Preventing Bullying and Preventing Harm

Many of us in education chose our career path because of the positive impact school had on our own lives. That impact is exemplified by a past student at the James Bean Elementary School in Sidney, Maine, where Stan worked as a school counselor for 12 years. At the end of her last year at the Bean School, this young person reflected on her childhood. Her life at home had been difficult in many ways, including several incidents of abuse and an overall pattern of emotional neglect. Yet at age 12 she was a confident individual with a web of friendships and a strong mastery drive. She frequently did kind things for others. When Stan asked her how she had made her life so positive, she thought for a while and responded, "I take the way school is . . . home with me." Schools can be a sanctuary, a springboard, and a positive beginning for life.

This book highlights the results of the Youth Voice Project, an extensive survey of youth from 31 schools across the United States. Through these pages, you will discover the heart of our nation's youth. As we present their stories, don't be surprised to hear part of your own story embedded in their words. In reading their stories, it is our hope that you will be inspired to remember the reason you chose to work with children and adolescents in the first place—to change lives, one child at a time. We hope that adults and youth can use what we've learned to make life better for all.

This book is not about what adults think might help to address peer mistreatment. Instead, this book represents the voices of youth, some of whom have been mistreated by their peers. We are concerned that too much work in this field has focused on adults telling youth what bullying is and what to do to address bullying behavior. In reality, youth are the primary experts on what is happening at school and on what works best to address peer mistreatment. Through the survey, we seek to bring youth into a dialogue as equal partners with adult educators and researchers. We see authentic youth involvement as key to success in bullying prevention.

Our survey results are both encouraging and disturbing. We are convinced that to protect our children we need a cultural change. In order to raise happy, healthy, confident, caring children, we need a culture where mean-spirited behavior is no longer tolerated, even in the name of friendship or "just joking around." We need

a culture where we all look out for one another—old and young, popular and un-popular. We need to build a culture where we take the time to truly listen to one another. We need to develop a culture where people are responsible for their behavior and are trained to show others they are sorry instead of merely saying they are sorry. We need a culture where it is safe to talk about feelings honestly and without judgment or fear.

We believe it is possible to decide together to change the social climate of our schools, sports teams, buses, hallways, neighborhoods, and homes. Change is not going to happen by itself; rather, it needs to be intentional on all levels. Change requires us to address our belief systems and think about which behaviors and attitudes we are willing to tolerate and which we are not willing to tolerate. We know that change is often uncomfortable and difficult, but a more inclusive environment can gradually become the new normal. We invite parents to explore our research as well, both as advocates for effective interventions in schools and to use what we have learned to give support to their own children who may be mistreated.

Change starts with each of us, but we need to agree on our goals. During our combined 23 years of work in bullying prevention, we have done a lot of thinking and talking with teachers, administrators, trainers, and students. On top of this experience, we have analyzed the thousands of youth responses to the Youth Voice Project survey.

There is some good news: The field of bullying prevention has improved in several key ways since the 1950s. We take this issue much more seriously now and see adults as responsible for taking positive action. There are national and local conversations about how to protect young people from the trauma of peer mistreatment and ostracism. Youth are much less likely to be told, "Don't let it bother you. Kids are mean sometimes."

But we still need change. Instead of focusing primarily on identifying and punishing the "bullies," we should be looking at ways to build inclusive, fair, and respectful school cultures. This shift toward a focus on school culture started with the important work of researchers and visionaries including Dan Olweus (1993), Peter Smith (Smith, Mortia, Junger-Tas, Olweus, Catalano, & Slee, 1999), Dorothea Ross (2003), and many others. We have also turned toward a greater focus on the powerful role of youth bystanders. It is clear that actions of inclusion and emotional support by young people's peers are a positive force for good.

It is time to abandon the idea that mistreated youth somehow caused their own mistreatment by being passive or provocative. Linked to this idea is the commonly expressed idea that if mistreated youth would only assert themselves or not show that they are bothered by negative actions or walk away or tell the mistreater how they feel, the mistreatment would stop. These actions, on average, were not helpful for the mistreated students who participated in the Youth Voice Project. We are concerned that such advice can lead mistreated youth to blame themselves for what has been done to them and thus to accept the negative opinions expressed by their tormentors.

We have come to believe that the words we have used to describe peer mistreatment—*bullying, bullies,* and *victims*—may do more harm than good. Adults and

youth have been taught to identify bullying as behavior that is intended to harm, cuts across a power differential, and is repeated. In our work with youth and educators within the United States and around the world, we have heard many accounts of harmful peer actions that were ignored because the adult observing them knew that the peer "didn't mean any harm." We have heard young people minimize the impact of their own hurtful actions because they aren't "bullies" and didn't intend to hurt. Regardless of intent or power differential, mean or cruel behavior often causes harm, and bullying as conventionally defined is a subset of mean or cruel behavior. Harm can be done by the actions of a close friend or in the context of an isolated event. Harm can be done even if the person saying or doing something is truly just joking, with no intent to harm. When deciding how to respond to a behavior, we can be more effective if we look at one variable only: the potential for harm inherent in that action.

Use of the term *bullying* encourages people to look for "bullies" rather than to look for mean behaviors that anyone may choose and that can do harm no matter who uses them. We should talk about what an individual does, not who the person is. For those reasons, we will use the words *peer mistreatment* instead of the word *bullying* throughout this book. We will continue to use the phrase *bullying prevention* at times for clarity.

Too often in this work, we want to find simple answers to complex problems. We want to highlight robust patterns to explain all students' behavior. In reality, we know that life is not simple. Though we will compare the helpfulness of actions that mistreated youth, their peers, and adults can take, we need to remember that one size does not fit all. Knowing that some actions work better than others can serve as a guide for us; however, we need to be patient and willing to look at complex answers to complex issues. In real life, we need to consider many different ways to solve problems. Similarly, we need to consider many different variables as we seek to reduce peer mistreatment and its associated harm. That said, the large amount of data generated by the survey is a major strength of this book. We are basing our recommendations on what thousands of students told us. Patterns of students' responses can guide us in our work.

Our work has led us to identify six primary goals in handling peer mistreatment:

- First, we should strive to reduce the frequency of thoughtless, mean actions carried out by youth who do not intend to harm others but who may be imitating negative social modeling and/or are striving to fit in with their peers. This reduction can be accomplished through the use of consistent rules and small, escalating consequences. We can also build awareness of the effects of mean actions. We can help youth shape positive peer norms.

- Second, we should seek to reduce the frequency of mean actions committed by youth who have deficits in conscience, self-control, or empathy. Helping these young people change often involves repeated, patient skill instruction combined with the use of small consequences. We should also help mistreating youth who have a history of trauma to build new patterns of behavior as we help them heal from traumatic events.

- Third, we should reduce the frequency of mean behavior by a very small group of young people who truly enjoy hurting others. Doing so often requires mobilizing significant resources over time. However, interventions with this group justify the use of these resources because effects these young people's behaviors are likely to have on themselves and on others are severe.

- Fourth, we should build cognitive and emotional resiliency in all youth to prepare them to cope with others' negative actions and with the inevitable losses and disappointments of life. All youth need to learn emotional awareness, emotional self-care, when and how to seek help, and cognitive skills to reduce self-blame and trauma.

- Fifth, we should build connectedness and relationships for all within the school community so no one has to go through difficult times alone. A large body of research shows that youth who have positive connections with adults outside the family become more resilient—that is, they are less likely to be traumatized by negative events. In addition, developing research on the effects of social isolation and ostracism suggests that social isolation at school is uniquely damaging and that connections with both peers and adults are a key element in preventing harm.

- Sixth, we should strengthen our community's responses to mistreatment and trauma, including in our work efforts to recruit and encourage youth who will mentor, support, and listen to mistreated youth.

Combating peer mistreatment is not just about stopping mean and cruel behavior. We can make a dent in the problem by enforcing consistent discipline and helping young people learn to be kinder. Given human nature, this effort will never be 100 percent successful. Thus, our interventions must *also* focus on reducing the harm that ensues from peer mistreatment. This book therefore focuses on the latter three goals: promoting resiliency, building connections, and developing adult and peer support for mistreated youth. In addition to pursuing these three goals, schools should do everything in their power to reduce the frequency and intensity of potentially hurtful peer actions. For more information on school discipline interventions, we encourage you to read Stan's book *Schools Where Everyone Belongs* (Davis, 2007b). For more information and some additional material that did not find its way into this book, visit the Youth Voice Project website (www.youthvoiceproject.com).