



When the Bully at School Is an Adult

Examining the phenomenon of school bullying requires that that school communities also take a closer look at the adults who operate within and influence the effectiveness, safety and social spirit of a school. In regard to the practice of any kind of bullying at school, adults in supervisory roles have the potential to be either protective factors or sources themselves, of such problems.

What makes adults who bully students at school a serious problem?

Bullying behaviors perpetrated by adults upon students have a particularly heinous aspect; as these adults are the very people to whom we have directly entrusted the care, supervision and education of children. A few of the consequences of adults at school who bully students include:

- ◆ targeted students who are afraid, confused, frustrated or angry.
- ◆ other students who are afraid of being next or even emboldened to join in the bullying as henchmen.
- ◆ distracted staff members who are aware of an unchecked problem.
- ◆ frustrated or angry parents.
- ◆ a compromised reputation for the school.
- ◆ a diminished sense of trust and respect and less confidence on the part of the school community.
- ◆ costly litigation and settlements.

Also at stake may be the professional careers and reputations not only of the adults who bully students at school, but also other adults who ignore the problem. In these times when the problem of bullying has such a high profile, failing to recognize, investigate and resolve such complaints, only increases the liability of the school and the vulnerability of school leaders.

Who are the adults at school who have the potential to bully students?

Any adults involved at school can use their position or power to intentionally and repeatedly, demean or harm students in direct or indirect ways. These may include school board members, superintendents, administrators, deans, teachers, librarians, counselors, coaches, nurses, school law enforcement or school security officers, teacher's aides, tutors, parent helpers, secretarial and custodial staff, crossing guards, cafeteria workers, bus drivers and walk-on coaches.

Why would any adult staff member bully a student?

Reasons why adults in a school setting bully students may include the following:

- **Because they can.** There are no rules, policies or guardians of the environment to stop them.
- A staff member may be operating in the same ways they were taught or raised.
- Bullying selected or problem students lends the appearance of being in charge.
- A staff member may be assimilating into an existing school culture of abuse and violence.
- A staff member may be motivated to act on personal bias or a lack of tolerance for certain student differences.
- There is no overall school plan or commitment to address any kind of bullying at the school.
- In some situations a staff member may be admired for tough stances and tactics.
- Bullying others may give the bully a sense of personal power and status.
- **Because they can get away with it.** They are skilled at hiding what they do, denying complaints and blaming students or others around them for the problems.



What do adults who bully students do?

Regardless of whom they target, adult bullies operate in much the same way as children who are bullies. They abuse their power/status over others, clearly intend to hurt or demean their chosen target(s) and tend to repeat their abusive behaviors. The obvious or hidden behaviors of adults who bully children may include:

- Physically abusing students in overt or covert manners, man-handling students, pinching, hitting, shoving, using inappropriate or demeaning physical punishments under the guise of discipline.
- Emotionally abusing students using, exclusion, ridicule, embarrassing nick-names, abusive name-calling or sarcasm to embarrass students
- Hiding behind claims of rigor and high standards that students continually fail to meet
- Using other students as henchmen to do their bullying for them.
- Selectively withholding attention, support or materials from students.
- Using or perpetuating rumors to humiliate students and/or their families
- Blaming student behaviors or classroom problems for their abusive actions
- Being overly domineering and making unreasonable demands of students
- Overtly favoring selected students to exclude targeted ones.
- Making-up rules or inconsistently enforcing rules or policies to hurt selected students.
- Using the opportunity to discipline a targeted student as a time to show-off power.
- Practicing denial, ignorance or indifference toward their abusive behaviors when called-out.
- Targeting a student's weaker skills during instruction.
- Threatening retaliation if students report what is happening.

It is also important to know that some staff members who bully students may also:

- Extend their behaviors to the siblings, parents or guardians of selected students.
- Bully and abuse other adult staff members.

What can districts, schools and fellow staff members do to prevent and respond to adults who bully students at school?

- Promote your school safety mission along side your academic mission. Know that bullying has been identified by experts as an act of social violence.
- Accept the potential for the problem of students being bullied by the adults in your school(s) as a reality.
- **Create, communicate and consistently implement** a policy addressing the bullying of students by adults at school. Use the development of the policy as an exercise to define such behaviors, identify courses of action for prevention, reporting and response. Include potential consequences. Use the completed policy to educate the school community about the problem.
- Accept and investigate any complaint of the bullying of a student by an adult staff member in an efficient and timely manner. Maintain open and dynamic lines of communication with concerned parents.
- Educate about the problem and consequences of adult bullies at school during staff orientation activities, in staff handbooks and as a part of other relevant activities.



- Walk the talk! Assess your relationships/rapport with your students, your classroom management approach and communication style. Leave behind student nicknames and the use of sarcasm in your classroom.
- Do your part to make your school(s) a welcoming and supportive place for all students.
- Accept and share guardianship over the problem with others who want to promote and protect the dignity of the students in your school(s).
- Include the problem of adult bullying at school as part of any efforts to understand, prevent and respond to student bullying behaviors at school.

Hilda Graham Consulting work products, tools, training, technical assistance, and consultation services, are designed to support the safe school planning activities of school communities. Each community must make unique choices to meet school safety needs reflected by their local circumstances and culture.

Hilda Graham Consulting makes no warranty, expressed or implied, nor assumes any legal liability or responsibility for the completeness, usefulness or accuracy of any information, resources, products or processes provided for consideration or use.