

## Getting Serious About Bullying

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Kudos to six Federal departments (Education, Health & Human Services, Defense, Justice, Agriculture, and Interior) for an important gathering on preventing bullying. As Jim Hmrovich of Prevent Child Abuse America quipped, “This demonstrates that Federal agencies *can* collaborate!”

Aside from the conference, which was a feat in itself, there is an important new School Climate Initiative and a website—[www.BullyingInfo.org](http://www.BullyingInfo.org). The site now contains information primarily about Federal efforts but, we were told, will begin to include information about non-governmental resources as well.

Initially, I heard the term, campaign, a lot—partnerships between government agencies, community groups, the media, corporations, etc., cleverly branded logos, catch-phrases, sites, materials, events and commercials. Some good, some unspecific and perhaps even naïve. As one high-ranking official at the event reminded me, though, awareness-raising is important. It undoubtedly is but to avail if there are not well thought-out strategies “where the rubber meets the road.”

And there are. Three kinds of efforts seem to me to really connect the rubber and the road, i.e., they directly engage children, community institutions and parents. Some of the youth-led initiatives are amazing. Some without funding, some with small grants from the government and private sources, several quite willing to share their toolkits with any and all. They confront bullying in all its manifestations (including language) and demonstrate the impact of hurtful encounters and how they could have been handled differently. They are children talking to children *in the contexts in which bullying occurs*.

Efforts that help parents talk with their children about preventing violence also stand out in my opinion. The Take 25 initiative of the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children is a good example. Conducted in May (though it could be year-round), it asks parents and children to take twenty-five minutes to discuss preventing violence. We often think of teaching children to be safe, to be wary of strangers but we could be talking to them about bullying, too. Our own kids may be bullies as well as victims.

Again, it takes many elements—policy, awareness-raising, programs, etc.—but the strategy that struck me as most potentially impactful and best aligned with the phenomenon of bullying and youth on youth violence is “social and emotional learning, rooted in prevention science.” This approach, implemented in the Harrisburg PA public schools seeks to help children acquire a better sense of self, express themselves fluently and respectfully, resolve differences and manage frustration, solve problems cooperatively. Yes it includes the board establishing policy on bullying but, more importantly, it engages faculty and staff as coaches and students in learning about respect, self-awareness, effective socialization skills, and the like. It is based on science (neuroscience, i.e., building from an understanding of the differences between the survival brain, the emotional brain, and the logical brain;

addresses bullying where it actually occurs (among peers), and teaches skills and processes that allow young people to deal with others constructively not destructively.

The danger of newfound attention on a long-standing problem is the proliferations of initiatives and programs which may feel good but miss the mark. We know from our work with logic models that alignment of actions, resources, and outcomes is essential. We should apply that knowledge to our strategies for preventing bullying. After all, bullying is a manifestation of a lack of respect (for self and others) and a lack of skills. We know how to address both.