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*HOT TOPIC: RESPONDING TO BULLYING*

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A Scout is helpful, friendly, courteous, and kind.

Though these are pillars of the Scout law, we know that our participants are not immune to lapses, and sometimes we witness moments of bullying behavior. As Scouters, we sometimes wait to intervene in order to allow a Scout to advocate for themselves or to allow youth leaders or peers to step up. Maybe we hesitate to step in to avoid embarrassing or making matters worse for the Scout being bullied. And sometimes we fail to act because we just don't know what to do.

In order to make Scouting a place of safety and comfort for all, it is imperative that we are prepared to respond. In recognition of National Bullying Prevention Month, this *Hot Topic* reviews techniques that Scouters must Be Prepared to use to intervene in bullying behavior when it occurs.

### Recognize

Bullying happens when someone uses their power and position to frighten, embarrass, harass, or threaten another person. Bullying can take many forms: verbal, social, physical, group, criminal, or cyberbullying. These actions have no place in Scouting.

Youth who bully often operate in the open because they think what they're doing enhances their status in the group. (It doesn't.) However, some youth who bully—especially online—act in secret.

The *Scouts BSA Handbook* lists ways you might be able to tell that a Scout is being bullied that every adult Scouter should be familiar with (see pages 405–406).

### Respond

The *Scouts BSA Handbook* teaches Scouts that to uphold the Scout Law, they should never bully *and* that they should help to stop bullying when it's happening to people around them. It shares some simple actions they can take to stop bullying if they feel safe:

- **Be an “upstander,” not a bystander.** Instead of saying nothing, which can make the person who bullies think that their behavior is OK, tell them to stop. Say you don't like it and that it isn't funny.
- **Avoid bullying back.** It won't help to use mean names or actions, and it could make things worse.

If Scouts don't feel safe, which includes worrying about becoming the bully's next target if they speak up, they are advised to:

- Say kind words to the person being bullied in order to be a friend and help them understand it's not their fault.
- Tell the person being bullied to talk to someone about what happened.
- Speak up to the other people who saw the bullying if they were laughing or joining in.
- Tell a trusted adult.

***That trusted adult is likely to be you.*** The person being bullied needs help from an adult, and the person doing the bullying probably does, too. When adults respond quickly and consistently to bullying behavior, they send the message that it is not acceptable. Research shows this can stop bullying behavior over time. So, what can you do to help?

- **Intervene immediately.** Don't ignore it or assume youth—including the unit's youth leaders—can work it out without adult help.
  - Separate the youth involved, and make sure everyone is safe.
  - Stay calm and model respectful behavior. Reassure the youth involved, including bystanders.
  - If members of the unit's youth leadership team intervene, remember that adult Scouters must monitor and guide their leadership techniques and ensure that BSA policies are followed.
- **Get the facts.** Keep all the involved youth separate. Get the story from several sources, both adults and youth. Listen without blaming.
  - Don't call the act "bullying" while you are trying to understand what happened.
  - Don't force other youth to say publicly what they saw or question the youth involved in front of other youth.
  - Don't make the youth involved apologize or patch up relations on the spot.
- **Support the youth involved.**
  - Support youth who are bullied. Listen to them closely, and assure them it's not their fault and you want to help. Give advice about how the youth might react if the bullying occurs again. Work together to resolve the situation and protect them.
  - Address bullying behavior. Make sure the child knows what the problem behavior is and that it is wrong and harms others. Calmly tell the child that bullying will not be tolerated. Model respectful behavior when addressing the problem. Work with the youth to understand some of the reasons they bullied, and involve them in making amends or repairing the situation.
- **Be persistent.** Because bullying is behavior that repeats or has the potential to be repeated, it takes consistent effort to ensure that it stops.
- **Create a culture.** Make it clear, through words and actions, that bullying has no place in your unit. Discuss ethical dilemmas involving bullying situations during unit meetings or outings so that Scouts understand how to recognize them, grow in empathy, learn why and how to be an upstander, and develop the skills and courage to take action. Setting the tone and expectations for your unit in this way can be a great prevention tool.

## Report

Documenting an incident and how it was handled on the unit level can be helpful, especially if anything were to escalate later on. Notify parents of youth who were involved as appropriate. Unit leaders should make sure they understand when an incident meets BSA and/or state law requirements for filing an immediate report with their council.

## Resources

- [StopBullying.gov](https://www.stopbullying.gov) offers a variety of available training and information materials to Scouts and adult leaders that can help you and your troop learn more about how to stop bullying.
- BSA's Bullying Awareness webpage offers factsheets and training resources for Scouts and Scouters: <https://www.scouting.org/training/youth-protection/bullying/>.