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INTERNATIONAL BULLYING  
PREVENTION ASSOCIATION



## NEWSLETTER Summer 2019

### Social and Emotional Development for Students with Diverse Learning/Medical Needs Including Sensory Loss

Suzanne & Rodger Dinwiddie

Children with diverse learning/medical needs have difficulty responding to traditional forms of social skill development, making friends, and identifying emotions. Social skills deficits are key criteria in defining many disabilities that hinder student's academic progress such as learning disabilities, Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), intellectual disabilities, physical impairments, Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), vision and hearing loss. Students with special needs have similar social responses as children with adverse child experiences (ACEs). The common component is seen with difficulty processing life experiences accurately or completely because their brain does not recognize implied social understandings.

The National School Climate Center defines school climate as "the quality and character of school life. It reflects norms, goals, values, interpersonal relationships, teaching and learning practices, and organizational structures." A key element of a positive school climate is the development of social-emotional competencies and at the core is fostering empathy, compassionate action, teaching perspective-taking, building social skills and establishing positive social norms. As Richard Carlson has stated, "Choose being kind over being right and you'll be right every time."

The practice of providing these important key elements begins the evidence-based practice of relationships. Healthy relationships provide experiences that are consistent, protective, validate feelings and address conflict without fostering mistreatment of others. The development of relationships and empathy begins "within arm's reach" of a student. Attachment and empathy are developed through touch and joint attention. Empathy is cultivated when an adult or peer takes time with each other; stands within arm's reach, makes eye contact, interacts with the student using a communication system the child understands, uses touch if appropriate, and establishes a shared focus.

Specific strategies are necessary to include students with diverse medical/learning needs. An educational team establishes system-wide "language" and visual supports used consistently so all students understand the social expectations. Constant language encourages problem solving skills and helps conflict resolution by labeling abstract

emotions, setting school-wide limits/expectations, and providing supports as needed. Conflict is inevitable, but it provides an opportunity to repair, deepen relationships, and teach self-regulation.

Other strategies include providing a structured, consistent environment with established routines that anticipate student needs. Adults create calming, "defined" spaces within the classroom. These spaces may be as simple as a duct tape boundary on a desk or floor, a carpeted space in the back of the classroom when a student needs to stand/move, or materials left in predictable spaces for easy access. Daily routines are the framework for learning and provide simple, predictable sequence of actions that communicates expectations.

Building a climate for empathy and social competencies is accomplished one relationship at a time, and needs constant attention and nurturing. Social connection must be a priority for any system that claims to address the needs of young people. Students have the right to expect truth and kindness during the day. This philosophy cannot be abandoned for even one day. Positive and caring relationships require daily commitment!

**Suzanne Dinwiddie, M.Ed., COMS, CTVI, CEIM** is an Educational Consultant for the Tennessee DeafBlind Project, a federal grant associated with Vanderbilt's Children Hospital in Nashville, Tennessee. Previously, Suzanne worked with the Metropolitan Nashville Public School System for 38 years as an early childhood assessment specialist, vision teacher, and orientation and mobility instructor.

**Rodger Dinwiddie, M.Ed.,** has been the CEO of STARS-Nashville, an evidence-based Student Assistance Program, since 1986. Prior to joining STARS, Rodger served as the Executive Director of a nonprofit organization working with juvenile court referrals and was also a classroom teacher in the Metropolitan Nashville Public Schools for 7 years. Rodger serves as an Olweus Technical Assistance Consultant, Tennessee State Leader for the Olweus Bullying Prevention Program, and Safe Dates and Restorative Practices trainer. He currently provides consultation in the areas of best practices in bullying prevention and intervention, school climate improvement, bullying in the workplace, improving workplace relationships and culture as well as the development of social emotional competencies. Rodger is also a Past-President of the International Bullying Prevention Association and former president of the National Student Assistance Association.

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## Inside Middle School

Josh G.

Many adults see middle school as just a short period of time in our academic career before things “really start to count”. But for many kids, middle school can have a major impact even years after they’re gone. The physical and emotional complexities facing middle school students can be overwhelming. There is the desire to fit in, concern for what others think about you, and often a fear of peers making fun of you and being bullied. Nearly one in three students report bullying during the school year, but according to the i-Safe American survey of student bullying statistics, around 58% of these kids admit to never telling an adult when they’ve been the victim of a bullying. Additional research suggests that almost all forms of bullying peak in middle school and decrease towards the end of the tenth-grade year.

Bullying may include but is not limited to: physical abuse, verbal attacks (such as teasing, inappropriate remarks and spreading false rumors), and psychological/social harm (such as group exclusion, humiliation and cyber bullying through social media). You may think that the “worst” of these would be physical bullying, and it may seem so in the moment, but research demonstrates that long term psychological and verbal abuse can have a longer lasting, negative effect on victims. Bullying that includes social exclusion and verbal abuse can lead to significant drops in self-esteem, higher rates of depression and anxiety, physical ailments such as headaches and stomachaches, a lack of trust in others, social disengagement and lowered academic performance.

Bullying is a huge problem in our schools and needs to be stopped. I believe that Anti-Bullying posters and awareness weeks are not enough. People need to recognize the seriousness of this issue and take action to prevent and minimize these incidents. I believe that if more victims of bullying would stand up and tell their story, we could make a huge impact on pre-teens and teens today. But this alone still will not stop the ever-growing problem of bullying. School administrators and fellow staff members need to learn how to recognize bullying and need training on how to intervene when they see it. In my middle school, our administration not only ignored the issue but did not seem to recognize signs of bullying or abide by the county’s anti-bully policies and procedures. It would be helpful if the adults in the school would partner with students and listen to their ideas about preventing and responding to bullying.

Bullying needs to be stopped. We know that a relationship exists between bullying and suicide, but the severity of the statistics is still frightening. Suicide is the **THIRD** leading cause of death of young people across the globe. While suicide is never the result of just one issue, adults need to be aware that bullied students can be at risk. Let’s find more ways for staff and students to work together so that we can stop bullying.

I’m Josh, the writer of the article. Currently I am in the 10th grade. I experienced these events throughout middle school. Although the scars still remain and I am still affected by those events today, the experiences I went through made me into the person I am today. I am stronger and more resilient. Bullying is one of the most prominent and prevalent problems in today’s society and it needs to be properly approached and resolved.

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## Perspectives: Bridging the Gap

Jenny Mischel, Ph.D. Candidate at George Mason University

Research focused on bullying behavior is prolific and the expansion into cyberbullying continues to grow. However, bullying/cyberbullying behavior continues to be elusive, detrimental, and worrisome. This may, in part, be due to discrepancies in how the constructs are conceptualized and operationalized (Tokunga, 2010). Volk, Veenstra, and Espelage (2017) suggest that researchers should continue to strive for consistency when defining and measuring bullying so that future studies build upon prior research findings. Smith (2019) agrees stating this is compounded further when investigating cyberbullying as platforms continue to evolve.

Another salient component is investigation into adolescent and adult perspectives regarding bullying/cyberbullying behavior. In a recent study utilizing qualitative measures to gauge perspectives (Mischel & Kitsantas, under review), the most prominent finding was adolescent beliefs in the discrepancy of how the behavior is perceived. This finding has been reiterated numerous times when working with groups of adolescents in informal settings. Those interviewed felt their situations, “were not taken seriously,” by adults or their feelings were, “diminished,” and they were “blown off,” by those in authority. All of the parents, of those interviewed, were aware of their child’s distress, yet were not privy to the full scope of what their child was experiencing. When asked about school staff support, adolescents in the study felt most educators were already over-taxed with behavior problems or lacked the tools to help when they were approached. Furthermore, this does not account for adult awareness, or lack thereof, regarding the prevalence of aggressive behavior. According to Slonje and Smith (2008), most adolescents believe that adults are less aware of cyberbullying behavior in comparison to bullying. Yet, research also indicates that relational bullying is usually manipulative and covert, occurring “under the radar” of adult awareness (Woods & Wolke, 2004).

It seems logical that most parents want to protect and help their child, as do educators. The parents in the study conducted by Mischel & Kitsantas (under review), shared their frustration and concern regarding their children’s well-being. Additionally, research indicates that teachers do want to help their students but suggest further training to navigate this sensitive topic would be beneficial (Bradshaw, Waasdorp, O’Brennan, & Gulemetova, 2013). Such training might benefit parents as well.

As bullying and cyberbullying have the potential to inflict long-lasting detrimental outcomes, it is vital that further exploration continues. Smith (2019) encourages focus on qualitative and longitudinal research methods to promote a better understanding of the phenomenon. For example, schools could implement focus groups to obtain a better “pulse” on students’ perspectives, and similarly with school staff. Findings could then be shared with the two groups so they both have a better understanding of the other’s perspective. This would help staff understand how an adolescent might be feeling. Additionally, school staff would also benefit from training on how to deal with such situations (Li, 2010). School staff could also be trained on identifying potentially problematic behaviors or have better awareness of students’ sense of self (Nixon, 2014). Also, development of peer support groups could provide a sense of belonging and refuge for those struggling. Adolescents today face different issues than adults did at their age. Information is at their fingertips and communications styles having changed considerably. Therefore, continued open discussions with adolescents on how they perceive bullying/cyberbullying behavior, is warranted.

Jenny is a Visiting Professor at Washington and Lee University with a research interest in perspective-taking, specifically focused on bullying and cyberbullying behavior.

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## Reflecting on being a Youth Presenter at the 2018 IBPA National Conference in San Diego

Sam Culver

It was such an amazing honor to have been invited to attend IBPA's National Conference in San Diego! Initially, I didn't know very much about the conference itself. I knew that it would be in the Golden State, but besides that, I was clueless! In all honesty, I was worried that the term "Youth-Voice" was going to be downplayed like it usually is. I was betting that we would be invited all of that way just to be able to sit in the crowd and listen to what the adults had to say. To my delight, I could not have been farther from the truth!

From the first day in, to the last day out, the youth were treated with a sort of reverence that I've yet to see from any other organization. It didn't matter if you were in the middle of a presentation, speaking to the executive board, or simply walking down the hall, the adults would stop and listen to what you had to say. They genuinely wanted to get to know you instead of treating you as another number on a spreadsheet. The overall vibe that I consistently got throughout the duration of the conference was that we all had a job to do, a goal to achieve, a hurdle to jump over, and we were going to face it together as one in order to succeed.

Attending the conference was phenomenal in many of its own ways, however, presenting at the conference was a completely different experience. For the entirety of an hour I was given the chance to lead a team of students in presenting a breakout session to a group of youth and adults alike. We spoke on the sheer power of labels, the positions that the fellow students, peers, or even co-workers could place us in, and how we could use our status in life to discourage bullying and harassment. A few students even provided their own personal and very moving testimonies.

It took a very strong and courageous group of kids to get in front of these total strangers and open up in the way that they did. The students from Beech High School and Lauderdale County did an amazing job and I could not have asked for a better group. As we were progressing through our activities and testimonies, I began to see that bullying is a universal theme that is a part of our everyday lives regardless of the age, status, or environment that we are in as individuals. This became evident to me after seeing the reactions from the audience as we presented. Both adults and students reacted in the very same way to certain aspects of our presentation. This was perhaps my biggest takeaway from the conference. Being able to see just how deep bullying and harassment has reached is a very scary discovery,

but it is a discovery that is immediately comforted by the realization that we're all in this together. There are a countless number of people that face harassment every day, but there are twice as many people out there in the world that are working tirelessly day and night to help put an end to bullying.

Both attending and presenting at IBPA's Conference in San Diego was a delightful and eye-opening experience that students and adults alike would benefit from being a part of. It was a very strong but comforting reminder that we, as students, are not alone in this battle and every day we get closer and closer to a brighter world for all.

Sam is a student leader in the STARS Nashville "Move 2 Stand" Bullying Prevention Program. Move 2 Stand gives youth motivation and workable strategies to create change in their schools in regard to bullying.

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