

## **Name It 2 Change It: Bullying Prevention:**

*A few words about our approach and thinking*

Our approach to bullying prevention is informed by the practices and theoretical foundation of narrative practice. Given this we have adopted some significant shifts in our approach which in turn we hope shift the bullying prevention conversation in important ways.

1. Foremost we have adopted the understanding that *the problem is the problem and the person is the person*. Given this we locate problems in interaction informed and shaped by context and as products of culture at any given time. The problem is not located in the person as a product of their personality, fixed qualities, their moral detachment, or as some sort of reflection of their deficit. Rather the use and participation in bullying actions is a choice available to people complicated by context and cultural discourses- the taken for granted ways of being in the world. This is an externalized understanding of the problem. Thus people are ‘in relationship with the problem’ rather than ‘being the problem’.
2. The choice to participate in bullying is shaped by how youth have come to see themselves and shaped by the meanings they hold about life events. Certain ways of being in relationship become more known and enacted than others overtime. Those more problematic ways of being in relationship can become cemented as community members respond to the youth in ways that fit with the youth’s sense of spoiled identity. Often those responses will involve adult misuses of power, social and spatial separation, and othering. Although those responses may work for some people sometimes in some circumstances they do little to address the complexity of the problem in a lasting way. Those responses may collude with Bullying’s intentions. Those practices are evidenced by ‘no bully zone’ signs, suspensions, relocation, and consequences that do not provide learning about other ways to be in relationship.
3. This externalized understanding also invites a different way of *talking* about bullying. No longer are we using labels of ‘the bully’, ‘the bystander’ and the ‘victim’. These labels invite stock plots of the characters, stereotypes, erasing times when the youth demonstrate other ways of being in relationships. They in fact can invite totalizing accounts of the youth, again colluding with Bullying’s attempts to assign a spoiled identity to youth. They invite dividing blame between parties involved. The language we have used most often refers to ‘the youth who uses bullying’, ‘the youth who experiences bullying’ and ‘the youth who sees bullying happening’.
4. This shift in language is important as it invites back the sense of personal agency (I have choice) youth can employ in choosing to use bullying or choosing to defy it, challenge it, and resist it’s invitations. It moves away from totalizing accounts of youth typing them as a stock plot bad character. Youth, families and

- authorities can join together against the Problem rather than each other in their attempts to address Bullying. Choice is restored. Moving towards talking about someone who has ‘experienced bullying’ as opposed to ‘being a victim’ resists overshadowing the many ways the youth has perhaps resisted, coped, and refused to abandon their own values and morals in the face of assault, injustice, and fear. When those refusals, resistances, coping, and responses come out of the shadows they provide a much more resilient and safe territory of identity and foundation from which the youth can continue to address the problems at hand.
5. An aspect of narrative practice is to engage in the deconstruction of cultural discourses that may often go unexamined and as such contribute to the endurance and escalation of the problem. With an externalized understanding of bullying many discourses supported in Westernized culture become part of the broader conversation. Ideas such as personal gain, competition, adultism, blame, hierarchy, normalizing judgment, can now be unmasked, examined and brought into question. We can examine how these cultural ideas limit people’s solutions, can indirectly encourage disrespect, and invite people to judge according to what’s normal rather than what’s moral. This is not a practice of problematizing these cultural forces but rather an exercise in making them more visible so they have less domination over the youth and population.
  6. The exploration and activation of local knowledge is a central aspect of narrative practice. With this in mind our bullying prevention project sought to learn from the youth their experiences of the problem and the many ways they respond in addition to their ideas about how to develop a prevention plan. To provide an arena for this consultation we held two Youth Festivals in which the youth learned about bullying and participated in facilitated discussion of an externalized understanding of bullying. They were asked questions such as, What does bullying want youth to think about themselves and the world? What do the youth know about themselves that helps them to resist and escape Bullying’s intentions for them? Their responses provided an ‘experience near’ personal description of the problem and local, grassroots responses and proposals for action. You can read many of these accounts in the book *We Want You To Know: Kids talk about bullying* edited by Deb Ellis.
  7. Phase two of this initiative provided the youth a forum for further exploration, learning and a scaffold to bring their proposals for action into action. We adopted *a youth engagement approach* seeking youth to come together as a committee to work with a facilitator and the larger Community Bullying Prevention Committee. In narrative community practice the linking of lives in accord with common themes is often an outcome of the work. In adoption of a youth engagement approach our youth have an arena to come together bringing with them their unique experiences, ideas, and common values of safety, justice, inclusion, community, education, and respect. This linking assists to erode the sense of

isolation that Bullying benefits from and provides an arena within which youth can develop leadership skills, supports, and communities of concern.

8. Moving away from the popular “Stand Up” call as there is an implicit aggressive undertone and implication that “Standing Down” is problematized. What values could “Standing Down” be a reflection of in the case of a youth experiencing bullying? Could it be a reflection of self preservation, trying to not make it worse (lessen the circumstances), avoidance as a means to escape, silence as a means to preserve comfort? What does “Standing Down” mean for the youth who sees Bullying happening? Could it reflect the value of personal safety? Could it reflect ones preference for safety in their own world? Does it obscure the many ways these youth put their values of respect, kindness, inclusion to work outside of the bullying episode? We urge to “play a part” in bullying prevention or to take a step. Playing a part invites the person into *many* possible roles. The role of providing assistance and support, the role of protector, the role of questioner, the role of non-involvement to preserve personal safety. Take a step, invites youth and adults to step into a bullying prevention role. Many roles are available to the youth/person, the role of safety advocate, the role of aftercare, the role of alarm, the role of intervention, the role of ...? Youth may go to authorities after the fact. Bullying prevention is an ongoing project as well as in each moment.