

## Bringing the Brain to Bullying Prevention

Presented by Chuck Saufier  
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## “Bullying”

- Does not describe specific behavior.
- Has potential to deprive targets of rights under harassment laws.
- Has become a buzz word for all peer aggression.

## Bullying (peer abusive) Behavior...

- Is learned behavior.
- **Is not** pre-wired, harmless, inevitable.
- Will spread if ignored, supported, or promoted.
- Involves everyone in the system.
- Can be controlled or prevented.

## Brain Basics

Neuron = nerve cell - 3 parts

a) Dendrites - collects info from other neurons

b) Cell body - collects info from dendrites

c) Axon - channel for sending messages to other cells

The process of neurons connecting is electro-chemical.

The chemicals involved are called neurotransmitters.

Synapse = space between axon of sending neuron and dendrites of receiving neuron

## Human brains exhibit plasticity (capacity to physically change ) across our entire lifespan.

Learning happens as a result of:

Time spent and feedback of a reward - unless the brain gets excited, upset, encouraged or discouraged by task feedback almost no plasticity occurs.

**The brain grows where the blood flows.**

## How the Brain Learns

- Repetition - creating and improving neural pathways
- Patterning - building and connecting networks
- Observation - scripts and models for behavior stored in unconscious memory - family, school, community, media
- Feedback - from the environment

**Learning is an Emotional Experience**

## Exercise Prepares the Learner

- Improves impulse control
- Improves Behavior
- Improves Attention
- Improves Mood
- Improves Motivation
- Lessens Fatigue
- Helps with Anxiety Regulation
- Combats Depression
- Combats Toxic Stress Hormones

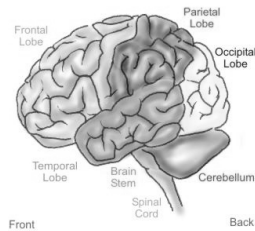
Spark: The Revolutionary New Science of Exercise and the Brain  
by John J. Ratey, MD

## Exercise improves...

- Brain health and function
  - Neurogenesis
- and**
- Reduces risk factors for cognitive decline.

## Prefrontal Cortex Functions

- Planning
- Organization
- Initiate or delay response
- Consequence evaluation
- Learning from mistakes
- Focus
- Working Memory
- Modulating Mood



Dysfunction in this area leads to the disruption in the organization and control of behavior.

## How it feels to be a...

- | <u>Target</u> | <u>Bystander to abuse</u>   |
|---------------|-----------------------------|
| • Angry       | • Afraid                    |
| • Scared      | • Glad it's not me (relief) |
| • Alone       | • Guilty for not helping    |
| • Intimidated | • Embarrassed               |
| • Fearful     | • Angry                     |
| • Hopeless    | • Pity                      |
| • Powerless   |                             |

**Distress changes blood flow in the brain.**

## Stress Related Neurotransmitters that Influence Behavior

- Adrenaline - triggers alert system
- Dopamine - responsible for linking events and actions to outcomes (reward/motivation system)
- Serotonin - helps regulate mood, assists in transmission of neural messages, keeps us from being overwhelmed with too much incoming stimuli
- Oxytocin - encourages "tend and befriend" behavior as opposed to "fight or flight" behavior, in response to stress.
- Cortisol - produced by long term stress, damages structures in the brain, affects learning and memory

## Cortisol Damages the Brain

Shrinkage of the frontal lobes and hippocampi

- Existing cells shrink
- Total number of cells decreases
- Reduces neurogenesis (new cell production)

Hippocampi are associated with the memory processes including long term, semantic, episodic and emotional.

## What do children learn from models?

- **Cognitive scripts** - rehearsed and reinforced or modified by the feedback results
- Successful scripts are stored in memory as **guides for behavior and social problem solving**.
- Children not only adopt specific behaviors but also tend to adopt **evaluative standards and attitudes** employed by the models in their life.
- **The child will pattern their thoughts, feelings and actions after a model.**



Still Faced Study on Attunement

	Attuned Reciprocal	Still Faced
Attention System	focused	defocused
Self-Regulatory System	calm controlled	Agitated distracted
Affect System	open happy bright	Scared Depressed miserable
Social System	Open to caregiver	Closed to redirection

## Chaotic, Emotionally Cold Homes Produce Children...

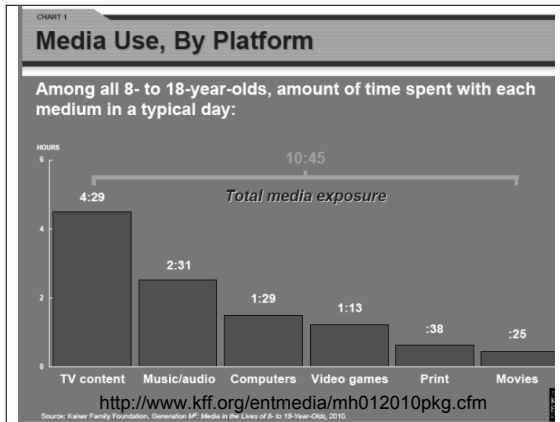
- Who don't do fear.
- Who don't respond to verbal or physical consequences.
- Who demonstrate impulsiveness.
- Who maintain an unattached attitude toward authority figures.
- Who don't show signs of guilt or remorse for unacceptable behaviors.
- With poor social and planning skills.

## Media / School / Parents as Models

Media	Schools	Parents
7hrs:38/day	5-6 hrs./day	12 mins/day
Huge budget	Small budget	Varies
Unlimited	Few resources	Varies
Violence glorified	Violence condemned	Varies
Lessons false	Lessons accurate	Inconsistent

## Media / School / Parents as Models

Media	Schools	Parents
Highly stimulating	Relatively unexciting	Limited
Graphic multi-media	Primarily spoken	Primarily spoken



## Cognitive Models Pervasive in Mainstream Media :

- Divisive Relational Models - “us and them thinking” - demonizing the “other”
- Revenge as legitimizing violence
- Unity at the cost of diversity
- Reinforcing stereotypes and bias
- Sarcasm and abusive language models
- Inappropriate relational models

## Violent Media Effects

- Aggression effect - meanness, increases aggression, decreases pro-social behavior
- Victim effect - “Mean world syndrome”
- Bystander effect - callousness, insensitivity
- Appetite effect - hunger for more, addiction
- Bias effect - black and white thinking
- “Shallow thinking” effect \*

## School Climate = The Affective Resonance of a School

School Culture evolves in the context of the climate of a school.

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## Climate and Connectedness

- School connectedness has a direct positive effect on academic achievement.
- As school climate improves relational aggression decreases.

(From: Wilson, Dorian, The Interface of School Climate and School Connectedness and Relationships with Aggression and Victimization, Journal of School Health, Vol. 74, No. 7, Sept. 2004)

For more research on school bonding, climate, and connectedness go to:

<http://www.jhsph.edu/wingspread/Septemberissue.pdf>

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## Reticular Activating System (RAS)

- RAS favors intake of sights, sounds, smells, and tactile sensations that are most critical to survival
- Priority goes to **CHANGES** in environment with priority to change appraised as threat
- When threat is perceived, the RAS automatically selects related sensory input and directs it to the lower brain where the involuntary response is not to think, but to react with fight, flight, or freeze.

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### Building a Framework for Practice

High Structure/Boundaries	<p><b>Doing To Punitive</b></p> <p><b>Authoritarian, Stigmatizing Blaming</b></p> <p><i>Brain = distress response, high cortisol, lower serotonin, memory and executive functions hampered</i></p>	<p><b>Doing With Restorative</b></p> <p><b>Co-operative, Collaborative</b></p> <p><i>Brain = raised serotonin, lowers cortisol, dopamine reinforcing relational skills, cause and effect thinking and accountability</i></p>
	<p>Doing Nothing Neglectful Ignoring Turning a blind eye</p> <p><i>Brain = negative emotions, distress, depression, lower serotonin levels, higher cortisol levels</i></p>	<p>Doing For Permissive Rescuing, Excusing Reasoning</p> <p><i>Brain = dopamine helping connect negative behaviors with positive feelings</i></p>
Low	Low	High

Nurture/Support

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adapted from Blood and Thorsborne, 2005

## Interventions that alone do not work as bullying prevention.

- Mediation
- Short term one shot solutions.
- Anti-bullying Curriculum
- Self-esteem work for bullies.
- Assertiveness training for targets.
- More punitive discipline.
- Anger management training for bullies.
- Zero Tolerance Policies

## What makes things worse?

- Calling student requests for help "tattling".
- Telling mistreated youth to "pretend it doesn't bother you", "just walk away", "tell them how you feel", or "ask them to stop".
- Getting all the students in a classroom or school together and telling them that bullying is wrong.

<http://www.youthvoiceproject.com/>

## What Works in Bullying Prevention?

- Build positive connections between staff and students.
- Develop clear, consistent rules and interventions about acceptable and unacceptable student actions.
- Develop consensus among all staff so they take action to discourage and interrupt low-level mean student behavior before it escalates.
- Have formal and informal systems in place to support mistreated youth.
- Develop positive peer norms among students.

[www.stopbullyingnow.com](http://www.stopbullyingnow.com)

## Precursors to Bystander Action

These tests must be applied in order one at a time:

### The bystander must...

1. Perceive that the person needs help
2. Believe the person does not deserve what is being done to him or her and deserves help
3. See it as THEIR job to help
4. Possess the skills and resources to help efficiently and safely
5. Consider the benefits and risks of helping

### Then

If benefits outweigh the risks, there is bystander action.

Darley, J. M., & Latané, B. (1968). Bystander intervention in emergencies: Diffusion of Responsibility. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 8, 377-383.  
Latané, B., & Darley, J. Bystander "Apathy", *American Scientist*, 1969, 57, 244-268.

## Strategies for Developing Personal Connection

- Smile
- Greet by name
- Birthday cards
- Post your pictures
- Ask an opinion
- Do the "2x10"
- 4 H's
- Give notes
- Special cue signals
- Music
- Own your mistakes
- Be a chaperone
- Notice the unique
- Sponsor a club
- Eat with them
- Have fun together

## Teach Cognitive Skills

- Procedural skills - routines
- Emotional Vocabulary
- A common problem solving method
- Stress reduction activities
- A reflective process to think about one's own behavior.
  - What did you do?
  - Who is it affecting?
  - How is it affecting them?
  - What should you do now?

\*Remember: Your demeanor in this exchange is very important! Are you doing "to", "for" or "with"?

## Neurologically Complete Redirection

Identify the behavior	Give reason...	Suggest alternate behavior...	Complete the neurology of the redirection.
"Stop ..."	"You might injure yourself."	"Instead do this..."	Practice and Praise... "Show me how you will do it."

## The Importance of Momentum in Your Response...

*All the body's cells respond with either Conservation or Growth strategies.*

*But inconsistent programs and efforts at school means mixed messages and NO PROGRESS!*

**Consistency of approach across settings and staff is the key!**

## Remember

School culture is like bread...it gets made everyday. How it turns out depends on how well we make it.

Bullying and harassment negatively affect school culture and that negatively impacts the brains of your students.

It takes a, comprehensive, coordinated and sustained approach to the problem to make a significant difference.