

Peer Advocacy - The Pilot

Objective

To reduce bullying of students with disabilities by engaging, educating and empowering designated peers to become advocates on their behalf.

Concept

Students with disabilities are bullied at a statistically higher rate than their peers. The two factors that are highly indicative of becoming a target of bullying—social isolation and a vulnerable reaction to the behavior—are the hallmark characteristics of many students with disabilities. Oftentimes students with disabilities have few or no friends. It is much easier for someone who bullies to pick on students who are alone or don't have an ally looking out for them. In addition, many students with disabilities are not as adept as their peers at navigating the complexities of social relationships, so they often react in a way that encourages someone who bullies, such as by getting mad, sad or afraid.

Research has demonstrated that peer engagement is a critical factor in reducing bullying in the school climate. Student engagement is also important because bullying can be covert, is not always recognized by adults, and often occurs outside the periphery of adult view with only the students themselves as witnesses.

Many students are already informally intervening in bullying situations. A peer advocate program creates a formal process that identifies, trains and supports a designated group of students who watch out for students with disabilities. The process establishes a support system from peers as well as logistics for adult supervision and support. Purposeful engagement of peers to intervene in systematic ways is a powerful step to reduce bullying.

Process

- Engage designated adults within the school to mentor the project. Adult involvement is critical for the project to be successful. There needs to be investment from a key adult(s) who will take responsibility for receiving training, training the peer advocates, maintaining a regular meeting schedule with the advocates and promoting the project. Adult investment needs to come from a supportive administration which will identify those responsible for the day-to-day implementation, such as a special education teacher, guidance counselor or school nurse.
- Inform the parents. Parents of both the peer advocates and the students with disabilities should be provided with information about the project, and a signed permission for students to participate should be requested. This allows parents to have a dialogue with their child about the process.
- Identify the students with disabilities that could benefit from peer advocacy. Often this can be students who are already receiving special education classes, currently don't possess the skills to protect themselves and are socially isolated.
- Select and recruit the peer advocates. Ideally, each student with a disability would have four to six assigned advocates. The peer advocates should possess the traits of empathy, critical thinking, and autonomous thinking. The students don't necessarily need to know the student with a disability, but it does help to have a previous relationship or connection. Think outside the box when selecting advocates. They can be students who wouldn't necessarily be

PACER's National Bullying
Prevention Center®

8161 Normandale Blvd.
Minneapolis, MN 55437-1044
952.838.9000
952.838.0190 TTY
952.838.0199 fax
PACER@PACER.org

considered for leadership positions, but who are able to speak out for others and be diplomatic.

- ❑ Provide initial training and education. Peer advocates should be trained about the dynamics of the student who whom they are advocating. It is also helpful to provide specific details about the characteristics of the student with a disability; this can be done with information that is provided by the students themselves or their parents. Peer advocates also need training on how to address various bullying situations. They can be taught to use direct intervention, such as trying to remove the student from a situation, or indirect, such as supporting the student after a situation or telling a designated adult.
- ❑ Establish a meeting schedule. Peer advocates should meet as a group on a regular basis with the students with disabilities. These meetings can involve doing activities together, sitting by each other for lunch, etc. This facilitates a connection that goes beyond just advocacy and allows for the development of a relationship. Individual meetings can also be established. All peer advocate “groups”(each set of 4 to 6 students) should also meet on a regular basis for training and to simply connect, which allows for establishing a larger support system among the students.
- ❑ Provide ongoing support. Adult mentors should be readily available to all students involved to respond to their questions, concerns and suggestions. Students need to know that there is a mechanism to address situations they may encounter, help them process their feelings and feel supported in their role. Data Outcomes from Initial Small Scale PilotPACER collaborated with a local school to develop a peer advocacy model designed to connect students with disabilities and their peers, who are trained in disability and bullying prevention. The model started in the spring of a school year with one student with a disability and four peer advocates. The following school year, the program expanded to four students with disabilities and 16 peer advocates. The peer advocates received ongoing training and support from a special education teacher and the school psychologist. The project was highly successful in keeping students safe from bullying and had the unexpected outcome of dramatically increasing social inclusion for the students with disabilities.

Results from Peer Advocate Questionnaire

Would you recommend that other schools adopt peer advocacy programs?

Yes, 100%

No 0%

Do you feel your involvement made a difference?

Yes, 100%

No 0%

Did this experience increase your understanding of others with disabilities?

Yes, 100%

No 0%

Excerpts from open ended questions

What do you want other kids to know about this experience?

- It's really fun and you get to know the kids you help
- It's fun, but serious
- That it makes you feel really good to help other people and it's fun to be with kids different from yourself
- To understand about kids who have disabilities and how they and other kids who don't have disabilities how they view it and how it makes them feel
- That there are so much more steps they have to take than others and their families are so supportive
- I think kids can learn more in depth of their disabled friends
- That it is very nice and that kids with disabilities are really nice people with cool personalities
- It's really fun and you get to learn about people with disabilities
- It's really inspiring. The littlest things can make a difference. This has opened my eyes and change the way I think about things.
- That just because you have a disability doesn't mean your different, you are the same as everyone else

What do you think you learned about yourself during this experience?

- How lucky I am and how great they were to be friends with
- That I am not alone when I am bullied
- That there should be kids helping others with

disabilities, and they enjoy us being with them

- I think I've learned how difficult other's lives are versus my own.
- I learned that I can really make a difference in the end of bullying!
- That literally the smallest things like saying dumb or stupid can be really offensive to people. But I learned a lot.
- Kind of the same thing as the question above this, but this program is so inspiring, I love it!

Describe the ways that you think your peers (those for which you were advocating) benefitted from this experience?

- I have noticed that H, J, and D have really got to know me more and they know they can talk to me, which they do a lot.
- I think that H, J, and D have opened up a little more, like they are talking more than they used to! It is amazing what we did together.
- More closer friends
- They probably thought it was nice to hang out with more during school
- They learned what was right and wrong
- I think they really realized that they have good friends and other people than their family
- They can show the world how they can help and they can spread the word of this cause
- I think they benefitted because they have something in their day to look forward to
- They have more friends and they have someone to share things with, and they now know they don't have to put up with bullying.
- Happy