

Bullying Prevention Guide



Introduction

Serving millions of young people across the nation each year, park and recreation professionals are leading providers of youth development services — including mentoring, youth sports, after-school and summer programs, workforce development, environmental education, arts and cultural offerings, and other enrichment activities. As community-based providers of health, recreation and positive youth development services, park and recreation agencies also are well positioned to guide youth as they grow into active members of a community.

Healthy youth-adult relationships are an excellent way to support youth as they begin to explore their identity, purpose and contributions to society. This resource provides guidance and best practices for mentors within group settings, with particular emphasis on bullying prevention and behavior management among youth.

Preventing Bullying Before it Starts

Creating a supportive group environment for mentoring programs to thrive involves proactive preparation and situationally relevant reactions that address harm, celebrate positive behavior and prevent choices that may put other members of the group at risk.

Whether you're helping a shy participant feel comfortable or redirecting a conflict before it escalates, strong group management keeps programs running smoothly. When youth feel comfortable in the group, they tend to be more open with their mentors and build trust over time.

Group mentors have the opportunity to set the emotional tone every time they show up. They can model desired behaviors by showing respect, kindness and active listening. If they stay calm and communicate clearly, youth usually follow their lead.



Youths participate in an educational field trip as part of their group mentoring program. Photo courtesy of Arizona Youth Partnership.

Set Up the Environment for Success

A well-structured environment helps young people feel safe, prepared and ready to participate. Mentors shape this environment by setting clear expectations, building intentional routines and using consistent communication. When youth know what to expect and feel supported by adults who are present and engaged, the group becomes more cooperative, confident and connected.

Good group management also helps stop bullying before it starts. With the clarity provided by group expectations and social cohesion, there is less teasing, fewer arguments and more teamwork.



Teen mentors participate in a junior lifeguard training. Photo courtesy of Christi Carrington, Houston Parks and Recreation Department.

Collaborate With Youth to Build Group Agreements and Norms

Group agreements (often called group or team codes, full value contracts, etc.) are simple expectations created in partnership with youth to guide how the group treats one another. When young people help create the rules, they feel ownership and are more likely to follow them and encourage others to do the same. A group agreement is usually created on the first day, posted somewhere visible, and signed by both youth and mentors to show that everyone shares responsibility for keeping the group safe and respectful.

Strong group agreements use clear, positive language, telling youth what to do rather than what not to do. For example, say, *"Use appropriate language,"* instead of *"No cursing,"* or say, *"Keep hands and feet to yourself,"* instead of *"Don't hit others."* Keeping guidelines simple and easy to understand makes them more effective. Mentors should revisit and update the agreement throughout the program if it stops meeting the group's needs.

In addition to shared group agreements, it can be helpful to collaborate with youth to collectively decide what consequences feel fair and appropriate, should someone not abide by the expectations outlined in the agreements. This gives them an opportunity to think critically about the actions they choose to take, consider what reparative consequences could look like and hold each other accountable.

Facilitating the Group Agreement Discussion

Creating group agreements should be a guided conversation, not something that mentors completely hand over or tightly control. While youth should lead the conversation, mentors can guide them by asking clarifying questions or bringing up topics they may overlook.

Mentors can:

- Prompt youth to think about areas they haven't considered yet, such as safety, language, belonging or participation.
- Redirect when youth offer unrealistic, silly or overly specific suggestions, helping them reframe ideas in a positive, group-focused way.
- Ask open-ended questions to spark deeper thinking and ensure balance.
- Set the tone by showing genuine curiosity. This could look like asking follow-up questions or acknowledging different viewpoints to help create a respectful and collaborative space.

Simple Prompts Mentors Can Use:

- "What kind of language helps everyone feel comfortable here?"
- "How can we show respect even when we disagree?"
- "What do we want our space to feel like during activities?"
- "What should we do when someone needs help or space?"
- "What helps everyone feel included?"
- "How and when is it appropriate to use phones during the program?"

Once the group names the ideas, mentors should help turn them into short, positive statements for the final agreement. If possible, post the written agreements where youth can see and refer back to them throughout the program.

It is hugely important for building mutual trust and respect that mentors follow the rules of the group agreement as well. For example, if the group establishes a no phone policy, mentors should model this behavior by also avoiding phone use during programming. Should a mentor need to use their phone during a program to take attendance or check in on childcare, for example, openly articulating their reason for bending the rule in this instance provides reasoning and transparency that keeps trust strong within the group.



Mentor orientation featuring NRPA's Youth Mentoring Framework. Photo courtesy of Arizona Youth Partnership.

The Mentor's Role in Influencing Behavior

Guiding and influencing group behavior begins with how mentors show up each day. Consistency is critical. Youth notice when adults treat them with respect and respond more positively in return. Mentors can also support the group by noticing early signs of frustration, offering encouragement when youth make good choices, prioritizing compliments to actions rather than individuals and helping everyone feel included. These simple habits build a supportive environment where cooperation, safety and belonging can grow.

Ways Mentors Can Begin to Shape Group Behaviors

- Model good social skills to help build trust and respect.
- Recognize and celebrate positive choices.
- Go out of your way during each session to talk with each youth in the program at least once. Ask them how they are doing, find common interests, etc.
- Keep an eye on subtle cues like a youth pulling away from a group or a conversation getting tense. Be ready to step in early if needed.
- Manage yourself! Staying calm and present helps you fully show up for the group.



Teen mentor leads a summer enrichment program session. Photo courtesy of Christi Carrington, Houston Parks and Recreation Department.



Create Policies and Practices to Support Group Management

Every program should have a clearly written Group Management Policy that provides an internal set of standards outlining how staff respond to behavior, how communication occurs and how documentation is handled. This policy promotes consistency and ensures that all youth are treated fairly. The policy may include, but is not limited to, the following elements:

1 Core Group Management Philosophy:

A strong policy begins with clear goals and beliefs about how behavior should be supported, such as promoting safety, respect, positive youth development and skill building. A group management policy is not just a set of rules; it helps create a safe, predictable program culture where youth know what to expect and staff have the tools to respond consistently and fairly.

2 Group Management Structure:

Defining the structure of how staff and mentors will address behavior helps them feel supported and helps to create consistency when issues arise. This structure could include topics such as:

- **Positive and Negative Consequences** – Create a policy that describes how staff should reinforce positive behavior and respond to inappropriate behavior. This helps to spell out what positive reinforcement looks like in your program, whether that's verbal praise, public acknowledgment or earning leadership responsibilities.
- **Progressive Discipline** – Develop policies that describe the steps that should be taken when inappropriate behavior occurs repeatedly over time. Additionally, these policies should describe how severe behaviors such as fighting, threats and bullying are immediately handled.
- **De-escalation Techniques and Intervention Skills** – Create a policy that includes guidance on how mentors prevent escalation and promote calmness in difficult situations. This should include acceptable techniques as well as unacceptable techniques based on your organization's policies.
- **Follow-Up** – Include policies that explain how staff and mentors should follow-up with youth and their families. Follow up conversations with youth give them and their mentors a chance to cool down, talk about what happened, understand the impact, and plan for better choices next time. Following up with families should include steps such as contacting caregivers with clear facts, describing what occurred and how staff/mentors responded, asking for their ideas, and sharing positives without naming other youth.
- **Documentation** – Write a policy that defines which forms should staff use and when they are required. If your agency doesn't have standardized forms to document behavior, creating them should be a priority. Documentation tools should be simple and easy to use so mentors feel confident completing them.

3 Mentor Training and Support:

To ensure the Group Management Policy is referred to consistently and effectively, programs should include clear expectations for mentor training. Trainings should introduce mentors to the program's behavior response steps, encourage the use of positive reinforcement, build deescalation skills and intervention techniques, and prepare staff to communicate with families in supportive, strengths-based ways. Mentors should also be trained on how and when to complete the required documentation. Ongoing coaching, refresher trainings and scenario practice help mentors apply the actions outlined in policies with confidence.



Bullying Prevention in Mentoring Programs

Preventing bullying is an essential part of creating safe, supportive programs for youth. Mentors play a key role in shaping group culture, noticing early warning signs and helping youth build empathy, mutual respect and accountability. A strong approach to bullying prevention blends proactively setting clear expectations, consistent and active supervision, and building strong relationships so that youth feel safe speaking up and included in the group community.

Bullying, whether physical, verbal, social or online, can harm a young person's confidence, sense of belonging and emotional health. Park and recreation programs serve as safe spaces where youth can socialize, build relationships and explore new skills. Mentoring programs at parks are uniquely positioned to model welcoming and kindness through shared activities, community-building and caring adult relationships.

Key Components of Bully Prevention in Mentoring Programs

Preventing bullying in programs starts with well-equipped mentors and staff:

- Invest in training for mentors.**
Offer training on how to spot bullying in its various forms, how to prevent it and how to stop it when it occurs.
- Set clear expectations.**
Create a group agreement on the first day that promotes respect, accountability and belonging.
- Model positive adult behavior.**
Lead by example. Stay present and avoid negative talk, even jokingly, as youth often mirror the tone set by the adults in the room.
- Practice proactive supervision.**
Pay attention to both verbal and non-verbal interactions, especially during transitions or free time.
- Encourage reporting.**
Help youth feel safe coming to an adult if something happens.
- Observe group dynamics.**
Notice who consistently sits alone or isn't picked for group activities, as these patterns can be an early signal of exclusion.
- Address actions early.**
Address small, disrespectful comments early so they do not grow into ongoing bullying.



Youth participate in an educational field trip as part of their group mentoring program. Photo courtesy of Arizona Youth Partnership.

Intentional program design can play a major role in preventing bullying by helping youth build connections outside of their circles, practice teamwork and understand one another better.

Use simple, strengths-based activities to help youth connect and feel included such as:

- **Icebreaker games** to help youth learn names and interests and practice using their voice in a safe group setting.
- **Teambuilding challenges** that require cooperation and problem solving.
- **Journal prompts** to help youth reflect on kindness, respect, belonging or handling conflict in healthy ways that encourage personal growth.
- **Small group discussions** about friendship, fairness, current events as they relate to program participants and how to support peers.
- **Partner or cooperative activities** to mix youth who may not know each other or usually work together.

Activities that require cooperation, such as partner challenges or team puzzles, naturally help youth get to know one another and practice empathy.

When Bullying Happens...

When staff witness or become aware of bullying, they should respond quickly, calmly and with clear steps:

- Stop the behavior immediately and separate the youth involved.
- Make sure everyone is safe and check for emotional or physical harm.
- Stay calm and model respectful communication, especially when addressing serious issues.
- Reassure all youth, including bystanders, that adults are handling the situation.
- Never ignore bullying, even if it seems minor or indirect.

Programs should follow their Group Management Policy for:

1

Documenting what happened.

2

Informing caregivers.

3

Supporting the youth involved through follow-up conversations.

Success Stories From the Field

Programs across the country are using mentoring, prevention strategies and thoughtful program design to reduce bullying and strengthen youth relationships. The examples below highlight how different communities are putting these ideas into action and seeing meaningful results.

Arizona Youth Partnership — “Getting to the Root Cause”

Arizona Youth Partnership partners with law enforcement educators to cofacilitate bullying prevention lessons through the LRE (Least Restrictive Environment) curriculum, ensuring that youth receive consistent messaging from caring adults across systems. When the superintendent raised concerns about repeated bullying early in the school year, the school resource officer and agency staff worked directly with the students involved to understand what was driving their behavior. As a result, the program staff shared, “the bullying stopped and the students who were bullying understood the root cause of their own behavior,” reinforcing their belief that bullying is often a symptom of deeper challenges. Through ACEs (Adverse Childhood Experiences) training for staff, parents and youth, the program has built an environment that considers adverse experiences and where mentoring relationships help young people work through underlying issues before they escalate.



Youth pose for a photo during their group mentoring session. Photo courtesy of Arizona Youth Partnership.

Warren Youth Mentoring — “Checking the Phones, Opening the Dialogue”

Warren (Rhode Island) Youth Mentoring that much of the conflict showing up in their program was beginning online. To address this, mentors created a structured phone check-in system so youth could be fully present during program time and avoid “keyboard warrior” online behaviors that might spill over into in-person interactions. Without the distraction of phones, mentors now guide youth through an open dialogue that creates space where young people can “speak, be heard and address concerns” with supportive adult modeling. Families stay connected through ongoing communication channels, including messaging, phone calls, social media and in-person conversations, helping ensure consistency between home and program expectations.

Houston Parks and Recreation — “Training Mentors, Transforming Culture”

Houston Parks and Recreation focuses on prevention through strong mentor preparation and training. Staff learn how to identify and understand bullying behaviors, intervene safely and prevent future incidents. This training has reshaped program culture across their sites, especially those serving large and varied age groups. Since implementation, “the number of bullying incidents has drastically declined,” staff report. The department also recognizes that youth mindset and unmet needs can make behavior challenges more complex, so they expanded the support they offer, including mental health classes to staff and youth, connecting families to outside services and hosting quarterly Family Fun Days that link families to community providers.

From Ideas to Action

In practice, strong group management shows up in the everyday aspects of mentoring programs such as consistent routines and mentors modeling the behaviors they want to see. When mentors set clear expectations, use youth voice to build group agreements, and rely on consistent policies and practices, they create predictable environments where youth feel prepared, respected and connected.

Next steps for programs:

- Review or update your group management policy using the components outlined above.
- Train mentors on behavior response steps, de-escalation strategies, and family communication.
- Create or refresh group agreements using youth voice at the start of each program cycle.
- Incorporate intentional activities such as icebreakers, team-building games and reflection prompts to strengthen group connection.
- Use documentation tools to track patterns and support consistent follow-up.
- Encourage ongoing communication with families so expectations and strategies stay aligned.

Bullying prevention grows naturally through positive relationships, active supervision and intentional programming that promotes teamwork, empathy and belonging. By combining these strategies, programs can reduce conflict, respond to challenges with care, and ensure that every young person has the opportunity to belong and thrive.

This resource is supported by Grant #15PJDP-22-GG-03844-MENT awarded by the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, Office of Justice Programs, U.S. Department of Justice. The opinions, findings, and conclusions or recommendations expressed in this material are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect those of the Department of Justice.