UNTYING THE

"NOTS"

OF BULLYING PREVENTION

By Jim Dillon

Flip your school's bullying strategy by emphasizing responsibility and empowering bystanders.

As schools implement tough anti-bullying policies, many educators have responded by tightening their control of student behavior. But this tightening doesn't lead to a significant decrease in bullying, and may even exacerbate the problem. If tightening control is not the answer, what is?

Students are the solution. The people who have the most influence in determining the amount and degree of bullying in a school are not the adults, but the students. An educator's goal shouldn't be to control students, but rather to empower them.

From Control to Influence
To empower students, educators should shift their mindset from one of control to influence. Influencing means modeling the behavior you expect, demonstrating care and concern, listening with the intent to understand, and becoming trustworthy to students.

Developmentally, students want more independence as they get older. And when adults exert control, many students will actively resist it. But this need for independence doesn't mean that students should be disconnected from adults. Educators who invest time in developing mutually respectful and trusting relationships with students will discover that students want and need

adult guidance and wisdom. This trust positively changes the culture of a school, and is the most effective way for educators to prevent and reduce bullying. Educators and students should work together as partners in creating the type of school climate they both want, and school leaders should openly welcome students' contributions in improving the school environment.

Understanding Students' Worlds
One essential concept from social psychology can help educators transition from a control mindset to an influence mindset. Educators need to avoid committing what is called the fundamental attribution error, a mistake that many anti-bullying laws and policies make. The fundamental attribution error is the inclination to attribute students' behavior to the way they are rather than the situation that they are in.

Consider the complex social and psychological realm that students confront

each day. In their world, bullying can be a social action that serves a purpose: to impress an audience of bystanders and raise one's social status. Educators, therefore, need to focus less on the rule-breakers and more on the majority of students who don't break the rules: the bystanders or the audience for acts of bullying.

Effective bullying prevention depends on how well educators can meet this notion: Stopping bullying requires changing the audience response to it. Though educators are mandated to make sure bullying doesn't happen, they need to do more than stop a negative. They need to view students as "works in progress," helping them learn from their mistakes and grow as responsible members of a community.

Empowering Bystanders

Most students don't bully and don't approve of it. Consider, then, the following questions: Why don't bystanders intervene or report bullying? What affects how the audience (bystanders) responds to the bullying?

Educators can help empower bystanders as allies. First, avoid the fundamental attribution error—know that bystanders don't fail to intervene or report bullying because they are heartless or apathetic. Research in social psychology and bystander behavior has revealed many reasons why it is hard to stop bullying. Just telling bystanders to "stand up" to bullying makes little sense, no more sense than just telling a student to be a good reader or become a safe driver without first providing instruction, guidance, coaching, and support. Understanding these reasons is an important prerequisite for giving students the knowledge, skills, and attitudes needed to combat bullying.

I have summarized much of this research into a series of "Nots." These

are internal statements that bystanders might make to themselves as a way of justifying their inaction in the face of bullying. These "Nots" are like actual knots: they restrain students, keeping them from doing what they know is right.

- **Not my word.** One way that students disassociate themselves from a bullying action is to use a different word for it: drama. Drama can describe a continuum of behaviors that happen in students' social world. Bullying becomes an adult word representing a rule that is perceived as another effort to control students.
- **Not wrong.** Students may not view the words and actions they witness as bullying; therefore, they do not see it as wrong. Since teasing, joking, and bullying can occur in rapid succession, some bullying can blend with non-bullying, and be easily overlooked, ignored, or considered the norm.
- **Not harmful.** Students may know what is happening is wrong but think that no harm is being done or that the victim should be able to handle it. Sometimes, victims of bullying don't visibly demonstrate that they are hurt or bothered.
- **Not like me.** The victim is perceived as very different from the bystander. It is harder to help someone who

is viewed as different from oneself. This can get complicated if the student who bullies is a friend of the bystander.

- **Not my "tribe."** The victim is from a different social group, usually a group with which students don't want to be associated.
- **Not worthy of help.** Students might think that the victim deserves the bullying. The victim might not be someone bystanders think the teachers like.
- **Not sure of what the crowd thinks.** Students might incorrectly think that most students approve of bullying. It is very hard, even frightening, for students to act differently from what they perceive the majority of their peers think.
- **Not sure.** Students may be unsure of what to do or say to stop bullying.
- **Not my job.** Students might think that the bullying should stop, but that it is someone else's (such as an adult's) job to it.
- **Not my decision.** This is the opposite of being unsure of what the crowd thinks. Students interpret the inaction of others to be a sign that what is happening is not a problem.
- **Not against the rules.** The bullying might be subtle, not technically against the rules. Conversely, the words or actions needed to intervene against bullying might be more likely to seem against the rules.
- **Not worth the risk.** The need for protecting the self (me) is greater than the need to help others.
- **Not sure if adults will handle the situation well.** Students might think that the bullying is wrong, but that telling adults will only make the situation worse. Many times their perception is correct, especially under zero-tolerance policies.
- **Not confident in their own skills and**

abilities. Students might want to help, but assume that their efforts will be ineffective, especially when pitted against a popular, socially connected student.

- **Not sure of back-up.** Students are unsure that if they risk going to an adult that the adult will support them. They may think that they will get in trouble themselves.

Untangling the "Nots"

These "Nots" that often prevent students from acting in a helpful way can be untied. Doing so begins with letting students know the influence they have, and how they are needed to make their school a better place.

Here are some guidelines for avoiding the fundamental attribution error and for helping students untie the "Nots" preventing them from helping others:

Make sure students and staff know that most students don't bully and don't approve of it. Don't let the prevalence of bullying in the media overshadow the fact that most students are responsible and well-intentioned. School policies and regulations should be designed with the recognition that most students follow the rules, rather than emphasizing the few who might not.

Make sure that your staff accepts that students will make mistakes and that those mistakes are part of the learning process. This doesn't mean that bullying is a rite of passage. Viewing bullying as a mistake, and not a crime, will help students accept responsibility for their actions. When students can accept responsibility for involvement with bullying without facing condemnation, they will be more open to adult guidance on better ways to interact with peers.

Remember that being compassionate toward students who break the rules does not equate with condoning the behavior. Students who bully aren't bad kids or inherent troublemakers—some just need to learn how not to bully others. Some adults feel that showing kindness to a student who bullies promotes that type of behavior. This is why using a harsh tone of voice or condescending attitude can become prevalent in adults who discipline kids. All staff members must strive to adhere to the important principle that there is never a valid reason or justification for treating anyone with disrespect. Students who make mistakes need compassion and will accept guidance and direction when given respect and care.

Avoid the mindset that schools should always be problem-free. Educators should have a matter-of-fact attitude towards problems. Problems are part of life and learning. Viewing them as such will make discussing them a lot less emotional. Students will be more open to sharing them.

Operate on the assumption that people want to do good and be helpful. This will eliminate the false need (driven by fear) some educators have to tighten control of students. When staff see the problem as more of a skill issue than a will issue, they will rely less on rewards and consequences and more on coaching and supporting students.

Acknowledge and value the social nature of learning. When adults acknowledge the importance of the social world to students, they open an important line of communication. Students will be more likely to seek help when they feel they need it if adults demonstrate respect for students' need to think for themselves and problem-solve.

Devote time discussing with students the "Nots" that keep people from helping others. Students shouldn't feel guilty if they don't act courageously in the face of bullying. Educators should share their own stories of their doubt, uncertainty, or even indifference in the face of need. Discussing and articulating these issues can help students make a change in their own mindset.

Schools cannot be places where the adult world and the student world do not intersect. Instead, students and staff need to feel that they are all in this together, rather than feeling that it is "us against them." All members of the school community are works in progress, which is just another way of saying that schools are places of learning. This is the direction our schools must take, not just to prevent and reduce bullying, but to become optimal learning environments for all members of a school community. **P**

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