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Understanding the Roles of Faith Leaders in Community-Wide Bullying Prevention Efforts

Faith Leaders' Unique Role in Addressing Bullying

How can faith leaders help to prevent bullying?

Although everyone shares the responsibility of making our communities friendly, safe, and desirable places to live, faith communities can support the healthy development of children and youth through their shared values of acceptance, tolerance, and mutual respect. Faith communities can also greatly influence how children and youth deal with bullying and other forms of aggression that they experience or witness. Leaders in the faith community can cultivate both the tolerant messages of their religious beliefs as well as create comforting and safe havens for children and their families. They can use their skills, position, and resources to help in bullying prevention and response efforts by:

- **Modeling and Messages.** Faith leaders can model tolerance, respect, and loving support for others. They can share stories from readings and religious histories that encourage persons of faith to love others, seek ways of peace, and defend those in need. Faith leaders can relate these stories directly to the roles of children and youth involved in bullying. They also can incorporate elements of best practice in religious education classes and activities.

- **Creating a Safe Haven.** Churches, synagogues, mosques, and other faith communities strive to be safe havens and inviting places for children and youth. Children who are bullied may experience serious immediate or long-term difficulties relating to their health, mental health, and academic well-being (Buhs, Ladd, & Herald-Brown, 2010; Copeland, Wolke, Angold, & Costello, 2013; Gini & Pozzoli, 2009; Juvonen, Graham, & Schuster, 2003). Those who are bullied or who witness bullying

may be comforted by caring adults and find safety in faith community settings. Strategies for faith leaders to help create a safe environment include:

– Training staff and volunteers who work with children and youth to recognize and deal appropriately with bullying behavior.

– Creating supportive environments where bullying is discussed, addressed when it occurs, and where respectful behavior is encouraged.

– Engaging youth in efforts to raise awareness about bullying and its effects throughout the faith community.

– Implementing effective programs of bullying prevention in organizations and settings associated with faith communities, such as parochial schools, child care centers housed within communities of faith, summer camps, sports leagues, and organized youth activities.

• **Helping families deal with bullying.** Faith leaders and their communities routinely provide support for families in distress, offering them counsel and connecting them with mental health resources and informal support. Children, youth, and families coping with bullying problems can similarly be supported by faith communities.

• **Mentoring youth in the community.** Members of faith communities frequently provide mentoring to youth within their own faith community or within the broader community who may be experiencing a variety of life challenges (Rhodes & Chan, 2008), including engaging in or experiencing bullying or other forms of aggression with peers.

How Faith Leaders Can Engage and Include Others in Community Bullying Prevention Strategies

People of different and diverse faiths commonly unite in efforts to improve conditions within their communities. They can also be active in efforts to protect children and youth from the harmful effects of bullying. Whether faith communities take the lead or lend support to community-wide bullying prevention efforts, they can participate by:

• Calling members of faith communities to act responsibly as mentors and allies to children involved in or affected by bullying.

• Bringing together leaders and faith communities in an inter-faith response to youth bullying and raising awareness about the harmful effects of social cruelty.

• Tailoring messages from sacred text and scriptures to encourage children and youth to practice compassion and concern for one another.

- Sharing resources and effective strategies, wherever possible, to implement bullying prevention policies and programs in faith-based or sponsored schools, child care centers, and youth-focused activities.

Ideas for Next Steps

- Learn more about bullying prevention through StopBullying.gov or the resources listed below. Review the research presented in the modules and how it is best communicated to other faith leaders and members in your community.

- Consult the Community Action Toolkit and perform a landscape assessment that will help you identify relevant data, as well as the broader needs and opportunities for engagement with children and youth in your community.

- Plan a bullying prevention event that will inform a broader network of faith leaders and other members of your faith, as well as parents, youth and other community stakeholders to help dispel common myths and misdirections. This will also shed light on the importance of a holistic, community-based effort.

Resources and References

Sample of Resources Available

Anti-Defamation League's Bullying and Cyberbullying Prevention Strategies and Resources – This website provides links to tipsheets and other resources for educators and administrators, including "Bullying Prevention and Intervention: Tips for Schools," "Ways to Address Bias and Bullying," and "Zero Indifference: A Guide to Stop Name-Calling and Bullying." For more information, visit www.adl.org.

Faith-based youth organizations have taken up the challenge to create safe havens in their faith communities, local YMCA or YWCA, and at summer camps. They also support youth leaders who want to serve as mentors and models of positive, compassionate relationships with peers in their faith and larger communities. Examples include:

- Communities have used the **YMCA** to establish youth bullying prevention programs. For more information on the bully-free commitment of one YMCA's afterschool program, visit www.sltrib.com/sltrib/neighborhoodcity/54859796-135/ymca-utah-program-kids.html.csp.

- **Young Life** has made kids' safety a priority. All staff and volunteers must uphold "Faith and Conduct" policies to prevent bullying by creating an atmosphere of acceptance, and further agree to model "acceptance and love for all kids." For information on this policy, visit www.younglife.org/AboutYoungLife/KeepingKidsSafe.htm.

- Youth leaders with the **B'nai B'rith Youth Organization** (BBYO) in Baltimore pledged to address bullying at their high school and within their faith community. For information on how these teenage leaders took a stand against bullying along with a copy of their pledge, visit http://standup.bbyo.org/news/baltimore_teens_take_a_stand_against_bullying/.

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