

Everyone has a role to play in stopping bullying and making our school communities safe and welcoming for all students. Bullying behaviour is hurtful and harmful and is NOT just something that children have to endure as part of growing up. Students with FASD may be especially vulnerable to being bullied and/or developing bullying behaviour. They may be vulnerable because they lack social skills, are easily influenced by peers or have not developed the ability to empathize with others.

It is important for adults to recognize that they may not see the bullying behaviour; it is not always easy to spot bullying in action. In fact, one Canadian study found that bullying incidents tended to be of short duration and average only 38 seconds. Recent research shows that much of bullying behaviour happens without an adult actually witnessing it. That is why we have to rely on good communication with students.

If a student is being bullied

Students don't always speak up when they are being bullied because they are embarrassed or afraid the person who is bullying will get back at them. Students sometimes feel they must remain silent in order to belong. Some warning signs that a student may be bullied at school include:

- being afraid to go to school or complaining about feeling ill in the mornings
- skipping school
- coming home with clothes or books destroyed or missing
- coming home with unexplained bruises or cuts
- becoming withdrawn or beginning to bully other children.

If you suspect a student you are working with is being bullied at school, there are several things you can do to help.

SAMPLE STRATEGIES

■ *Offer comfort.*

Let the student know you are there to support him or her and that you will do all you can to help him or her feel safe. Let the student know the bullying is not his or her fault. Encourage the student to ask for help and not to stop until he or she gets it.

■ *Work with the school.*

When there is a bullying concern, encourage the family to contact the school immediately to make sure the situation will be monitored so their child is safe. If the family is reluctant to approach the school on their own, you could offer either to accompany them for support or to speak to the school on their behalf.

■ *Make arrangements for safety.*

If the bullying happens on the way to school, work with the family and school staff to arrange for the student to go with older, supportive students, or have an adult take him or her to school until the threat of bullying is gone.

Help the student develop strategies for avoiding vulnerable situations. Encourage him or her to stay with friends on the playground and in the hallway, and avoid isolated areas such as empty classrooms or areas of the playground that are far away from supervisors.

■ *Practise effective responses.*

Work with the student to practise what to say and do when someone is bullying him or her. For example, the student could say, “Stop it. I don’t like it” firmly and walk away and get help. Encourage students to stay calm and not to fight back. The person who is bullying wants attention and fighting back gives him or her what he or she wants. Fighting back can also make the situation worse.

■ *Encourage the student to connect with positive peers.*

Students who are isolated tend to be the ones who get bullied. Encourage the student to participate in clubs or social groups that share similar interests and that will be a positive support.

Preventing and stopping bullying behaviour

Bullying is destructive—not just for the students being bullied, but also for those who witness bullying and/or demonstrate bullying behaviour. Recognizing bullying in children and youth is an important step in stopping and preventing the emotional, physical and social scars that can last a lifetime. Bullying is not a discipline problem, it’s a relationship problem. Bullying is a learned behaviour, and students need help in fostering more positive relationships. The following may contribute to bullying behaviour:

- mental or physical abuse
- exposure to excessive violence through media or games
- lack of supervision when interacting with peers
- difficult temperament, attention problems, hyperactivity
- family stress
- lack of positive role models
- past experience of being bullied
- lack of attention, rejection or marginalized feelings.

Here are some possible indicators of bullying behaviour:

- lack of empathy—not understanding or caring if someone is hurt
- extra money, clothes or boasting about taunting someone
- passing off teasing someone as a joke
- children or youth grouping together and intentionally leaving others out
- aggressive behaviour with peers, such as yelling, hitting or throwing

- laughing when others get hurt
- name calling of siblings or friends
- aggressive, angry behaviour towards family, school staff or other adults.

If you are working with a student that you suspect is demonstrating bullying behaviour at school, there are several things you can do to help.

SAMPLE STRATEGIES

■ *Be a positive role model.*

Recognize your role in modelling positive relationships. Set a good example and reinforce positive, empathic behaviour when you see it.

■ *Communicate.*

A student who is engaging in bullying behaviour needs to be able to talk about his or her own experiences. Establish an open, friendly, nonthreatening line of communication. See the child inside the bully. Try to find out what the student is feeling, and if something has happened to make him or her feel vulnerable.

■ *Teach empathy.*

Look for opportunities to talk about bullying. Use examples from real life, movies and television, and identify how each person feels. Help the student to see the other person's point of view, and how hurtful and damaging bullying can be.

■ *Do something fun together.*

Fun activities and positive attention build confidence, positive pathways, and encourage empathy and compassion for others.

■ *Create opportunities for leadership.*

Look for activities and everyday opportunities that channel energy into constructive leadership opportunities.

■ *Help students make amends and be friends.*

Coach the student on ways to make amends for past behaviour (e.g., to apologize, or to do something helpful or kind), and help him or her connect with others who have similar interests.

■ *Work together.*

Talk with the parents and encourage them to work with the school to monitor the situation. By working together, caring adults can foster a school climate where every student can feel cared for and safe.

The information in this section is adapted from fact sheets posted on the Bully Free Alberta website at <http://www.bullyfreealberta.ca/>. Please visit the website for more information and ideas on how you can help create a bully-free Alberta.