Bringing Youth to the Table in Bullying Prevention Policy Making

"Successful solutions to bullying will not come from the top down, but from the bottom up." – Fish, 18

Peace First was founded around a deep conviction: that **young people are natural problem-solvers** with the power and creative energy to make positive, lasting change. We know that each day, youth everywhere are taking action, looking beyond themselves and collaborating with others to create a more just and peaceful world.

Yet, far too often, these powerful stories go untold. Young people are dismissed or overlooked, **portrayed as victims to be protected or as perpetrators to be punished.** As a result, bullying prevention efforts often exclude the voices and perspective of those who are impacted most.

Peace First exists to change all that. **We believe that young people have critical lessons to teach us**, particularly around bullying prevention. By actively involving youth in these efforts, we can empower people of all ages to work together to design concrete, relevant policies to effectively prevent bullying. Through collective action, we can all play a part in creating safe, inclusive schools and communities where all are respected and valued.

About this Guide

As part of Bullying Prevention Month, Peace First reached out to members of our Community of Peacemakers- an online group of young people actively engaged in positive social change efforts- and sought their advice on how schools and communities can better bring youth to the table in bullying prevention policy and decision making.

Because young people are so often excluded from bullying prevention discussions, we have chosen to make youth voices the focal point of this guide. We hope you will join us in sharing their rich insight far and wide, and use their ideas to inform policymaking at schools and other youth-serving institutions across the country.

Find additional toolkits, lessons, activities and more at Peace First's Digital Activity Center (http://www.peacefirst.org/digitalactivitycenter/).

How to Use This Guide…

1. **Read the conversatio**n we had with our co-authors. Reflect on their thoughts to draw inspiration and ideas, and to challenge your own thinking.

2. **Share quotes** from this guide with your students and find out what ideas resonate with them.

3. **Want to get to work**? for some tips on how to begin engaging youth in your school or organization.

With Appreciation for Our Collaborators

Peace First would like to sincerely thank each member of the **Community of Peacemakers** who chose to share their insight with us in preparation for this guide. We are deeply inspired by your wisdom and advice, and honored to have had the opportunity to co-create this document with you.

We would like to thank the following young people for allowing us to share their responses in this guide: **Amit, Elise, Fish, Gerry, Jeremiah, and Scott.** to learn more about these incredible young changemakers.

We would also like to express our appreciation for the support and inspiration we received from the following young people: **Alex, DeAnna, Gianna, and Tyler.**

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Advice from the Community of Peacemakers: Questions and Answers

Peace First: What unique strengths do young people bring to discussions on how to prevent bullying in schools? What would you like adults to know about why including youth in these discussions is important?

Elise: "Young people bring **fresh ideas**, **first-hand experience**, and an **understanding** of their schools' issues. Adults need to know that no matter what they decide needs to happen, they will need dedicated student leaders to lead by example. Adults in schools set rules and attempt to enforce them, but they cannot see everything. **Students hold each other accountable more effectively**."

Jeremiah: "Young people bring first-hand experience on bullying in schools. Adults are the implementers and creators of rules but they must make the rules tailored for the situation. Young people can bring a refreshing and contemporary perspective on the issues that **affect them and matter to them**. Although young people lack significant experience on Earth they have more experience with bullying than adults who tend to be years removed from bullying."

Fish: "They know the tools of the trade. Increasingly, **bullying is proliferating online**, and the platforms on which bullying is perpetuating--from Facebook to ask.fm to Kik messenger to the now-defunct Formspring--are multiplying faster than many adults can keep up with them. Students, however, are **in tune with the evolution of these platforms**--and how they are being used to bully their peers--because they're using them themselves."

Amit: "When youth talk to youth, they **listen** more, **believe** more and **do** more."

PF: How would you like to see school administrators, legislators, and other adults work collaboratively with youth in bullying prevention policy design and decision-making?

Fish: "Every stage of a bullying policy process--from identifying the root causes of the problem to exploring possible solutions to strategizing implementation--needs to include youth input if it is to be effective. It is especially important for educators and policymakers to engage and partner with youth in advertising and implementing new policies and processes--students are much more likely to respond positively to a change where **their peers, and not adults, are at the forefront**."

Jeremiah: "I would like for there to be an **open forum and a level dialogue** between adults and adolescents. Moreover adults and youth can't be looked as two separate groups; they must combine and fight the injustices they see."

Gerry: "I would love for our administrators to give youth a little more power…If they would listen to kids' needs, the programs may be much much more effective. I love to go to schools and talk to the kids because **they can relate to an 11-year old** and believe what I say. But when we have adults that are very smart and educated telling kids that they know exactly what the kids are going through, it doesn't sound sincere…"

Advice from the Community of Peacemakers: Questions and Answers

PF: What mistakes do you think adults sometimes make when they create anti-bullying policies or rules in schools?

Scott: "Too often the focus is on one individual and one incident. Instead, bullying should be viewed and treated as a **systemic problem**."

Elise: "Adults use the term 'bullying' without describing it. It can be understood as an extremely abstract term. Instead of just scaring students not to participate in 'bullying,' adults need to educate their students on what bullying really looks like, and present them with multiple perspectives of how it looks. They also need to have open discussions on how to tackle it, and positive ideas to prevent bullying through school community building, instead of just setting policies and punishment for when it does happen. **Scaring students into not participating, without providing them with a framework for rising above bullying, will not work.**"

Jeremiah: "The biggest problem is saying bullying nowadays isn't so severe because it tends to be over the internet rather than more physical bullying. **A person's perception is their truth**, if a person thinks their problems are big then you have to respect that."

Fish: "Additionally, **zero-tolerance and other excessively strict policies** often have the unfortunate effect of undermining broader anti-bullying efforts. When the consequences are especially severe, there is incredible pressure on victims and bystanders not to report incidents--both socially imposed and self-imposed. It's the classic 'law of the playground' mentality at work: You don't rat out your buddy--even if they are your abuser--especially when you know the punishment will be severe. Harsh consequences also feed into an unfortunate '**us vs. them' mentality** between students and administrators, which cripples the collaboration and understanding necessary for successful anti-bullying efforts. On the other hand, **restorative justice-based policies and other, more progressive forms of discipline** will help destigmatize reporting and spark understanding, respect, and cooperation between students and administrators."

Advice from the Community of Peacemakers: Questions and Answers

PF: What specific actions can school administrators, legislators, and other adults take to make sure that youth voices are at the center of discussions about bullying prevention?

Jeremiah: "School administrators, legislators, and other adults need to first **acknowledge youth voices**, then not disregard what they hear, and finally act on what they hear. There have been numerous states that have passed 'bullying' laws, laws that make certain bullying actions illegal; this is great in theory but unfortunately almost none of the lawmakers consulted the people the laws were aimed at protecting, mainly bullied children when drafting up the bills to be voted on. None of the respective state legislatures had **a general assembly where the people the laws were targeted for spoke out to give their opinions and suggestions**…The same theory applies to school administrators, they need to hear **the voices of the people they want to protect** in order to protect them."

Scott: "Committees are the usual decision-making body, and they often include student volunteers. Sadly, those who have been bullied are often unwilling to volunteer for such a committee. Therefore, it would be preferable to thoughtfully consider **anonymous suggestions** from students."

Elise: "I would like to see school administrators, legislators, and other adults working to design **extra-curricular programs where teens of all backgrounds can come together and build relationships**…I know that schools are focused on meeting curriculum needs and reaching standardized test scores, but students will not thrive until they are in a safe and supportive environment. These extra-curriculars will bring a community to those students. These extra-curricular programs should be led by students…When students are the ones leading the movement, it is significantly more effective than when students are expected to follow their teachers' lead."

Fish: "Ensure that every committee that meets to discuss bullying and anti-bullying solutions has at least one youth voice, preferably multiple, to ensure that the discussion is well-informed from a student perspective. Let students be leaders in crafting policy, especially in developing community-specific solutions (as opposed to state or national ones). Provide them with resources and constant guidance, but **let their thoughts and ideas shape the end product**. Unless they are directly engaged, they may hang back in conversation and **prefer to assent** to other solutions. Involve students in the implementation of the policy—whether as teachers for a new anti-bullying curriculum, or as mediators for conflict intervention programs… [This] will engender a sense of trust and respect between students and adults that is indispensable to the success of bullying programs."

Gerry: "Start **anonymous bully boxes in a safe place** so kids can report bullying w/o putting themselves in danger for retaliation, start Kids Resource clubs or something similar where kids can get together during lunch a few times a week or after school and have a safe environment where they can go and ask for advice."

Advice from the Community of Peacemakers: Questions and Answers

PF: What bullying prevention strategies or programs have you seen that have worked really well? What do you think made them successful?

Jeremiah: "The **'We Are' campaign** by Aaron Cremeans. It's genius, the success behind it was getting the schools in his area to collaborate under the banner of 'Kindness is cool,' and within each school students were bonded together condemn bullying. Teachers endorsed this movement and school officials used the movement as a reference when creating anti-bullying policies. A fantastic example of teacher-student collaboration and a campaign that spread past a small group of people."

Amit: "The purpose of a **My Name My Story (MNMS) School Club** is to create 'A student led, Social Leadership Club that inspires empathy and unity in the student body and community, while developing leaders.' The club engages students, faculty and the community in the spirit of 'inspiring the next generation of leaders' and all actions of the club must be aligned with the MNMS philosophy of 'Hope- Believe- Succeed- Inspire.' What makes MNMS successful is the fact that it is youth led and run; the program harnesses the ability to inspire empathy in the entire student body rather than only those involved in the bullying. MNMS uses positive words in all our campaigns so we do not run 'anti-this' or 'anti-that' campaigns, and perhaps most importantly that the program focuses on the root cause of bullying, which is the lack of empathy."

Elise: "**Unified Theater**, an organization with which I have been involved for ten years, has built the most amazing community at my school. I have never experienced or witnessed bullying at my high school. Students support each other and see each other as individual people with their own talents and struggles, because we have such a tight-knit community through Unified Theater, where students lead their peers to use creativity to redefine inclusion and build teams. It's successful because it's a noncompetitive environment, it's led by students, and it's a positive program that does not focus on treatment of a problem, and instead prevents it."

Advice from the Community of Peacemakers: Questions and Answers

PF: If you could give just one piece of advice to educators about bullying prevention, what would it be?

Gerry: "Don't talk down on kids and practice active listening. Don't just automatically disregard their complaints because you are busy or not in the mood – **you may save a life if you listen** and pay attention."

Jeremiah: "Be there for your students, **having someone who will listen means the world** to everyone. Be there for others because you know what it's like to have no one there for you."

Amit: "Although we realize there is a clear need for programs that support the bullied and helps them deal with bullies, ...we [must] continue to focus on the cause- 'the **lack of empathy**.'"

Scott: "Make every student feel **empowered, important, appreciated and supported**. Give every student the opportunity to demonstrate their own unique set of talents and skills. If every child's self-esteem is high, it is less likely that anyone will feel the need to bully, and it is less likely that a target will be affected by a bully's actions."

Fish: "Successful solutions to bullying will not come from the top down, but from the bottom up. **Peer-driven solutions** will be more authentic, palatable, and sensitive for their fellow students, who are likely to dismiss the ideas of adults who they feel don't adequately understand their circumstances. When the students are driving the solution, everyone wins."

Elise: "I would advise educators to think positively. What is the **root cause of bullying**? To me, it's competition, dehumanizing peers, and desensitization. By **building communities** where teens can see each other as individual people and breaking down traditional barriers between kids, you will make a huge difference in the main cause of bullying. Instead of waiting until it happens and punishing students who engage in bullying, don't let it become a problem!"

Conclusion: Lessons Learned

Creating this guide with the Community of Peacemakers has taught us so much about how to effectively bring young people to the table in bullying prevention policy making. Below are some of the lessons Peace First is taking away from this process. We invite you to share how this guide has influenced you and your work! Email us at dac@peacefirst.org.

1. Make sure you are truly valuing the voices of your youth representatives.

- ❑ Give adult representatives and youth representatives equal opportunities to speak during meetings, and make a point to try out as many ideas suggested by youth representatives as those suggested by adult representatives.
- ❑ Help students lead by creating opportunities for mentorship and learning throughout the policymaking process.
- ❑ Ensure that youth are heavily involved in implementing and monitoring the success of any policy you choose.

2. Rather than telling young people what *not* to do, acknowledge and foster their incredible potential to create positive change.

- ❑ Instead of using an "anti-bullying" framework, use positive and descriptive language that tells students the values and behaviors you expect to see from them.
- ❑ Create programs that bring young people together across difference to build relationships.
- ❑ Invite young people to be the face of your campaign—engage them in spreading the word, creating materials, and shaping the language you use.

3. Create safe spaces in your school for young people who have been targeted by bullying.

- ❑ Make sure there are safe and anonymous ways for all young people to participate in policy discussions.
- ❑ Show your support and build your understanding of young people's experiences by being an active and compassionate listener.

About Our Co-Authors:

Meet six amazing young people creating change .

Amit, age 15:

Amit is the founder of My Name My Story (MNMS), a youth leadership organization with a mission to inspire empathy and unity among youth. MNMS hosts "Inspire Empathy" talks, book drives, random act of kindness campaigns, and many other projects. MNMS now has 80 School Club Founding Leaders with hundreds of club members in 14 schools reaching over 13,000 students in schools across the country. To learn more about Amit, visit http://www.mynamemystory.org/.

Elise, age 21:

Elise is a student and actor who has been working with an organization called Unified Theater for 10 years. Unified Theater brings together young people with and without disabilities to work side by side writing and producing theatrical productions. After many years of participating in Unified Theater's programs, Elise now serves on the Board of Directors.

Fish, age 18:

Fish, a college student, is the Executive Director and co-founder of the Teaching Peace Initiative (TPI). TPI recruits and trains high-achieving high school students to teach a peace education curriculum in local elementary and middle schools. To learn more about Fish, visit http://www.teachingpeaceinitiative.com.

Gerry, age 11:

Gerry is an advocate against bullying in schools. He produced and directed two movies, *Day of Silence* and *Born to Bully*, and he is launching Kids Resource Clubs, spaces where students can come to solve problems together, in schools across the country. To learn more about Gerry, visit http://www.kidsresource.org/.

Jeremiah, age 18:

Jeremiah is a high school student who started the Twitter account "westhighbros" to send anonymous compliments to his classmates. Soon Jeremiah enlisted several friends to help, and together they used compliments to promote compassion, unity, and acceptance at their school   Their idea has spread to 58 other schools, impacting over 90,000 students!

Scott, age 16:

Scott is a high school student whose experience with dyslexia led him to connect with and support other youth who have dyslexia. His projects have included a website for dyslexic youth, a nationwide discussion group, free tutoring for young people with dyslexia, and an eBook that helps children understand and celebrate learning differences. To learn more about Scott, visit http://dyslexickids.net/.