

Mental Health Programme for Schools on Bullying

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Abstract

This mental health program on "Bullying" consists of multiple sessions to be conducted in the month of October as one session per week, starting from October 10 (World Mental Health Day) for classes 9-12. This program is designed keeping in mind the broader context of "bullying culture" in formal and informal spaces both inside and outside the school. It will help in initiating the conversation around the prevalent issues related to bullying amongst students and teachers. These sessions will provide a safe space to students in creating positive self-concept, understanding themselves as well as others and confronting uncomfortable situations that involve unfair acts, mean verbal remarks etc. It will give them a platform where through activities, they will learn to manage their emotions and engage in honest communication, thereby creating an empathetic attitude towards the bully and the bullied. It will also open up the scope of reflecting and discussing prominent issues with a focus on problem-solving instead of playing the endless blame game. This program intends to develop accountability in students for their words/actions and also equips them with various life skills that will help them in challenging the bullying culture.

Introduction/Rationale

Schools are an extension of the primary safe space (home and family) in which the child grows up and learns to engage with the outside world. It shapes the social identity of the child by providing ample opportunities to express his/her individual and collective sense of self. The child experiences school as a microcosm of society that contributes to his/her social development in many ways. Children are prepared there for life to come and face the world. But in the same way, school has the potential to impart low self-esteem, negative self-concept, indifferent and insensitive attitudes or belief systems towards the self and others while shaping their identities.

Bullying is a prevalent phenomenon in schools among students that perpetuate in many forms. It can be physical, verbal or, in contemporary times, cyber on individual or group level. The power relations, formal and informal, lead to misuse of the strength and support that, even though noticed, goes unaddressed. The bystanders unintentionally increase the support system of the bully by not taking any action even if they feel the actions taking place are morally wrong. The person bullied can be affected physically, mentally and emotionally not being able to cope with the situation. The students bullying, being bullied and the onlookers, all lack some or the other life skills needed for a mentally healthy life.

Factors responsible for Bullying

1. Insecurities around Body Image, Self and Identity.
2. Discrimination based on Race, Caste, Religion, Gender, Sexuality, Disability.
3. Ignorant and insensitive attitude towards others.
4. Manifestation of one's weaknesses on others to appear cool, strong and popular.
5. Unrealistic notions of beauty shaped by popular media.

This mental health program is designed to help students understand how self-esteem is shaped and influenced, how everyone unknowingly is a part of bullying-culture and helping them develop some coping strategies after identifying their own position in this structure.

Life skills development

The program emphasizes on the following life skills in the procedure: empathy, self-awareness, critical thinking, problem solving and development of interpersonal relationships.

Objectives of the program:

1. To sensitize students against bullying culture.
2. To make students aware of the acts counted as bullying.

3. To strengthen their critical and emotional thinking.
4. To equip students to stand against any bullying incident in or outside school by fellow students, seniors and teachers.

Broad plan of the program:

1. Four-day program
2. Four sessions: with class 9, 10, 11 and 12 students,

Aspects to be covered in the sessions:

The first session will be reading- based and understanding Bullying theoretically. The students will engage in discussions while the teachers of the school may also be involved in this session.

The second session aims at developing self-awareness in students and acknowledging the fact that everyone of us has something or other to be proud of and feel happy about. The second activity in this session helps students to identify how they would react to some uncomfortable situations and seek alternative ways for it.

The third session is designed for students to empathize with others' perspectives and be sensitive about their feelings.

The fourth session empowers students with some effective communication skills to handle difficult situations. Their skills of problem-solving, communication and negotiation are put to test through a set of two activities.

Session 1 - Theoretical Base

Specific Objectives:

1. To reflect on students' understanding of Bullying.
2. To be aware about the different types of Bullying and the probable consequences of Bullying.

Activity: Open Discussion (30 Minutes)

In the first session of the mental health programme some news articles will be read and presented after the students have shared their understanding of Bullying. Articles will be discussed in great detail to sensitise and inform students about Bullying.

These news articles may include the following:

“A Teacher’s Thoughts on Our New National Culture of Bullying” (The Wire, May 7, 2019)

“Is your child being bullied? Deal with it before it’s too late!” (The Indian Express, August 6,2018)

“Anti-Bullying Laws in India” (<https://blog.ipleaders.in/bullying/>)

Students will be encouraged to point out the issues identified in relation to Bullying from the above readings. This will help students realise and vocalise their concerns along with finding solutions to handle them. The facilitator will also get insights into the thinking processes of students which will help her in addressing the upcoming sessions.

Session 2 - Self- Awareness

Specific Objectives:

1. To make them recognise their strengths and what they are good at.
2. To boost their self-esteem through acceptance of self and others.
3. To learn ways to manage one’s emotions.
4. To empathise with the situation of others.
5. To critically think and appreciate the perspective of others.

Activity 1: Creating Positive Self Concept (30 Minutes)

Students will be asked to reflect on five positive points about themselves and their mates. The facilitator will encourage learners to take some time and think about them in silence without consulting them with their friends. They will be asked to use words describing their internal characteristics, like “I am a helpful person,” “I cannot see people in pain,” “I say good jokes” or “I always keep secrets” “I am a good dancer”.

The facilitator will encourage students to share these points, both about themselves and their mates. She will tell everyone that we all feel good when others value and appreciate us for reasons we are not aware of. It is equally important for all of us to recognize our special abilities and feel good about them even when others fail to see them in us.

Ask the students if they have ever thought about themselves this way. Some students may say yes, others may say no. Discuss with them how we seldom sit down to think and list what is special about us - our talents, abilities and what we do best. The facilitator may also stress on how and why is it important to know one’s own strengths and also appreciate other people’s strengths.

Activity 2: Managing Emotions (30 Minutes)

Students will be asked to reflect on incidents of Bullying that may have happened to them or a friend. Encourage them to share the emotions or feelings attached to those incidents or events,

allowing them to freely associate their feelings in a group of three. Facilitator will ask some of the students to describe the event and the feeling associated with the event in a sentence.

For example:

- I felt sad when a senior started calling me Black Beast and even encouraged others too to do the same.
- I felt ashamed when everybody stared at me the day, I was wearing a skirt. Some of them even laughed and shouted Fatso, Thunder Thighs and Bulldozer behind my back.
- I was very angry when a mean guy suddenly barged in my way and I fell on the ground hurting myself.

Facilitator will ask the students how they reacted to the situations cited.

For example:

- I cried a lot.
- I ran away and tied a shirt around my waist.
- I ignored it.

Now the facilitator may ask the students how the same incident could have been handled differently so that there is a positive outcome or accountability on the part of the Bully.

For example:

- I could have asserted myself confidently by telling everyone what my name was.
- I could have looked everyone in the eye and walked with my head held high like the models advocating Body Positivity.
- I could have questioned or confronted him for pushing me on purpose.

The facilitator will conclude by stressing the need to not give in to the Bully's remarks by being meek or weak. It is important to realise the insecurity behind Bullies and not react to situations as affected by them or their actions like crying, looking downwards, shaking with fear etc. Also, participating in the group task will help in building empathy amongst the group members and everyone would learn a myriad of ways on how to respond with an understanding approach instead of acting irrationally. It is important to emphasize the fact that it is in our hands to manage our emotions and we must not allow the situation or circumstances to control our emotions and feelings. Therefore, we should not let negative feelings or emotions govern and belittle our sense of self over time.

Session 3 - Empathize with Others

Specific Objectives:

1. To put oneself in others' position and think from their perspective.
2. To critically reflect on one's words and actions as well as how they have an impact on others.

Activity: Theatre of the Oppressed (30 Minutes)

Facilitator will ask students to get ready for the role playing. They will be encouraged to pair up and decide who's going to play the Bully and the Bullied. They can act out any bullying scene they've come across or witnessed somewhere. They will be asked not to physically harm each other as part of the Bullying act. Bullying is limited to continuous verbal/visual remarks on one's physical appearance or incompetency at a task mostly and if it turns into violent acts it will be counted as physical assault.

Students will be asked to perform the act. These acts will be followed by certain questions to make learners think, question and discuss the prevalence of Bullying at considerably safe spaces like school, home, neighbourhood etc.

The following questions may be asked from the students:

- What is the specific issue showcased in the act?
- How was the experience? Did you feel any kind of discomfort?
- What could be the reasons behind this discomfort you feel? What kind of emotions were evoked?
- What are the possible ways the Bullied could have handled the situation?
- Imagine yourself as the Bully and reflect on the thought process of Bully. Why does the Bully overpower the Bullied?

The facilitator may conclude by addressing the need to be sensitive towards others and recognizing the needs of others. Not just empathising with the bullied but also looking for reasons behind the Bully's behavior.

Session 4 - Communication and Negotiation

Specific Objectives:

1. To be able to express their point assertively.
2. To resolve conflicts through effective negotiation.

3. To establish good interpersonal relationships.

Activity 1: Making My Point (40 minutes)

This activity is designed to give them space where, through enactment, they can revisit some of such situations and become thoughtful of the need for effectively communicating their thoughts in such situations. Further, this activity aims to assert the role of effective communication in establishing good interpersonal relationships.

The facilitator may begin by asking the students to share an incident where misunderstanding occurred because communication was unclear. The students may be divided into smaller groups of 5-6 and ask them to pick up a chit and prepare a role play on the suggestive plot. The facilitator may note that the plots remain incomplete and the students may be asked to evolve concerns on communication of their own as well.

- Everyday Sonu and his gang of friends stop Sudhir while he is on his way to school. They snatch away his bag and throw away all his books. One day Sudhir decides to talk to them.....
- Rani reaches school late almost every day. The facilitator scolds her, but she does not tell her that she gets late as she drops her younger brother to his school on her way to school.....
- Akram's father gets angry with him over his selection of Humanities stream in class 11 and keeps drawing comparisons with his elder sister who is pursuing MBBS.....
- While Meenu was carrying a tray of glasses to offer water to the guests, she slipped and all the 5 glasses that she was carrying fell and broke. Her mother came and without listening to any of her clarifications slapped her.....
- A teacher of your's once read out loud in the class, a paragraph, from an English test paper of your classmate that was full of errors. A group of students now started teasing that child using that cue.....

Once the students have enacted the plays the facilitator may explain to the group the difference between passive, aggressive and assertive communication. Further, they may talk to them about ways for assertive communication. The facilitator may bring the activity to closure by reiterating the role of effective communication in making one's point clear.

Notes to the facilitator:

1. Passive communication means to communicate in a "weak" way. You have confused body language, which shows you are weak, timid, undecided and have low self-esteem.
2. Aggressive communication means to communicate in a way that threatens to punish the other person if your feelings, opinions or desires are not accepted. You have threatening and forceful body language.
3. Assertive communication means to communicate in a way that does not seem rude or threatening to others. You are standing up for your opinion, ideas, feelings, for your rights without endangering the rights of others. You have strong, steady but nonthreatening body language.

Activity 2: Resolving Conflict Situation (30 minutes)

Through this activity, we may communicate to the students that any conflict situation can be resolved by taking the right actions and with sincere intentions. Instead of arguments and fights, they may be introduced to alternative ways to address conflicting situations through discussion and dialogue. The facilitator may emphasise the importance of keeping everyone's perspectives in consideration while trying to arrive at the most appropriate solution. The facilitator will narrate the short story given below:

HOW DO THEY GO ABOUT IT?

John and Jack are classmates who have been paired by their teacher for a survey based project. John is a high-scorer student, good in extra-curricular activities, and a part of teachers' good books. He sometimes uses this popularity in wrong ways also. Jack, on the other hand, fails at exams often and is never noticed by the teachers. The only time he gathers everybody's attention is when some or the other teacher picks him up in front of the class. Both of them are unhappy with this pairing which the teacher has declared as unchangeable.

The project work requires them to prepare a questionnaire, collect data, analyze it, prepare a report, and then present it in the class. John says that he would have to work much more in this partnership, while Jack doesn't feel confident in working with John as he is scared of being judged and not being able to contribute anything valuable to the project. These feelings are restricting the commencement of their work.

Suggest, how can they proceed.

The class may be divided into two groups. One group will speak in favour of John and the other group in favour of Jack. To manage the students, instructions must be given to engage in dialogue on behalf of both the parties without shouting or arguing. The discussion must aim at resolution and not escalation of the problem. The facilitator must encourage the students to listen to the other's point of view.

In case, the students are stuck somewhere or deviating from the topic, following directive questions/instructions can be dropped for their consideration:

- What problems do both the parties have with each other? How does it impact their self-concept, mental health and the project work given?
- What may be the strengths of both the parties?
- Identify the ways in which the power relations between them can be reduced.
- As the project is to be a team work, in what ways both of them can peacefully engage in it?
- Consider all your options again, and check if they can be acceptable to both the parties. Keep in mind their safety, respect, learning and exposure, and the objective of assignment of the project work.

The facilitator can reiterate the following steps of problem-solving while conducting the activity:

1. P = The first step is to identify a problem (P) and understand its core. Analyzing the situation objectively and considering its possible causes constitutes critical thinking.
2. O = The second step is to examine probable options (O) for solving it. The more options, the better the decision is. This step uses critical and creative thinking and involves decision-making for selection of suitable solutions.
3. W = The third step is to reflect upon the positive and negative consequences of each option (W which stands for weighing the options). This step also uses creative thinking.
4. E = Then the next step is to prioritize your options and keep the best five ways to solve the problem. Electing (E) is the best option and plans for the actions required to implement it.
5. R = The last step is to review and reflect (R) on the impact of the decision. Being able to take action on the decision, implementing it and accepting the responsibility to see it through.

A concluding fifth session may be kept for any queries and discussions over what and why the previous sessions were held and how they will be of help. It will be intended to help students visualize a clear picture in their minds about the objectives, reflect upon them and see if they were met or not.