# What You Must Know to Help Combat Youth Bullying, Meanness, and Cruelty

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In order to empower youth to create a kinder and braver world, we must begin by making sure that youth are safe.  Youth are not safe when they are being bullied, harassed, or threatened.  Thus, one of the first things that we must do to help youth be safe is combat the culture of meanness and cruelty that is at the root of bullying, peer violence, and abuse.

Bullying is a systems problem and many well-intended people don't realize the complexity of the issue.  The following are research-driven elements of bullying that should ground any discussion of how to address this complex issue.

## What is Bullying?

1. **Bullying is a serious issue**. It leaves scars and makes learning hard. Both those who are victims of bullying and those who bully others face serious educational, social, and psychological challenges. We need to address bullying in order to make certain that all youth have the ability to grow up healthy and happy.

2. **Bullying is not universal.** Approaching the issue as though bullying happens to everyone makes it harder to address.  Youth who are socially marginalized are more likely to be bullied, including LGBTQ-identified individuals and those with disabilities. Bullying also plays out differently across gender and age, ethnicity and race.

3. **Not all aggression is bullying.** Bullying refers to repeated psychological, social, and physical aggression propagated by those who are more physically or socially powerful. Bullying is on a continuum of aggressive and violent behavior, which also includes things like dating violence, peer aggression, gang violence, sexual violence, etc.  All are bad, but not all are bullying.

4. **"Bullies" aren't the source of the problem; they're often a symptom of the problem**. Many bullies have problems at home or in school, and need help just as much as those who are targets of and bystanders to bullying. Bullies are often victims in other contexts who are lashing out in situations where they have power. We must have empathy for those who hurt as well as those who are being hurt. Recognizing this is crucial to stopping the cycle of bullying.

5. **Bullying is tightly entwined with a host of other related issues,** including drama and teasing, social rivalry, physical and sexual violence, mental health issues and identity struggles.  We cannot address one without the other.  Furthermore, we must be careful choosing our terms because many adult-driven terms do not resonate with youth.

## How to Intervene

6. **There are no silver-bullet solutions.** To combat bullying, we need everyone to be engaged. We need holistic solutions that involve youth, parents, educators, social workers, mental health experts, community members, religious leaders, law enforcement, and others who touch the lives of youth.

7. **Public policies must enable *and fund* educational prevention programs.** Prevention programs do more to address bullying than punitive approaches. Very few government initiatives provide funding and schools lack resources to implement curricula in ways that would make it effective.

8. **"Zero tolerance" school policies are ineffective.** They sound good, but they do tremendous damage in schools and are often correlated with a rise in bullying and other forms of aggression. Consequences for bullying should be clear, but support structures must also be put in place to help youth learn from their mistakes. We need to teach youth to be courageous and kind, not to avoid adults.

9. **All interventions should be evaluated and assessed.** Even the most well-intended programs may not be effective. Worse: some programs may actually have unintended consequences when implemented in certain circumstances (e.g., peer mentoring). Interventions should be coupled with assessment plans in order to assess their efficacy.

10. **Developing interpersonal skills is key to addressing bullying.** To be effective, much of what needs to be done takes a constructive form, even though the public narrative tends to emphasize punitive approaches. Programs that emphasize social-emotional learning tend to work best.

11. **Mental health support is essential to addressing bullying.** While bullying can be devastating to youth, mental health issues often compound it. Mental health is an invisible component of most bullying and suicide cases. It is also an arena that is underfunded, under-supported, and under-recognized.

12. **Adults – especially school staff – need to be trained.** Training youth is important, but adults need to be trained in order to help youth. Lack of training can make bullying situations much worse. Parents, teachers, staff, and all adults who work with youth need help and guidance to support youth. When adults don't have the skills to help youth manage bullying, "tell a trusted adult" is not a helpful prevention messaging. "Toughen up" is never a good response, yet it is a common one expressed by well-intended adults.

13. **Bystanders have a critical role to play, but they also need support.** In order to ask bystanders to speak up whenever they witness bullying, we

need to make sure that they have trusted and trained adults to turn to when things become overwhelming for them.

## Digital in Context

14. **Cyberbullying is not a discrete practice.** It should not be addressed separately. While digitally mediated interactions can complicate bullying dynamics, what happens online is often deeply entangled with what happens offline.

15. **Cyberbullying is more visible, but not more common or more harmful than face-to-face bullying.** What happens online is often more visible to adults, but this doesn't mean it's more damaging to youth. Studies consistently show that face-to-face bullying is still more common – and youth consistently report that it has a greater negative impact – than what happens online.

16. **Cyberbullying shouldn't be used as a distraction.** Because cyberbullying feels "new" or "different," schools, parents, and lawmakers are spending tremendous time focusing on what's new and different about the internet rather than addressing the holistic issue of bullying. This creates the impression that adults are doing something without actually helping those youth who are most at-risk.

17. **It is important that we leverage all possible paths to reach youth.** Technology can be a valuable venue to communicate messages of love, acceptance, and bravery and to engage youth who are struggling at home or in school.

## Meanness and Cruelty in Context

18. **We cannot address youth bullying if we don't also take into account the culture of meanness and cruelty that we live in.** Politicians berating one another, parents being mean to their neighbors, and celebrities getting famous for talking trash all shape youth norms. We must address meanness and cruelty in all aspects of society in order to help youth.

19. **Meanness and cruelty generate attention** for the person lashing out, whether that person is a politician, a CEO, or a teenager. We need to find ways to celebrate positive attention-seeking practices rather than rewarding negative attention-seeking actions.

20. **We must create a positive youth culture that reinforces kindness and bravery.** And we must help encourage youth to be courageous and loving, respectful, and tolerant. This is hard, but it starts with each of us.