

Chapter 9, CHARACTER MATTERS: How to Help Our Children Develop Good Judgment, Integrity, and Other Essential Virtues—Thomas Lickona (Touchstone, Feb., 2004)

**PREVENT PEER CRUELTY
AND PROMOTE KINDNESS**

Children remind me of chickens, seeking out the weak and wounded and pecking them to death. They have discovered that my 9-year-old son, who is autistic, is bothered by loud noises, and they scream and whistle in his ear until he cries.¹

—A mother

Your children who have ridiculed me, who have chosen not to accept me, who have treated me like I am not worth their time, are dead.

—Columbine shooter Eric Harris's e-mail suicide note to the Littleton community

"The school's most powerful moral influence," observes psychologist and character educator Marvin Berkowitz, "is the way people treat each other." In many schools, most of the adults are making a conscientious effort to treat students with love and respect. But in those same schools, even schools that are ostensibly committed to character education, kids are often devastatingly cruel to each other.

When peer cruelty goes unchecked, it's a very serious problem for many reasons. The school is sending the message that the law of the jungle rules. This threatening atmosphere interferes with learning; students won't be focused on schoolwork if they're worried about getting cut down in their classroom, harassed in the hallway, ostracized at recess, or bullied on the bus. Cruelty at the hands of their schoolmates deprives them of what every child needs: the experience of being accepted and valued by peers. Peer rejection, one study found, is more likely to cause a child to leave school than academic difficulties.²

Students who persecute peers are not only hurting others; they are also deforming their own character. By age 24, according to the U.S. Department of Justice, 60% of students who bully will have a criminal conviction.

For students who are regularly subjected to abuse by peers, school is a miserable experience. After graduating from his suburban high school, a boy wrote the following letter to his principal:

Before I came to this school, I went to a school where I was liked and into sports. I thought that joining the soccer team when I came here in 8th-grade would be a good way to make friends. Instead, for reasons I never understood, four kids on the team decided to pick on me. They started by calling me names and one day after practice pushed me into the swamp behind the school. When I tried to get out, they kept pushing me back. This went on until I teared up, and then they called me “crybaby.” When I finally got out, I told the coach—which was a big mistake because he made them run laps, and then they *really* had a reason not to like me.

One day outside of school, as I was talking to two girls I liked, these guys came up behind me and pulled my pants down. As they walked away, they said, “You can’t do anything about it.” They kept this up all through high school. I was constantly afraid of being humiliated. These kids were ruining my life. I thought about what I’d like to do to them, but I didn’t have the courage to carry it out.

Some students who are subjected to this kind of tormenting do carry out their desire for revenge. A 2000 study of school shootings by the U.S. Secret Service found that two-thirds of the shooters had felt persecuted, bullied, threatened, attacked, or injured by others.

Other victims of peer cruelty become at risk for suicide. A mother says:

My nice, pretty 7th-grader has no friends. She eats alone in the cafeteria, she walks alone in the halls. She says it is like she is a ghost. She does not know what she has done wrong. Needless to say, she’s depressed and said last night that she would like to kill herself. My husband and I are at a loss as to what to do.³

One 8th-grade girl who did kill herself left this note to her parents: “All my life I have been teased. I love you very much, but I just couldn’t stand it anymore.”

Peer cruelty, of course, has always been with us, but research shows it’s on the rise.⁴ In recent years, anti-bullying programs have proliferated—a reflection of the problem.

Much more pervasive than classical bullying (a stronger child picking on a weaker victim) are the everyday emotional cruelties—teasing, taunts, gossiping, rumor-

spreading, and exclusion. In a nationwide survey of nearly 70,000 students in grades 6-12, only 37% said “students in my school show respect for one another.”⁵ The problem facing a great many schools is now a general peer culture where disrespect and meanness have become the norm.

Schools have no higher moral obligation to students and their parents than to do everything in their power to prevent peer cruelty and create a culture of kindness and respect. There is no more important measure of the effectiveness of a character education program than its progress toward this goal.

1. BEGIN WITH CHARACTER-BASED DISCIPLINE

The first strategy in preventing peer cruelty is character-based discipline (Chapter 7). All of the discipline strategies that help kids develop respect for rules and the rights of others will help to curb bullying.

An essential part of character-based discipline is enforcement that holds students accountable to rules through fair and firm consequences. With bullies, behavior contracts have often proved helpful (e.g., *“I will not hit or hurt anyone—if I do, I will have to call my parents and report what I did”*).

2. CREATE A CARING SCHOOL COMMUNITY

The second strategy must be the creation of a caring school community in which all students feel a sense of security and belonging.

It’s possible to measure the extent to which a caring school community exists. This can be done through a survey that asks students and staff to indicate their agreement or disagreement, on a 5-point scale, with statements such as: *“People in this school care about each other,”* and *“Students in this school help each other, even if they are not friends.”*⁶ Using such an instrument to investigate six diverse school districts in different regions of the country, one study found a clear pattern: The stronger a school’s sense of community, the more likely it was that students showed positive attitudinal and character outcomes:

1. Greater liking for school.
2. Less feeling of loneliness in school.
3. Greater empathy toward others’ feelings.
4. Stronger motivation to be kind and helpful.
5. More sophisticated conflict resolution skills.

6. More frequent acts of altruistic behavior.
7. Higher academic self-esteem.
8. Stronger feelings of social competence.
9. Fewer delinquent acts.
10. Less use of tobacco, alcohol, and marijuana.

Schools seeking to strengthen their sense of community should consider using an available survey (see Chapter 11) to get baseline data at the beginning of their effort and then repeat the survey later to assess their progress.

3. IMPLEMENT AN EFFECTIVE ANTI-BULLYING PROGRAM

Many schools have taken the further step of implementing a schoolwide anti-bullying program.

Schools pursuing this strategy should take care to select a program that is evidence-based. In 1999, a committee of educational researchers examined more than 500 programs ostensibly designed to prevent violence and found only four school-based programs with proven effectiveness.⁷

Perhaps the best known of the effective approaches is the *Olweus Bullying Prevention Program* designed by Norway psychologist Dan Olweus. Implemented over the past 20 years in Norway's elementary and junior high schools, this program has: (1) reduced bullying by 50% or more; (2) significantly reduced general anti-social behavior such as vandalism, fighting, and stealing; and (3) improved classroom climate and students' satisfaction with school life.

Now used in a growing number of U.S. schools, the *Olweus Bullying Prevention Program* has four major components:

1. *General Prerequisite: Awareness and involvement of adults*

2. *School Measures*

- Administration of an anonymous bully/victim questionnaire
- Formation of a Bullying Prevention Committee
- Staff training and time for ongoing staff discussion groups
- Effective supervision during recess and lunch periods

3. *Classroom Measures*

- Clear classroom and school rules about bullying
- Regular classroom meetings

- Meetings with students' parents

4. Individual Measures

- Individual meetings with students who bully
- Individual meetings with victims
- Meetings with parents of students involved
- Development of individual intervention plans.

For more information on the *Olweus Bullying Prevention Program*, *Life Skills Training*, *Promoting Alternative Thinking Strategies (PATHS)*, and *The Incredible Years*, visit www.colorado.edu/cspv/blueprints/model/overview.html.

4. GET STUDENTS TO TAKE RESPONSIBILITY FOR STOPPING PEER CRUELTY

Bullies gain power when there is a tolerance for their behavior. An estimated 85% of bullying occurs with other students watching. Bystanders often passively observe or aggravate the problem by cheering the bully on or even joining in.

A Canadian study found that if even one student spoke up to express disapproval of a bullying incident, the bully typically stopped within ten seconds.⁸ Our challenge as educators is to create a school culture in which most students hold the belief that they should do something to try to stop any cruelty they observe.

Some schools have had success in promoting peer intervention by recruiting an anti-bullying team of students at each grade level. These teams then work with a teacher or counselor to brainstorm and carry out strategies for reducing peer cruelty. Team members subsequently step in on behalf of victims. Says a high school senior in Clarksburg, West Virginia: "We don't yell at the kids picking on someone—we just say, 'Hey, man, that's not a cool thing to do.'"

In Erie, Pennsylvania, The Ophelia Project (www.opheliaproject.org) focuses on "relational aggression," including all the behind-the-back ways kids are mean to each other. The project trains high school students as mentors who go into middle and elementary school classrooms and lead discussions: "What do girls do when they want to be mean to each other? Let's make a list. Okay, what do boys do?" Then the high school mentors role-play common scenarios depicting the aggressor, the victim, and the kids in the middle. Sample situation: Someone is mad at Kelly and tries to get all of Kelly's friends mad at her, too.

The goal of the role-plays: to demonstrate to students how the kids in the middle have the power to influence the group dynamics in a positive way. “The message we want to get across,” says Ophelia Project founder Susan Wellman, “is that what bystanders do makes a significant difference.”

5. BUILD CLASSROOM COMMUNITY

A central strategy in preventing peer cruelty is to create a strong sense of community in every classroom.

That begins with helping students get to know their classmates. A seat lottery—changing kids’ seats on a regular basis—is a simple way to do that. A mother remembers with gratitude how her 6th-grade teacher used this strategy:

Halfway through my 6th-grade year, we moved. I dreaded going into my new school in the middle of the year. But every week the teacher assigned us a new seat by lottery. I got to know a lot of other kids in a short time and was able to make friends. There was a very comfortable atmosphere in that class.

Marty Kaminsky, a 4th-grade teacher in Ithaca, New York, describes how he uses the ritual of “morning meeting” to create and renew the sense of community in his room:

The first day of school and every day thereafter I sit down with my students and conduct a morning meeting. For at least 15 minutes, we share the birth of kittens, the loss of a tooth, anxiety about an upcoming move. We sing songs. We celebrate individual accomplishments. Through our morning meeting we are saying to every child, “You are part of us. You are welcome here.”

Morning Meetings, a publication of the Responsive Classroom (www.responsiveclassroom.org), is a rich source of greeting rituals and other activities for this start-of-the-day time.

6. FOSTER FRIENDSHIP

As psychologist Michael Thompson points out, students can handle social cruelty if they have one friend. An estimated 20% of children, however, are at risk of having no friends.

Wise teachers therefore take deliberate steps to foster friendship in their classrooms. Beverly Oakley, a 2nd-grade teacher at Long Island’s South Hampton Elementary School, reads several books on friendship at the start of each school year. And every day, for five minutes immediately after recess, she has her students circle up for “Friendship Time.”

At Friendship Time I’ll ask the children, “What is a nice thing that you saw someone do during the morning or while you were at lunch or recess?” It doesn’t have to be anything big; someone might say, “I saw Joe pick up the crayons.” I give a sticker to each of the students who is named. We usually do 3 or 4 students on a given day. They put their stickers on a laminated card I give them. All the kids get recognized eventually.

Of all the things I do, Friendship Time is the one that means the most to them. At the end of the year, I have them each make a book on 2nd-grade— what they liked, what they will remember. They always mention Friendship Time. Several years later, when they’re 5th- and 6th-graders, students will stop by, and even if they can’t remember anything else about 2nd-grade, they remember Friendship Time.

“Since I started Friendship Time,” Oakley says, “I almost never get complaints about behavior during recess—‘he did this, she said that.’ And if someone tells me about a friendship problem they’re having—such as a friend who isn’t playing with them—I’ll say, ‘Let’s talk about that at Friendship Time.’”

7. DO “ANONYMOUS COMPLIMENTS”

Mark Twain once said, “I can live for two months on one good compliment.” Rick Mansfield, a 5th-grade teacher in Merrick, New York, keeps the compliments flowing in his classroom through his weekly “Anonymous Compliments” activity.

1. Each student draws the name of a classmate from a bowl.
2. Before the end of the week, each student writes a compliment about his or her person on a strip of paper, shows it to the teacher, and, with the teacher’s approval, puts it in the Compliment Box.
3. On Friday, the teacher posts the compliments on the bulletin board next to class members’ names.

Comments Mansfield: “This activity takes almost no time but does a great deal to create a positive classroom climate. And because a compliment is anonymous—anyone

in the classroom could have written it—there’s a generalized good feeling toward classmates.”

8. IMPLEMENT QUALITY COOPERATIVE LEARNING

Cooperative learning has students work in 2s, 3s, or 4s on a task that requires interdependent learning (each student has a job to do) and individual accountability (each must demonstrate mastery of the material by taking a test or turning in a paper or project). Dozens of studies show that cooperative learning contributes to both academic achievement and character development, including perspective-taking, team skills, the appreciation of differences, and the integration of all students into the classroom community.

However, to have these benefits, cooperative learning has to be designed well. Many adults have negative memories of “group work” where some kids got a free ride, a bossy student took over, and the teacher gave a group grade (not a good idea) that penalized students who had done higher-quality work than their teammates.

Quality cooperative learning requires that the teacher and students: (1) identify the behaviors that bring about effective cooperation; and (2) continually monitor and assess how effectively pairs or groups are working together. For example, Betty House and her 5th-grade students in Ithaca, New York, developed the following chart to guide their cooperative learning:

WE WORK BEST TOGETHER WHEN:

1. *We help each other and don't fight.*
2. *We're all kind to each other — no put downs.*
3. *We encourage each other.*
4. *We communicate and share our ideas.*
5. *Everyone has a job to do.*
6. *Everyone contributes and feels included.*
7. *Someone compliments me.*
8. *We listen to all ideas and take turns sharing them.*
9. *People don't complain.*
10. *I feel respected.*

Students are most likely to grow in their cooperative skills if the teacher reviews such a list before every cooperative activity and then asks students after the activity to use the list to evaluate how well they worked together.

9. TEACH EMPATHY THROUGH CHILDREN'S LITERATURE

Peer cruelty—especially toward kids who are “different”—almost always reflects a lack of empathy. Children’s literature that depicts cruelty and the suffering it causes is a valuable tool for fostering empathy.

Eleanor Estes’s *The Hundred Dresses* (Harcourt Brace, 1944), Lauren Mills’s *The Rag Coat*, Mary Wright’s *Who Belongs Here?*, and Taro Yashima’s *Crow Boy* are four picture books on this theme that can be used effectively with kids of all ages. See also *Character Education Through Story: K-6 Lessons to Build Character through Multicultural Literature* (www.CharacterEducation.com.)

I was recently working in an elementary school where children’s unkind treatment of each other was the staff’s top concern, as it so often is. I read *The Hundred Dresses* to several 4th-, 5th- and 6th-grade classes and conducted circle discussions with each group.

The book tells the story of Wanda Petronski, a poor, quiet girl who always wears the same faded blue dress to school. She has no friends. The other girls, led by the popular Peggy, constantly tease Wanda about her one dress. Finally, one day Wanda blurts out, “I have a *hundred* dresses home—all different colors!” After that, the girls’ teasing becomes merciless. Maddie—Peggy’s best friend—wishes she and the others would stop picking on Wanda but doesn’t have the courage to say anything.

The time comes for the annual art contest conducted each spring by their teacher. On the day the winner is to be announced, the children enter their classroom amazed to see 100 beautiful drawings of dresses—each different—displayed on the walls. They were all drawn by Wanda, the teacher explains, but she is not present to receive the first prize. The teacher then reads a letter from Wanda’s father:

Dear Teacher: My Wanda will not come to your school any more. Jake also. Now we move away to big city. No more holler Polack. No more ask why funny name. Plenty of funny names in the big city. Yours truly,

Jan Petronski

In every class I read this story to, the children listened intently. You could tell it hit home. I asked, “How many of you have ever been left out or made fun of at school?” Most of the hands went up. I asked, “How many of you have ever taken part

in making fun of another kid or excluding them because they're different in some way?" Most students either looked down or slowly raised their hands.

As the discussion progressed, I asked them to think about Maddie, the girl in the story who felt sorry for Wanda but did nothing. After Wanda moved away, Maddie had a sick feeling in the pit of her stomach. She felt like a coward. I said, "What are some ways Maddie could have helped Wanda? Suppose she wanted to be friendly toward Wanda but still stay friends with Peggy—how might she have done that?" In each class, students came up with good ideas.

Then I said: "Suppose you see someone in your class or school being treated badly—made fun of or left out. Maybe that's happening right now to someone you know. What are some things you could do to help?" We made a list on the board. I asked each student to write down one thing they would try to do—and I asked the teacher of each class to make time the next week for the children to write about whether they followed through on their intentions.

10. HAVE CHILDREN WITH DISABILITIES TEACH THEIR PEERS

In developing empathy, there is no substitute for face-to-face experience. First-hand experience is especially valuable in helping kids understand and support schoolmates who have disabilities.

Kathleen Scanlon is the school nurse at Frederick Leighton Elementary School (Oswego, New York). She helps disabled children talk to their classmates about their disabilities and how they cope with them. She explains:

With a parent present, I'll meet with the child and ask, "What would you like to share with the class? *How* would you like to share it? What *don't* you want to share?" One 4th-grade boy had spina bifida and didn't want to tell that he had a catheter because of bladder control difficulty. One 3rd-grade girl had epilepsy and was worried that someday kids would see her having a seizure—and did want to talk to them about that. Having the child be part of the planning is key. Sometimes they decide to read something to the class about their disability or to tell a personal story. Sometimes they'll do part of the presentation, and I'll do part.

Says Scanlon: "I've had students come back to me when they're in junior high and high school and thank me for the opportunity to do this and for asking them how they wanted to do it."

11. USE THE 7 E'S TO TEACH CARING

There are 7 E's of teaching any virtue:

1. *Explain it*—define it, illustrate it, and discuss its importance.
2. *Examine it*—in literature, history, or current events.
3. *Exhibit it*—through personal example.
4. *Expect it*—through codes, rules, contracts, and consequences.
5. *Experience it*—in relationships and activities.
6. *Encourage it*—through goal-setting, practicing the virtue, and self-assessment.
7. *Evaluate it*—give students feedback on how they're doing.

Jan Gorman, a 1st-grade teacher at Meachem Elementary School (Syracuse, New York), illustrates how to implement the 7 E's. She starts the school year by teaching a virtue a week, beginning with caring. On the board she has a large sign, CARING, along with a photograph of two children working together.

She gathers the students in a circle and elicits their thoughts about the following questions on the board:

- *What is caring?*
- *Who can show caring?*
- *Where does caring take place?*
- *How can each of us show caring? In our classroom? In our school? In our families?*

She makes a visual web of the children's responses, which remain posted in the front of the room.

She then reads a picture book that illustrates the theme of caring. She often begins with Peter Golenbock's *Teammates*, the story of how Brooklyn Dodgers captain Pee Wee Reese stood by Jackie Robinson when Jackie faced racism, even from some of his teammates, for being the first black man to play major league baseball. After the story, she conducts a discussion, asking: "Who in the story showed caring? Who did not show caring?"

Then she says, "I want you to remember this story and to try to show caring toward each other during the rest of the day." When a child behaves in a caring way, she compliments that child, sometimes calling the class's attention to a thoughtful act. If a child behaves in an inconsiderate or unkind way, she will speak to the student

privately: “Did that behavior show caring? Remember our story . . . remember our discussion.”

On each subsequent day of the week, she reads a different story about caring, followed by another class discussion. She repeats her challenge to children to act in a caring way in their own interactions, and again looks for opportunities to comment on their behavior.

“By the end of the week,” she says—after five such stories and discussions—“caring has been established as an expectation in my classroom.” Her children have been immersed in this virtue. It has become part of the classroom culture. During the following week, she repeats this process with a different virtue.

12. USE THE POWER OF A PLEDGE

A pledge, especially if it’s repeated daily as a classroom ritual, can build classroom community and strengthen students’ commitment to doing the right thing.

The “Children’s Diversity Pledge” is an example of a pledge that helps students value the differences that enrich human community. The pledge teaches that we should all try to find the good in other people, just as we want them to find the good in us.

Children’s Diversity Pledge

- *I believe that all kids are different and special in their own way.*
- *I believe that all kids deserve to be loved, accepted, and respected for who they are.*
- *I will work on being a good friend, so that all children feel welcomed around me.*
- *I will not judge people because of where they live, the color of their skin, how they dress, their abilities, their spiritual beliefs, or whether they are a girl or a boy.*
- *I can and will find the good in all people.*
- *I will not tell or listen to jokes that make fun of other people.*
- *I will be a peacemaker in my family and school.*
- *I will show pride in my family and heritage.*
- *I will learn as much as I can about the family traditions of other kids in my school.⁹*

13. HAVE KIDS KEEP A GOOD DEEDS JOURNAL

One of the best ways to inhibit a negative behavior is to develop a positive habit that is its psychological opposite. It's hard to be mean to other people, for example, if you set out each day to perform acts of kindness.

Acting on that insight, St. Rocco Catholic School (Providence, Rhode Island), winner of a Blue Ribbon Award from the U.S. Department of Education, has its students keep a daily *Good Deeds Journal*. At the start of each day, students write in their Journal a good deed they did the day before in school, at home, or in the community.

In all subjects, teachers make a connection to the good deeds theme. In language arts, the teacher might comment on a good deed performed by a character in a story; in social studies, on a good deed performed by someone in the news. Students learn that a good deed can be anything that contributes to another person's happiness—something as simple as a smile.

A girl comments: "I like the *Good Deeds Journal* because it helps me to be more aware of helping others. I can even see an improvement in my friends because they are trying to be more courteous and kind to each other." A St. Rocco's parent says: "My children now readily shovel snow for our elderly neighbor without expecting or accepting money in return. They are also more sensitive about social issues when watching TV."

14. CELEBRATE KINDNESS

We celebrate what we value. Classrooms and schools that care about kindness find ways to recognize and honor it.

For example, Donna Funk, a special education teacher in Cortland, New York, gives each of her students a "LOOK WHAT I DID TODAY" page. To recognize positive actions she gives kids stickers (1" x 3" rectangles, each with a graphic, that she makes on her computer and prints out on adhesive label paper). Students put these stickers on their page so they can see at the day's end all the good things they did. Sample stickers: "I shared with someone," "I gave a compliment," "I listened to someone," "I let someone else go first," "I said excuse me," "I calmed myself down," "I was a good friend." Funk comments:

Most of my developmentally delayed students come to me unable to speak positively about themselves. When I would ask them about a particular positive action

they had just performed, they would typically respond, "I was good." The stickers give them language they can use to identify their specific accomplishments.

15. HAVE PEERS RECOGNIZE PEERS

When students recognize each other for acts of character, virtue has a better chance of becoming a peer norm rather than something kids do just to please adults.

One 3rd-grade teacher often ends the day with a 2-3 minute class meeting in which she asks, "Who has a good word for someone today?" On the board she has a list of character words: kind, caring, hard-working, determined, fair, generous, and so on. A student might say, "Sara was kind to me when she gave me some of her paper." Or, "Steve was determined to solve the math problem he got stuck on."

Many schools make a schoolwide effort to involve students in noticing other kids and adults performing "Acts of Character." Students write the act and the person's name on a printed form (placed everywhere in the building) and drop it in a box. As part of the morning announcements, students take turns drawing three or four forms from the box and reading what those persons did. Forms not drawn are sent to classroom teachers so they can pass them on to the students whose positive actions were reported.

16. USE A CLASS MEETING TO DISCUSS BULLYING

Despite a school's proactive efforts to prevent peer cruelty, some children will still engage in hurtful behavior and will need additional help in learning to act in a prosocial manner. The class meeting—in which the offending child can hear peers say what behaviors they like and dislike—is often more effective than teacher correction alone.

Peter Sullivan, a 2nd-grade teacher in central New York, had a student he believed was in the beginning stages of becoming a bully. Charles came from an unhappy home environment. He showed little respect for others' rights or feelings. He consistently invaded the personal space of other students and often grabbed or pushed to get what he wanted.

Teacher Sullivan describes how he used a class meeting to address this problem:

Charles was present but not singled out. Our ground rule was, "Give examples of bullying, but no names, please." I asked children to tell how they felt when they were

the victims of these behaviors. This discussion got us all on the same page: *No one likes to be bullied.*

Later that day, I met with Charles to discuss his bullying. I emphasized that I liked him but did not approve of this behavior. I asked him to remember and think about what kids said in our class meeting—how they felt when they're bullied. As we talked, I made a list of "Feelings About Being Bullied" on a piece of paper.

I asked Charles to carry this list in his pocket and read it at least once a day. We agreed to meet in a week to see how he is doing. I wanted Charles to know that I care about him and am serious about wanting him to succeed. His behavior has in fact begun to improve.

17. BUILD BONDS THROUGH BUDDY CLASSES

Many schools develop a caring community by using "buddy classes" to create nurturing relationships between big kids and little kids. These go a long way toward making the school feel like a family.

For example, a 5th-grade class might buddy up with a 3rd-grade class, a 3rd-grade class with a kindergarten, and so on. Older students help their younger buddies with schoolwork and do special projects together. Sometimes the older kids read to their younger buddies and sit with them during assemblies.

Says principal Bob Storrier, who uses buddies extensively at Enders Road Elementary (Manlius, New York): "These relationships give the older children a sense of responsibility and the younger ones a sense of security."

18. CREATE "SCHOOL FAMILIES"

St. Rita's K-8 Catholic School (Dayton, Ohio) groups its students in "families," one child from each grade (they say they got the idea from a public school). A 7th- and 8th-grade boy and girl serve as the "parents" and are actually called "Mom" and "Dad" by the younger children.

At the start of the school year, these family groups spend much of the first three days together in games and other activities that build bonds. During the rest of the year, the family groups come together for regular events (in a public school this might be weekly assemblies) and for special occasions such as holidays.

Principal Maryann Reismann comments:

At these events, the older students try to be good role models for the younger ones. In general, the older members of a family group look out for the little ones. They help them solve problems. They're glad to see them in the hall and on the playground. They're happy to see them when they return after an absence. There is no craziness at our school, just a very peaceful and loving atmosphere. We think much of that is due to our family groupings.

19. IMPLEMENT ADVISORY GROUPS

At the middle school level, friendship and inclusion are more important than ever. Therefore it's very important for schools to provide structures which ensure that no student gets left out.

Advisory groups are one good way to make sure every student has a home base. Advisories typically consist of an advisor and 8 to 12 students. Some advisories meet every day before school or during lunch; some meet less often. The advisory can address school issues, share good news, plan group activities (e.g., a field trip), discuss an educational TV series they're all watching or a book they're all reading, or talk about current events. Advisory provides every student with two things crucial for young adolescents: (1) a supportive peer group, and (2) an adult who knows and cares about the student as an individual.

A middle school advisory group also helps parents stay connected to the school at a time when parents' school involvement typically declines. The advisor usually has several scheduled meetings with the parent during the school year, is available for other meetings as needed, sends the report card home, and generally keeps parents updated about their child's academic progress and any problems.

Some middle schools tried an advisory system but dropped it when staff or students complained it wasn't working. A better solution: Conduct a survey of both staff and students, asking: "What do you like about advisory, and what would you change to make it better?" If middle schools don't have something like advisory that meets every student's need for inclusion, many students will look for intimacy and identity in gangs, drugs, or premature sex. Others will suffer a painful loneliness.

A recent publication with activities for advisory groups is Sarah Sadlow's *Advisor/Advisee Character Education* (www.CharacterEducation.com). For information on a well-designed advisory system that has evolved over three decades, contact Shoreham-Wading River Middle School (contact info to be added).

20. CREATE A SAFE AND RESPECTFUL SCHOOL BUS

How can a school promote respectful and responsible behavior on the school bus, which for many children has become a ride in terror?

Lynn Lisy-Macan describes how she tackled this challenge when she was principal of Brookside Elementary School (Binghamton, New York), a 1998 *National School of Character*:

In response to increasing bus problems, we initiated bus meetings three times a year to discuss appropriate bus behavior. We assigned each bus group to a room in the school. The bus driver and three other staff met with each group. At the first meeting, we did icebreaker activities to pair "bus buddies," kids who then sat together on the bus each day. This created a sense of community on the bus.

At the first meeting we brainstormed: "What does a safe and respectful bus ride look like?" "What does a safe and respectful bus ride sound like?" "What does it *not* look like and sound like?" The drivers talked about the rules they have and why those are important. Finally, we discussed: "*What can each of us do to help create a safe and respectful bus ride?*"

We made charts based on these discussions to refer to in later meetings. The second meeting took place before the snow flew—to discuss safety issues related to winter weather and to ask, "How are we doing in creating a safe and respectful ride?" If there were any behavior problems, we addressed those.

A third meeting was held in the spring to head off the end-of-the-year slide. In addition, all of our busses had signs that told students what our character Word of the Month was—plus its definition and a reminder that character is important on the bus, too.

"Bus behavior problems at our school," Macan says, "declined significantly."

The peer culture is a powerful teacher. If schools do not take proactive steps to shape a positive peer culture, the worst in human nature will often prevail. By contrast, when schools take deliberate steps to create a caring community, students can learn morality by living it every day. In such a community, virtues are not abstract words on a wall but emotional realities felt in the heart and experienced in relationships. And by placing respect and caring at the center of its moral life, the school meets the deep human need to belong. It becomes what every school ought to be: a place where respect

and kindness are normative, where exceptions to that are treated as a very serious matter, and where every student feels valued, safe, and significant.

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Other recommended resources: the March 2003 issue of *Educational Leadership*, devoted to “Creating Caring Schools,” and the 2002 report *Safe and Sound: An Educational Leader’s Guide to Evidence-Based Social and Emotional Learning Programs* (www.casel.org). See also www.peacebuilders.com

¹ Eli Newberger, *The men they will become* (Perseus Books: New York, 1999).

² Michael Thompson, *Best friends, worst enemies* (New York: Ballantine Books, 2001).

³ Charlene Giannetti and Margaret Sagarese, *Cliques: 8 steps to help your child survive the social jungle*. (New York: Broadway Books, 2001).

⁴ Dan Olweus, “A profile of bullying at school” (*Educational Leadership*, March 2003).

⁵ Darcia Bowman, “At school, a cruel culture,” *Education Week* (March 21, 2001).

⁶ Eric Schaps, Marilyn Watson, and Catherine Lewis, “A sense of community is key to effectiveness in character education,” *Journal of Staff Development* (Spring, 1996).

⁷ Olweus, op. cit.

⁸ Cited in an ABC television special on bullying, February, 2001.

⁹ Cultural Exchange Entertainment Corporation, 1994.