

Introduction to *Dignity for All* (DFA): Learning Goals and Objectives

Building Dignity for All: Urban Tech’s Evidence-Based Bullying Prevention and Safe and Supportive Schools Program

How does YLA’s Bullying Prevention module enhance my instructional program?

This research and theory-based Bullying Prevention module focuses on preventing and reducing bullying and cyberbullying behaviors in schools and communities, while also delivering ELA and STEM-related content aligned with the Common Core State Standards. Developed by education and mental health experts, YLA’s Bullying Prevention module incorporates evidence-based knowledge and experiential skill-building exercises that are based on the latest findings from neuroscience, attachment theory, ecological systems theory, and bullying research to prevent and reduce bullying, facilitate social and emotional learning, and lead to improved academic outcomes. The module provides the activity plans, materials and resources needed for successful implementation. YLA’s design is user-friendly, with step-by-step guidance and support provided to the educator.

Why is using this module to learn and apply knowledge about Bullying Prevention important?

YLA’s Bully Prevention Module is a whole-schools approach, which emphasizes creating safe and reflective school climates and school-based norms that involve all students, with a focus on developing bystander and upstander interventions, empathic understanding of the triadic roles of bully, target, and bystander, and reflective learner-centered communities. The development of anti-bullying programs that emphasize safe school climates have been endorsed by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, The Council of Educational Sciences and US Department of Education, and found to provide positive outcomes in mental health, sub-

stance abuse, self esteem and resilience (National School Climate Center, 2012).

Bullying and cyberbullying are the most prevalent forms of violence in schools today with detrimental and long lasting effects. Results from national surveys indicate that as many as 70% of secondary students have reported experiencing bullying (DCD, 2012; NCES, 2013). Among middle and high school students, 25% report having been the victim of cyberbullying, and 16% report that they have cyberbullied others (Cyberbullying Research Center, 2015). Often, bullying leads to other negative and **anti-social** behaviors (Mishne & Sawyer, 2012). For example, students who bully are more likely than their peers to have a criminal conviction by age 24 (Olweus, 1993), are at higher risk for other delinquent and violent behaviors (Nansel et al., 2001; Farrington, 1993), and are at much greater risk for drug and alcohol abuse (Pepler, Craig, Connolly, & Henderson, 2001).

Students who are bullied are more likely than their peers to experience social isolation, health problems (Rigby, 2003), anxiety and depression (Baldry, 2004), and to face academic challenges, such as, school avoidance (Slee, 1994) and lower academic achievement (Clarke & Kiselica, 1997). Both bullies and targets of bullying are more likely to have increased suicidal ideation (Klomek, Marrocco, Kleinman, Schonfeld & Gould, 2009). Moreover, bystanders, who comprise the largest student group affected by bullying, can experience traumatic reactions similar to peers who are bullied (Boney-McCoy & Finkelhor, 1995).

The pervasiveness of bullying, and the potential detrimental effects on those involved, make the importance of bullying prevention a national

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imperative. YLA approaches bullying prevention by helping participants understand the interpersonal dynamics of bullying, the **systemic** nature of bullying, and the functioning of the brain as it relates to bullying. This provides learners with the tools and techniques for reducing and preventing episodes of bullying. Through the acquisition of knowledge, the incorporation of skills-building exercises and the creation of school-based reflective learning communities, participants will develop the understanding, critical awareness, self-management, and interpersonal skills necessary for the creation of non-violent school communities.

An environment (school, community, or family) that is unsafe, lacks social-emotional support, and is characterized by injustice or discrimination can produce a bullying cycle that has stakeholders who play revolving roles. These learned bullying behaviors are often shaped by feelings of helplessness. In addition, people who bully tend to exhibit moral disengagement (Bandura, 1991), whereby they rationalize their bad behaviors (e.g., blaming the victim, projecting responsibility) to absolve them of guilt and pain. Feelings of helplessness, fear, pain, and vulnerability are often the underlying emotions felt by all participants to the process – bullies, targets and bystanders. According to Attachment Theory, these feelings often arise because persons operate within social systems in which they feel disconnected from others and anxious about that disconnection.

These feelings have a profound influence on their behaviors, and offer one explanation as to why less than half of bullying incidents are reported to adults (IES, 2012). The feelings that students involved in bullying experience are cause for concern, as they are quite powerful in shaping students' identities, have a profound influence on their behaviors, and serve as a catalyst in perpetuating the bullying cycle.

How do recent findings in neuroscience inform the Dignity for All program?

Recent neurological studies show that both reflection (recognition of one's emotional response) and empathy from others are crucial to easing distress and accessing the executive function of the brain (I.e. functions like planning, organization, critical thinking, mood regulation and empathy). We now know that when we are very frightened, our stress response systems, located in the lower regions of our brain where emotions and instincts reside, take over. Our bodies release hormones and bio-chemicals, like adrenaline, that activate fight, flight, or freeze responses.

For adolescents, practicing mindfulness and empathy is particularly important. Recent findings show that **empathic, caring encounters with others not only light up the pleasure centers in the brain, but also facilitate the development of integrative fibers in the brain. That means that emotional attunement from another can make the entire brain work better.** Studies show that during the adolescent phase of development, two things are happening – the prefrontal cortex is developing, and the reward center of the brain is more active than behavioral control areas (perhaps explaining adolescents' increase in risky decision-making and emotional reactivity) (2008, Casey, Jones, *The Adolescent Brain*, NIH). Thus, providing reflective practices and safe and supportive school climates fostering empathic peer and adult relationships, could greatly increase the likelihood that students will both improve their cognitive abilities and engage in more positive risk behaviors. In contrast, to the extent that we do not regularly have these necessary interpersonal experiences of connection, we are at risk of indulging in addictive, destructive, and self-destructive behaviors.

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Dignity for All’s Restorative Approach to Discipline

Students examine the benefits of learning in a safe and caring environment, decide on the values that would underlie such communities, and set goals for their own school climate. Students learn that the effectiveness of bully prevention programs “may depend upon the supportiveness of the school climate” (Bosworth & Judkins, 2014, p. 301). Research has indicated that in schools where students perceive that adults care about them individually and are invested in their learning, the students are less likely to become either targets or aggressors of bullying (Blum, 2005). Moreover, when bullying is seen as a whole school issue and supportive connections are fostered among all school personnel, bullying behaviors have been reduced (Reine & Herman, 2002; Waasdorp, Pas, O’Brennan, & Bradshaw, 2011)

Students learn that bullying (physical, emotional, and social – exclusion and discrimination) incidents are different from mere conflicts, and ones where there is harm to be repaired. The meaningful work of relationship-building in a caring school community helps students build mindfulness, self-reflection and regulation skills, as well as develop empathy for others, social skills and social understanding. Students apply their theories and test their new learning in role-playing, group discussions, and workbook writing. They practice their reflective and enquiry skills by using scripts to follow a values-based “Circle” process to repair harm from bullying, harassment, or discrimination and improve relationships among all school stakeholders, and then can use this restorative “Circle” to repair harm and build safe and supportive relationships with each other.

Dignity for All provides tools and techniques to teach core “soft” skills, such as responsibility, respect, trustworthiness, friendship. The program

also focuses on issues of how to care for oneself, for others, for the environment, for ideas, and develops a community of responsible citizens. Activities and implementation are designed to inspire and develop skills in mindfulness meditation, self-reflection, and empathy to build **resilience, responsiveness and flexibility, not only in educators, but also throughout whole organizations to support circumstances that foster a child’s optimal learning and growth.**

To make these tools compatible with lesson plans that are already in place, the new Dignity for All module provides English and Language Arts objectives that are aligned with Common Core State Standards. The following curriculum guide includes all instructor notes, activity plans, materials, and resources needed for successful implementation, and follows a user-friendly design.

Quests for Learning: Knowledge | Attitude | Behavior

YLA’s *Dignity for All: Bullying Prevention and Safe and Supportive Schools Program* is divided into three (3) stages of learning, or Quests. Each Quest is divided into steps that are designed to inspire students through the progression of learning about the nature of bullying, the role of school climate, its impact on their lives and personal goals, and effective skills that will help them sustain a safe and supportive learning environment.