have classroom meetings. Work with students to create and launch an awareness campaign in their classroom and school.
- Mental health—emotional and psychological well-being—of individuals, promoting healthy development and functioning and increasing the capacity of individuals to live productive lives while striving to reach their full potential
- Discipline, rules, and strategies applied in school to manage student behavior and practices used to encourage self-discipline

## Sample Anti-Bullying Ground Rules

Your own rules might be different. What's important is having clear ground rules that pertain to all students and help build a safe and inclusive environment.

Examples:

- We will treat others with respect and not bully others.
- We will try to help students who are bullied.
- We will try to include students who are left out.
- If we know that somebody is being bullied, we will tell an adult at school and an adult at home.

*REMINDER: Kids often want to help, but they don't always know how.*

## Ten Things Students Wish Teachers Would Do

1. Take the issue of name-calling and teasing seriously. Refrain from saying things like "Kids will be kids..." or "He didn't mean anything by that comment; he was just kidding."
2. Let students know that you are available to talk to them. If possible, set aside ten minutes of class time each week to discuss issues that students want to bring up. Get to know students as individuals.
3. Take time to listen. Don't try to "fix" a situation before you've taken time to listen carefully. Avoid making the situation worse by blaming the targeted student. Don't discourage a student who is being honest.
4. Don't harp on what should have been done in the past; focus on the present. Saying, "Why didn't you tell me sooner?" is not helpful.
5. Be a role model. If students observe you gossiping or exhibiting other bullying behaviors toward students, their families, or colleagues, they will interpret it as permission to behave similarly.

Remember that everyone, including yourself, has biases that can influence behavior and that your words can have a strong impact.

6. Do not belittle, tear down, or publicly embarrass students. Although these strategies are common in competitive sports, they are ineffective in motivating students to do better.
7. Help students learn how to act as effective allies. Provide time for them to learn the range of behaviors practiced by good allies. Do not communicate the expectation that students should always directly intervene when bias incidents occur. Discuss safety concerns, and brainstorm effective alternative strategies with students.
8. Acknowledge when name-calling and bullying are occurring and that being the target of these incidents can be painful. Do not downplay what a student says he or she is feeling or experiencing.
9. Be proactive. Prepare your students to respond effectively to bias incidents, and become a partner with their families. Discuss name-calling and bullying and school policies that outline how these situations will be handled. Explore the different roles students can take in bias incidents – target, perpetrator, bystander, and ally, and help students consider responses to situations from the perspectives of each of these roles.
10. Be discreet and whenever possible, maintain confidentiality. Do not announce to the class when a student is having a problem with name-calling, bullying, or harassment. Whenever possible, help each student privately.