

Section Three: Timely Information

Encouraging Communication

If no significant or immediate response occurs to bullying, harassment, intimidation and other violence, all those involved (directly or indirectly) may conclude that such behaviour is acceptable. Victims, believing that nothing can or will be done to stop the behaviours, may feel helpless. Aggressors may see their behaviours as acceptable forms of self-expression or successful ways to solve problems. Bystanders may become increasingly unwilling to intervene and/or report, thus reinforcing the code of silence that enables bullying, harassment, intimidation or other misconduct to thrive.

Effective schools address these issues by encouraging communication and empathy, and promoting responsibility and accountability. Effective response strategies facilitate the safe reporting of safety concerns, and encourage victims to speak up and report. Bystanders are encouraged to intervene and report. Mechanisms are in place to enable all parties involved in an incident to communicate and resolve the situation safely. Responses support and complement school and school board policies and in turn are supported and complemented by those policies.

Keeping Records

Routinely kept records of reported safety concerns and incidents of violence provide documentation about the nature of the concerns or incidents, when and by whom the reports were received and what actions were taken in response. Schools and school boards track violent incidents in a variety of forms, and use that information in conjunction with other measures to monitor school safety and plan for improvements.

Sharing Information

Managing the flow of information related to student safety in schools is a delicate balancing act. Deciding how much information can, and should, be shared with which people, and how many people, at any given time is a frequent dilemma for school personnel. Saying too much, too soon, to too many has the potential to harm the reputations of individuals and the school. It can also disrupt the sense of order the school works so hard to maintain. Saying too little, to too few, too late can lead to other regrets.

Personal privacy needs to be protected – yet people need to be alerted to watch for indications of potential danger that might otherwise go unnoticed. What is certain is that the school must have well-established and well-known mechanisms in place to receive (openly, confidentially and anonymously), record and act on information about concerns for student safety. What is equally certain is that the school must take action promptly and firmly at the first indication of bullying, harassment or intimidation – ignoring it is not an appropriate response.

The criminal justice system for young persons emphasizes, among other principles, "enhanced procedural protection to ensure that young persons are treated fairly and that their rights, including their right to privacy, are protected."

Youth Criminal Justice Act (2002) Declaration of Principle 3. (1)(b)(iii)

Recommended Resources

Focus on Bullying: A Prevention Program for Elementary School Communities

See – Develop a School-Wide Plan for Bullying Prevention (Pages 15-57)
and Respond Directly to Bullying Situations (Pages 59-83)

Focus on Harassment and Intimidation:

Responding to Bullying in Secondary School Communities

See – Chapter 3/Taking Action, Part I
Preparing for Action (Pages 23-40)
Chapter 6/Taking Action, Part IV
Responding (Pages 97-115)

Sample Forms presented in Appendix D have been adapted from these resources.

Reports - In

Schools can reduce the likelihood that incidents of violence, bullying, harassment and intimidation will occur by conducting safe school initiatives and establishing caring and orderly school environments. But staff members can't intervene in a timely manner to actually stop (or head off) specific incidents unless they know about them. Heightened concerns for student safety in recent years have led many schools to:

- **increase the visibility and availability of adults:** adult presence beyond the classroom – in hallways, the cafeteria, gymnasium, and on the school grounds helps the school keep a watchful eye on students in unstructured situations. It also makes student – adult conversations a natural and frequent occurrence and increases the probability that an adult will hear or be told some important information.
- **make it easier to report safety concerns:** students know that all staff members are prepared to receive reports (verbally or in writing) of safety concerns in a professional manner and to convey the information to the appropriate personnel as soon as possible.
- **make it safer to report safety concerns:** anonymous “safety tip” boxes are placed strategically around the school, and confidential “safety tip” voicemail numbers are published. Both are checked frequently by a “tellable” adult.
- **make reporting safety concerns common practice:** a code of social justice (as opposed to a code of silence) is openly valued in the school, as is the expected behaviour that students will inform a “tellable” adult, in a timely manner, of incidents of bullying, harassment or intimidation.

Records - Kept

Traditionally, schools maintained records of student conduct in the files of individual students. While this system made it relatively simple to review behaviour records on a student-by-student basis, it was of limited use in providing a sense of how things were going in the school as a whole. In recent years most schools have implemented some sort of information system that enables them to examine conduct-related data on a school-wide basis. Analyses can be made by type of infraction, date, frequency and consequences imposed, as well as student-by-student. Schools document violent incidents, including bullying, harassment, intimidation and other serious misconduct, as well as some less serious disruptive behaviours in this manner.

Schools and school boards track violent incidents in a variety of forms, and use that information in conjunction with other measures to monitor school safety and plan for improvements.

In addition, most schools keep a safety log, which details reports of safety concerns. This documentation provides a record of the nature of each report, when and by whom it was received and the action that was taken in response to it. Traditionally, entries in these school safety logs pertained to buildings, grounds and equipment (e.g., loose floor tiles, fire extinguishers, earthquake drills) – things that could have an impact on the physical safety of students. With recent concerns for students' emotional and psychological safety, many schools now also formally document the receipt of reports of bullying, harassment and intimidation and other forms of violence in their safety logs. Specific details of these reports, however, are kept separately as they usually contain confidential information.

Together, these two information systems assist schools and school boards to monitor safety issues and plan comprehensive strategies to address them.

A key principle of the education system's accountability structure is that school boards employ evidence-based decision making, using a combination of provincial measures and measures relevant to the local community context.

Over time, records-kept enable schools and school boards to assess the impact of school responses and initiatives taken to make schools as safe, caring and orderly as possible. They also provide a basis for accountability.

*Sample recording and reporting forms are included in **Appendix D**.*

Reports - Out

As school staff members are expected to help make the school as safe as possible, it is important that they be informed of new safety concerns in a timely manner. It is assumed that such information will be shared on a professional need-to-know basis and that staff members will respect privacy rights and keep information about individual students inside the school.

There may be instances, however, when it is important and/or necessary for some information about student behaviour to be conveyed to one or more adults outside the school. Such notification practices are usually governed by board policy and school procedures. As a rule, in instances of serious misconduct, the parents of the offender are informed. If the serious misconduct involves bullying, harassment or intimidation, the parents of both student offenders and student victims are informed and involved in resolving the situation. In addition, it is common practice for the school to reconnect, on a confidential basis, to thank the individual who reported the issue and advise him/her that it has been addressed.

School board policy may require that school district officials be advised of certain types of misconduct. The school may also have legal obligations to inform the police or agents of other public service organizations about the details of the misconduct and identities of the individuals involved. Again, it is assumed that this information will be shared on a professional need-to-know basis.

Despite the best efforts of the school to safeguard the privacy of its students, some information about serious misconduct on the part of one or more students may become known informally within the school community. At such times it may be important and/or necessary for the school to reassure members of the school community that school officials are aware of the misconduct and are taking appropriate actions to address it. In such instances, students' identities and specific details of the incident would not be disclosed.

Finally, school boards may choose to share information with their communities about safe school-related goals. To enable boards to identify trends and track progress toward achievement of safety goals, they may require schools to provide information about the number and nature of violent incidents in schools and the response. Here again, students' identities should be kept confidential.