

BULLY-PROOFING the BUS

Each year in the United States, 444,000 school buses transport 24 million students to and from schools. Collectively these buses travel 4.3 billion miles daily, with only one adult to get them to their destinations safely.

In recent years, violence on school buses has increased sharply. Not only are students inflicting harm verbally, physically, emotionally and sexually on one another, bus incidents involving parents have also increased.¹ What are some factors that contribute to this significant problem? More importantly, what can we do to prevent this problem?

Bullies are everywhere, but they thrive on school buses, where they have a captive audience and only one adult present. This adult's first responsibility is on making sure that every child, even the bullies, arrive at school and home safely and without incident.

Bus drivers and school administrators agree that prevention is key. Targets, witnesses, parents, drivers and schools can help prevent and reduce bullying on the bus by working to develop a positive culture.

- Define bullying and make sure everyone know the definition: one person or more intending harm, humiliation and/or intimidation to others with words and/or actions.
- Create immediate and consistent consequences for misbehavior. Make sure parents are aware of guidelines and post them on buses.
- Recognize the importance of dealing with low-level aggression, such as name-calling, put downs, or negative humor in preventing more serious offenses.
- Train drivers to de-escalate aggression as much as possible. Make sure they know where police and fire stations are along the route in the event they need help; train them in safety procedures when weapons are present.
- Help troublemakers become peacemakers by giving the responsibility.
- Train students to be vigilant, caring witnesses—teach empathy; if students take responsibility for safety, they can work together to stop violence.

Parents, drivers and schools can also prepare children against bullying.

- Teach children to ignore bullies if possible. Bullies often stop if they don't have an audience.
- Rehearse with children how they can deflect bullying—practice walking confidently so as not to appear to be a victim. Teach them ways to use humor to disarm bullies.
- Teach the difference between being a passive bystander, thus providing an audience for a bully, and being an active witness, or “ally”. Children will learn to sit with allies, making them feel safer.

Bullies are devious by design. They can be thwarted by creating a climate where opportunities are limited, where consequences are clear and where positive behavior is rewarded. When drivers can focus on safety, and students arrive without witnessing or experiencing acts of violence, everyone wins.

