

# Acting Against Bullying: Using Drama and Peer Teaching to Reduce Bullying

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Source: [Bullying Special Edition Contributor](#)

Topics: [Bullying and Teasing](#), [Hot Topics in Bullying](#), [Helping Your Child with Bullying](#)

*Before I did AAB, I didn't know how to deal with a situation when I got into it so I got like - I didn't think about what I was doing and about the consequences of what I was doing and about how it would make other people feel. Since doing AAB people have said that whenever I get into fights and stuff, which sometimes I do, that I've dealt with it in a more mature way and it hasn't got me into so much trouble as before.*  
(Year 9 student)

## What is Acting Against Bullying?

Acting Against Bullying (AAB) is a program which uses a combination of two key strategies: *drama* and *peer teaching*. This occurs across the whole school, with every student actively involved, and within the curriculum. The aim is to give students themselves both the understanding and some of the tools to deal with bullying – and other forms of conflict - in schools. This empowerment of the students as individuals then has the potential to allow them to change the ethos of their schools.

In spite of years of effort, research shows that levels of school bullying remain remarkably constant, and that virtually all students worry about bullying and conflict (1, 2). We take a fairly standard definition of conflict as clashes of interests, rights or power, or through misunderstanding, and of bullying as the ongoing abuse of an imbalance of power and/or status (3). This is particularly relevant for this program, since schools are places where there are built-in disparities of both power and status, and clashes, misunderstandings and the misuse of power inevitably occur.

## Why do typical school conflict management programs fail?

Our work calls into question several common features of typical school conflict management approaches. These common features are:

- they are top-down: adults (teachers and counsellors) use power and authority to restore acceptable (if unequal) power relationships – even peer mediation involves training young people to act as quasi-adults with the authority of the school behind them
- they are ad hoc: conflicts and bullying are dealt with as they occur, as if isolated occurrences in a conflict-free landscape
- they are extra-curricular – neither conflict nor its study are explicitly part of the classroom curriculum, and in theory (at least!) the classroom is a place from which conflict is excluded

- they almost invariably concentrate on assisting the person being victimised and the person doing the bullying

### **Why do drama programs work?**

We are drama specialists. We work with conflict mediation and counselling experts, using participatory drama techniques, including carefully structured role-play and forum theatre. Drama is used sometimes in bullying management, but rarely as part of a coherent, whole-school scheme. There is extensive evidence that drama provides opportunities to create and experiment with life-like models of conflict, even ones drawn from real life which are ‘made safe’ by being altered and made fictional (4, 5). Students themselves have said they prefer the use of drama to other approaches in anti-bullying programs (6).

### **Why do peer teaching programs work?**

Despite extensive evidence that peer teaching can be a powerful pedagogical tool, it is seldom used in normal curriculum teaching (7, 8). Yet our research has demonstrated that young people can take responsibility for learning themselves, and then teaching younger students, how to address the problem of bullying with considerable understanding and skill. Hundreds of young people have achieved this in the Acting Against Bullying program when given the tools and the motivation to do so (9, 10).

### **How the Acting Against Bullying Program works.**

The program we developed normally starts at senior level, say a Year 11 Drama or English ‘Key Class’. A set of simple, clear key concepts about bullying and conflict is the basis of the empowerment: if the students have words and concepts to help them understand bullying situations, not just feel helpless, confused and frightened, they will be in a better position to deal strategically rather than emotionally.

#### Key Concepts

- the range of types and contexts of bullying
- three escalating stages – latent, emerging and manifest bullying
- the parties involved – invariably three: the person or people bullying, the bullied and the bystander - we avoid the terms ‘victim’ and ‘the bully’, stressing that all humans have the propensity to take on any of these three roles, and all three, especially the bystander, have the power to act to remediate the bullying
- possible remediation strategies

**First Step:** These concepts are taught through drama. Drama removes ‘blame’, exploring neutrally the dynamics and mechanics of bullying in context. Situations can be acted out that show bullying behaviour, but the emotions remain unthreatened, and the participants are always in control. It is important to remember that drama is imaginative play, where students can explore any experience safely by pretending it is real whilst knowing it is fictional.

**Second Step:** Next, in small groups, the Key Class uses the same drama techniques and key concepts to peer-teach ‘relay classes’ (ideally two years younger – say Year 9). By this they are reinforcing their own knowledge. The younger students, too, appreciate being taught by students they look up to, whose knowledge they trust as much closer to their reality than teachers, and whom they know to have survived their own kinds of conflict. Those younger students then teach younger relay classes students, down into the primary (elementary) school, and right down – we have found – to Year 2 or 3 (eight year olds). It is important that the relay classes are not also drama or English classes, so that the program is not seen as their ‘province’. Social Studies, Health Education, Liberal Studies all provide potential curricular openings. Where the program is supported and infuses the whole school, the ethos of the school begins to change – students are more conscious, empowered with strategies for action.

### **Does the Acting Against Bullying Program work?**

Our most recent statistics (10), show that after the program, 97% of the students were able to identify the three stages; 87% stated they were more able to recognise when bullying was taking place, and 87% believed that bullying could be de-escalated or stopped. 64% believed they were more likely to respond to de-escalate or end bullying, with 33% unsure (only 3% responded negatively). 70% believed they had learned to manage bullying situations better, and most believed that bystanders had the most real power to ameliorate bullying. Extensive anecdotal evidence reported that over 50% of the students were in fact using what they had learned in real-life conflicts; and a number of genuine life-changes were identified and followed. Over 80% of the teachers believed the program should be incorporated permanently in their schools. Surprising results included the prevalence of students self-disclosing as bullies.

All the evidence shows that the three keys to Acting Against Bullying are skilled management of structured drama work; trust in students’ peer teaching ability and their ability to put what they have learned through experience into mature practice; and strong support by system and school administrations. With these three factors, any school can implement it.

Details of both the drama program and school organisation, together with our bibliography, further results and statistics, can be found in our book *Cooling Conflict*.

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