Bullying Prevention and Response Strategies When Supporting Refugee Students

Bullying is a pervasive issue in schools, affecting millions of children worldwide. Refugee students, already vulnerable due to displacement and trauma, face heightened risks of bullying. This guide aims to help community-based organizations, school staff, and resettlement agencies recognize bullying, understand why refugee populations are more vulnerable, and provide effective prevention and response strategies.

Newcomer Youth and Bullying

Refugee students face increased risk of bullying due to factors such as cultural differences, economic hardships, and trauma. Unfamiliarity with school norms and lack of social support further exacerbate their vulnerability to bullying.

Newcomer students frequently face social isolation, as students who are not familiar with refugee students may be apprehensive to build rapport. Refugee students often lack the appropriate language skills to be able to speak and effectively communicate with other students, which can create barriers to building rapport with other students.

Mental health or social-emotional challenges also factor into refugee students' risk of being bullied. Evidence suggests that exposure to trauma, which affects refugee children and youth at higher rates than the general population, makes a student more likely to bully others and/or be bullied, per the National Child Traumatic Stress Network (NCTSN).

Mitigating the impacts of bullying on refugee youth requires comprehensive and sustained approaches that include both prevention and response strategies. Many schools and youth-serving organizations have policies and guidelines related to bullying. However, educators, schools, community organizations, and service providers can play an active role in

strengthening their institution's approach. Assess your institution in relation to the strategies for preventing and addressing bullying listed below, and identify which areas can be developed or improved, as well as the actions you might take to catalyze that change.

Bullying Prevention Strategies

To help mitigate bullying in your institution, explore the following strategies.

Examine Rules and Policies Related to Bullying

Schools and community-based organizations should clearly define what bullying is and outline the consequences for those who engage in it. Rules and policies should be communicated to students, staff, and caregivers through handbooks, policies, and programs.

Rules and policies should detail anonymous ways of reporting incidents, including protocols for documenting and tracking bullying incidents. See Fairfax County Public Schools' comprehensive bullying prevention and intervention protocol for a sample policy that includes guidance on reporting, responding, investigating, and documenting bullying incidents.

Foster a Secure and Welcoming Environment

A school or program environment that is trauma-informed and culturally responsive will promote safety, transparency, and trustworthiness, which are especially important for refugee students.

A positive climate and culture will also enhance students' protective factors against bullying, such as having positive relationships with peers, mitigating bullying risk factors, and enabling greater success in bullying prevention efforts.

Consider the following guiding questions to assess your school or program's climate and culture:

- How do staff, students, and the broader community view immigrants? Determine if your organization could benefit from further training and education—for both students, their families, and staff—about the refugee experience.

- How does your school or program value and celebrate diversity? Consider literature, visual displays, and community-wide events that can help students acquire cultural humility and respect each other's differences.

- Consider the extent to which refugee children and youth have positive relationships within the school environment. Do they have mentors in the school or community? Are there ways to increase refugee students' feelings of belonging? How can you further promote stable connections with educators, staff, and other students?

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[1] *What Is Bullying*. (2019, September 24). StopBullying.gov. https://www.stopbullying.gov/bullying/what-is-bullying

Implement Trauma-Informed and Culturally Responsive Bullying Prevention Programs

Consider the protocols set forth by these three evidence-based bullying intervention programs, which have received national acclaim: Olweus Bullying Prevention Program, Second Step Bullying Prevention, and Positive Behavior Intervention & Supports.

These programs provide interventions at multiple levels—including individual, classroom, and school-wide—with a focus on social-emotional learning, building empathy, emotional regulation, and conflict resolution. These key skills assist students and staff in creating a culturally responsive environment to prevent and respond to bullying.

Regardless of which bullying prevention program you use, it is vital for schools and organizations supporting refugee students to ensure prevention programs are trauma-informed and culturally and linguistically sensitive.

Consider the following questions to assess the program:

- Is the program easily accessible for refugee students?
- Are there mechanisms in place for ongoing evaluation and feedback from refugee students and their families to ensure the program remains responsive to their needs?
- Are there opportunities for refugee students to participate in leadership roles within the program, fostering a sense of belonging and empowerment?

Build Stakeholder Capacity

Proper training through anti-bullying program initiatives is essential for students, families, staff, and community members who work directly with students. Information sessions and written materials should be made consistently available to ensure caregivers understand the institution's prevention and response approaches, including how to address bullying with their children and how to communicate bullying-related concerns to the institution. Ensure that families can access any relevant information in their home language, and consider using interpretive services when necessary.

Strong family engagement initiatives will also empower caregivers to support their children in bullying prevention and response. Suggestions for teachers and staff include hosting parent workshops, incorporating discussions about bullying prevention into parent-

Who is most likely to bully others?

Those who bully can face devastating long-term social, emotional, and academic problems which can potentially affect them into adulthood. When families, schools, and communities can mitigate the risk factors for bullying behavior, these students may be less likely to bully, leading to more positive outcomes down the line.

Risk factors for bullying behavior:

- Children who have more social authority (which they may use to dominate others);
- Children who are more isolated from their peers, potentially indicating higher incidences of depression, anxiety, or low self-esteem;
- Children who are aggressive or easily frustrated;
- Children who have less parental involvement or challenges at home; and
- Children who are more exposed, in the past or present, to violence and/or trauma.

teacher conferences, and soliciting feedback and collaborative input from newcomer families.

Many cultural factors influence how refugee families perceive and respond to bullying, so intentional outreach and guidance will help parents navigate nuances and understand specific school policies. Partner with newcomer families to ensure they understand the effects of bullying and how to support and advocate for their child if necessary.

Strategies for Addressing Bullying

Even when schools have effective tools and strategies to prevent bullying, there are still going to be incidents. Consider the following strategies on how to provide support in response to bullying after the fact.

Evaluate Policies

Consistent policies and protocols are critical to effectively addressing bullying incidents. Schools and community-based organizations must promptly investigate reported cases of bullying and take appropriate disciplinary action.

Consistency in enforcing consequences sends the message that your institution takes bullying seriously and that bullying incidents are managed fairly. Consider the following questions:

■ Does your school or organization promptly investigate bullying incidents in accordance with stated policies?

■ Do any refugee families struggle to understand the policies?

■ Are refugee students and families asked for feedback on the handling of bullying incidents?

Support Everyone Involved

Since there are many roles involved in bullying incidents, it is important to effectively document and support everyone affected—whether they were bullied, displayed bullying, or were bystanders.

If you observe bullying in the moment, first address the student who is being bullied. This may feel counterintuitive, but is important to preserving the power and safety of the student who is being bullied.

Take the opportunity to understand what students need to learn in order to do things differently during any subsequent incidents, and create support plans with the designated school staff members including counselors or school social workers).

Ensure that parents and caregivers are also a part of these conversations. Parents and caregivers may need

Roles Involved in Bullying

There are many distinct roles involved in bullying incidents, which are not limited to the bully or the student getting bullied.

Reinforcers—these students do not necessarily start the bullying, or lead in bullying behaviors, but may encourage and occasionally join in.

Bystanders—these students witness bullying situations but neither reinforce them nor defend the child being bullied. They may want to help, but do not know how. Even so, by providing an audience, these students may encourage bullying behavior.

Defenders—these students stand up for, and actively comfort, the child being bullied.

guidance on how to talk to their child about bullying or getting bullied. Targeted interventions may include counseling, social skills training, conflict resolution practices, and mentorship programs.

Consider the following questions:

■ How does your institution address bullying incidents with the broader community of students?

■ How does your institution talk about bullying? Do children get labeled as bullies or do staff talk about "bullying behaviors" more generally?

Use Restorative Practices

In contrast to disciplinary methods that simply punish misbehavior, restorative practices address conflict by seeking to repair harm, which can make them a powerful bullying response strategy.

Bullying harms peer relationships, which is critical to a positive school or program environment. Restorative practices seek to repair relationships after harm has been done. They facilitate dialogue, empathy, personal growth, and learning. They can also collaboratively develop solutions to prevent future incidents.

Consider the following questions:

■ To what extent does your institution use restorative practices?

■ Could your institution develop or improve restorative practices to better support refugee students?

Employ School Specialists and Support Staff in Immediate and Ongoing Response

The "it takes a village" approach is best when supporting students. Designated staff members—including counselors, social workers, and psychologists—can provide social, behavioral, and mental health support to all students as part of a bullying response strategy. Refugee students who connect with these individuals, building rapport and trust in advance of bullying incidents, are more likely to advocate for themselves if they are bullied.

Consider the following questions:

■ Does your institution use a multi-tiered support system that includes mental health staff to help students at higher risk of bullying or being bullied?

■ Does your institution provide resources to families for community-based mental health support when necessary?

■ What types of programming does your institution's mental health or other trained staff

provide (such as small groups, psychoeducational activities, peer mediation programs, mentoring, and behavior intervention plans)? Are these services featured in bullying response programming and education?

- Do refugee students and families face any barriers to accessing these services?

Data Collection

Collecting and analyzing data effectively is essential to bullying prevention and response. Implementing anonymous reporting systems allows students to report instances of bullying or concerns about safety (of themselves or others) without fear of retaliation, all while providing crucial information about bullying to organization staff.

Data collection can also help institutions make informed decisions by illuminating the scale and scope of bullying within their environments.

Review your data for these questions:

- How many bullying incidents take place per year?
- What types of bullying are most often taking place?
- What trends can you observe about who bullies and who is being bullied?
- Does bullying happen most frequently in certain spaces, or at certain times of the day (e.g., lunchroom, hallway, online, during or after school, etc.)?
- To what extent are refugee youth represented in the data?
- Do students feel comfortable reporting bullying, or do they fear retaliation?

Resources

Bridging Refugee Youth and Children's Services (BRYCS) offers Refugee Children in U.S. Schools: A Toolkit for Teachers and School Personnel and provides guidance on how to file a bullying or discrimination complaint.

BRYCS also offers an e-Learning course on Discrimination and Bullying of Refugee Youth and an archived webinar on Muslim Refugee Youth: Stories and Strategies Addressing Discrimination and Bullying.

NCTSN provides a tip sheet for caregivers of refugee children to help address needs specific to those who have suffered traumatic separation.

See the Monique Burr Foundation for Children on how bullying may differ by grade level.

See Switchboard's webinar Partnering With Schools To Provide Safe And Inclusive Learning Environments For Refugee Students for more on creating culturally responsive and trauma-informed learning environments for newcomers.

Switchboard blog also offers a post on Talking about Race and Racism: Tips for Conversations with Refugee Youth.

Supporting Children Impacted by Hate Incidents and Hate Crimes is a client-facing resource (available in eight languages) developed by the IRC's Center for Adjustment, Resilience & Recovery (CARRE).

CARRE also provides a children- and youth-facing resource on online safety, available in twelve languages.

The National Center on Safe Supporting Learning Environments provides technical assistance to organizations looking to improve their bullying prevention and response protocols.

The U.S. Committee for Refugees and Immigrants (USCRI) offers a guide aiding service providers in talking about bullying with families and children.

To learn more about Switchboard, visit www.SwitchboardTA.org.