You can’t bully your way to bullying prevention

By Jim Dillon, October 6th, 2014

Imagine the following scenario: There was a disease that plagued the population for a long time and finally a cure for it was discovered. There are enough resources available to translate this discovery into a treatment plan that could be implemented by hospitals and doctor’s offices. This treatment plan, however, might require those medical institutions to change many daily and routine practices including ones that might have contributed to the spread of the disease. Most medical institutions, however, continue business as usual and make none of the required changes. Feeling like they have to do something, however, as a way to at least acknowledge that the disease is not a good thing, the institutions simply tell the general population to avoid the disease.

What is the problem? Is it the disease or is it the lack of change in the medical establishment?

Most of us would readily agree that the disease is really no longer the problem. The failure to change is the real problem.

This analogy is an apt one for bullying prevention in our country. This is the reason why I think our well intentioned efforts to stop it appear to be stalled: We continue to think “bullying” is the problem when the real problem is changing the culture, climate and practices of schools.

The research on why people bully other people is not a mystery. Social psychology has produced some definite answers to that question. We also have research telling us why bystanders too often don’t intervene and report it. This research is not hidden away in some secret place that only a few have access to. It is literally at everyone’s fingertips at little or no cost. In addition, there are policies against bullying in schools, most students don’t bully and don’t approve of it. It would seem there are more reasons for it to fade as a problem, than for its existence as a permanent problem that has spawned an industry of products designed to stop it.

Here are some of my observations for why we seemed to be stalled in making progress:

The tendency when faced with a complex problem is to convert it to a simpler one and then use a familiar solution. Changing the basic culture of schools, their underlying assumptions and practices is a process that doesn’t lend itself to quick fixes or easy solutions. Even though it is less effective, our need to do “something” makes it a lot easier to use ad campaigns, inspirational assemblies and PSA’s all designed to tell students to change.

The minority of people who bully others seldom think they are “bullying,” so telling them to stop has very little or no impact whatsoever. Would a boss who bullies employees admit to bullying them or just think that she was an effective boss who was getting things done? Would a teacher who bullies a student admit to bullying or just think it was doing what the job required? Would a student who bullies another student admit that it’s bullying or say that he was just joking around or that the student deserved it? In all these cases, the people who bully has a set of justifications or rationalizations readily available to explain how what they did was not bullying. They think that those admonitions are for other people.

The majority of students who don’t bully interpret many “Stop Bullying” slogans as not relevant or possibly hypocritical. The version of bullying that is depicted in the media as a drama of good versus evil and in school as a rule infraction, is out of touch with students’ experiences, where acts of bullying are ambiguous and provoke ambivalence and confusion. In addition, telling students not to do something they already don’t do, turns them off. Telling students to stand up to bullying can be like asking students to drive a car in traffic, never giving them driving lessons and just telling them to be safe.

It is too easy for students to see sanctioned bullying as a routine practice in our schools and culture. In fact, the harsh and punitive measures used in our schools for students who get caught
bullying only mirror the mindset of bullying: using force and power as the default approach to solving any problem. The irony of many of our bullying prevention efforts is that they inadvertently punish students for only doing what some adults have modeled or “taught” them.

These are hard statements to accept, so it is understandable, if we prefer to look the other way, or in other places for the “solutions.” Progress in addressing it, however, depends upon having the courage to not see bullying as an isolated problem that emerged out of a vacuum, but rather as a symptom of a deeper problem of how we educate our students.

For a better starting point for our efforts, I recommend making the following changes in our collective thinking:

**Students are not the problem; They are the solution.** Let’s stop telling them what not to do or asking them to do what we ourselves have difficulty doing. Adults need to ask students to help in making a school a better place and improving how everyone is treated.

**Adults need to go first in changing: making sure they treat students the way they would way to be treated.** Better yet they need to look at the world through the eyes of their students and decide to treat them the way they want and need to be treated.

The key question to ask anyone who has power over anyone is: Should there be any exceptions or reasons for breaking the “golden rule”? And if the answer is yes—think again!

At the very least we should stop trying to bully our way to bullying prevention.

--------

Jim Dillon (@dillon_jim) has been an educator for over 35 years including twenty as a school administrator. He is currently the director of the Center for Leadership and Bullying Prevention. He has written two books, Peaceful School Bus (Hazelden) and No Place for Bullying (Corwin). He writes a blog at www.jim-dillon.com.

This article originally appeared on SmartBlog on Education.

Reproduced with permission.